

## **“What the UCC Church Brings to the Table”**

*Preached at The United Church of Los Alamos*

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Texts: John 17:20-23

Micah 6: 6-8

Welcome to our service today. During Lent we will be exploring the denominations that the United Church is officially associated with. Each tradition and each person adds something unique to our church and to the whole church of Christ. Today our focus is on What the United Church of Christ brings to the table of The United Church.

My first encounter with a UCC congregation occurred in Bucyrus, Ohio right after seminary. I accepted a call to the First Christian Church in that city. Down the street was another church called the United Church of Christ. Many of our members had friends in the UCC church so one day I walked the block long distance to meet with the pastor of that church. As we visited I asked him about his church, how it had formed, and so forth. As he talked he named as one of the founders Barton Stone.

“Barton Stone,” I asked?

“Yes, Barton Stone is one of our founders,” he replied.

“That can’t be for Barton Stone is one of the founders of the Christian Church,” I said!

What I discovered was that in the 1800s many of the Stone congregations in Kentucky chose not to merge with the Campbell churches to form the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Instead these congregations remained independent and later merged to form the Congregational Christian Churches who eventually

became part of the UCC. So I was pleasantly surprised to find a cousin just down the street.

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The United Church of Christ is actually younger than the United Church of Los Alamos. This denomination formed in 1957 with a merger of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Churches. However, the process of uniting actually began decades before. In 1931 the Congregational Churches and the Christian Churches (the former Barton Stone churches) united to form the Congregational Christian Churches. Three years later, in 1934, the Reformed Church in the United States and the Evangelical Synod of North America merged to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church. It was these two bodies that united in 1957 to form the United Church of Christ. This year the UCC celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> year.

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The first thing that the UCC brings to the table is a **commitment to unity**. This is not a commitment that is just a fanciful idea---they have done it and are doing it.

For centuries the Christian Church was more or less united. The Roman Catholic Church dominated the western church and the Orthodox Church dominated the eastern churches. Then in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries with the Protestant Reformation dozens of new “denominations” sprang up. And during the last two centuries the church has seen split after split after split so that today there are thousands of denominations that believe in Christ. Some of these

denominations are cooperative with others. Many are right down hostile toward Christians who hold a different point of view or interpretation.

The Disciples of Christ, my denomination, have long called unity their “polar star”. Yet, the Disciples of Christ have never united with anyone. In truth we have experienced major splits forming the Churches of Christ (non-instrumental) and the Independent Christian Churches.

Other traditions have united but normally these have been churches that have similar histories. These include the United Methodist Churches, the unification of northern and southern Presbyterian churches into the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the unification of various Lutheran churches. One church that has both identified unity as important and has unified very different traditions is the United Church of Christ.

Why is unity important? I imagine many of our members could answer this question very well. We are unique in that six denominations have covenanted to worship and serve together and have done so for some 60 years. The United Church is a unique church on the landscape of the whole church.

Why is unity important? One reason and perhaps the best reason is that Jesus prayed for it. In the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of John’s gospel, John shares a prayer that Jesus prayed before facing his trial and death. In that prayer Jesus prays time and time again that the church will be “one”.

We know that by the time of the Apostle Paul’s writing in the 60s that the churches he related to were experiencing disunity and disagreement. Things

only got worse by the end of the first century when John wrote his gospel. So he reminded us of the prayer of Jesus for unity.

Disunity and division weakens the witness and ministry of the church. In truth the ecumenical movement did not begin in the hallways of theological seminaries or even in the conventions of churches but in the mission field. Missionaries discovered that the competition between various denominations caused many of other cultures who had embraced Christianity to return to their old ways in confusion. A Methodist would lead a person to Christ and along would come a Disciple of Christ missionary telling them that they had been baptized improperly and needed to be immersed. Then a Presbyterian would come along and tell the people that the Disciples were full of hot air and so were the Methodists for one should not have bishops. On and on it would go until finally people became so confused they just gave up the faith and returned to the familiar old ways of believing. So it was the missionaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who were the real force behind the ecumenical movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The unity I am talking about is not a unity of doctrine and belief. In truth most of the religious conflicts including vicious religious wars have been fought to force people into one way of belief and interpretation. Unity under this definition is “my way or the highway” or in some cases “my way or we will burn you at the stake”.

The unity that I am referring to and that I believe Jesus was praying for is a unity of spirit. It is the recognition that in Christ there is a true unity even

though at the same time there is great diversity. The umbrella of Christ is large embracing people who understand and interpret faith differently.

Recent discoveries of ancient Christian texts that were later banned have shed light that in the early centuries of the church there was this kind of unity. There was great diversity of interpretations, texts, worship and understandings of the faith under the umbrella of Christ. It was only when the church, under some pressure from the Roman state, felt that it had to define “orthodoxy” and stamp out “heresy” that the diversity was replaced with uniformity. We continue to fight similar battles today.

Rather the unity celebrated in the United Church of Christ and practiced here at the United Church of Los Alamos is a unity of spirit. “We are Christians only but we are not the only Christians”, to quote from my own tradition. A passion for unity and cooperation is one gift that the UCC brings to the mix of our church.

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The second gift that the United Church of Christ brings to the table is a concern for justice. This concern for justice was reflected in the various traditions that merged to form the UCC in 1957. This concern grows out of the biblical witness such as the verse I shared from Micah.

Actually Jesus never separated “evangelism” into “evangelism” and “social action” as we do today. That separation is peculiar to our own time. Evangelism means sharing the good news and living out the good news. This means that the people of God will be concerned with issues of justice.

The Prophet Micah went so far as to declare that God is much more pleased if we live out our faith in justice, mercy and peacemaking than if we say the right words and perform the rituals correctly. The Hebrew people had fallen into that trap where faith was separated from actions. Jesus confronted this time and time again when he pointed out how many---quote “religious” people were saying the right things but doing the wrong things. Jesus intentionally drew attention to the “least” among us and even went so far as to say that how we treat the “least” may have more to do with righteousness than being a member of the correct church.

When we point out injustice and call for righteousness we will very often find ourselves in conflict. When we challenge sacred beliefs of a dominant culture we will find hostility. That is why we often prefer talking about “spiritual” things rather than rolling up our sleeves and diving into the world to work for justice. Justice is about repentance and commitment to Christ. When we follow Christ that commitment will be seen in the actions of our lives.

The congregations that merged to form the UCC have a long history of being involved in issues of justice. Some of these issues have been and were very controversial at the time.

The pilgrims who came to America in the 1600s and who evolved into the Congregational Churches came here seeking spiritual freedom. They left England and then Leyden seeking a place where they could be different from the dominant Protestant religious group in England. Even though they violated that idea of tolerance in practice, the seeds of tolerance and freedom would one day

evolve into the experiment of congregational government and a representative form of National government.

Early in the 1700s Congregationalists were some of the first to take a stand against slavery. In 1773, five thousand angry colonists gathered at the Old South Meeting House, a Congregationalist church, to demand a repeal of an unjust tax on tea. Their protest became the first act of civil disobedience known as the “Boston Tea Party”. Congregationalists were front and center in that protest.

Also in 1773, Phillis Wheatley, a member of the Old South Congregation became the first published African American author when she wrote, Poems on Various Subjects. She gained her freedom shortly after that.

It was a Reformed Congregation that safely hid the Liberty Bell during the occupation of Philadelphia by the British. If that is not “political” what is. The bell was hidden under the floorboards of the Old Zion Reformed Church in Allentown.

In 1839, Congregationalists along with other Christians organized a campaign to free the captives of the Armistad incident when slaves seized control of the ship. This case caused Congregationalists to take the position that no human being should be a slave. In 1846, Lewis Tappan, one of the Armistad organizers, organized the American Missionary Association, the first anti-slavery organization in the U.S. with multi-racial leadership.

Congregationalist William Gladden was one of the first leaders of the Social Gospel Movement which lifted up the plight of the poor. Evangelical and Reformed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr preached a sermon in 1943 that

contained a prayer that has since become known as the “Serenity Prayer”. Later, Evangelical and Reformed theologian Paul Tillich published The Courage to Be, later named by the New York Public Library as one of the “Books of the Century”. The book encourages us to be faithful to Christ even if such faithfulness brings us into conflict.

In 1959 southern television stations were imposing a news blackout on the growing civil rights movement. Martin Luther King Jr. asked the UCC denomination to intervene. The UCC, only two years old, organized churches and filed a suit that gained a Federal Court ruling that the airways are public and not private property. Today this ruling has led to the participation of people of many backgrounds and color in television, newsrooms, and in the movies.

And of course in 1972, the UCC ordained the first openly gay minister. At a later convention, representatives from many congregations voted that the church should welcome all people. This vote is not binding on the antonymous congregations of the UCC but serves as a witness to all of us.

The congregations that have merged to form the UCC bring to the table a passion for justice and often have been leaders in confronting the darkness of various injustices. This concern for justice comes directly out of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.

Here at the United Church we actively participate and create an environment for members to be involved in issues of justice. Whether we look at the Thrift Shop, the high commitment to missions, the mission trip to Mexico to build homes for the poor, or the many ways our members are involved in issues

ranging from hunger, to nuclear non-proliferation, to serving on the County Council, and many other ways, the United Church has always encouraged us to be involved and to express our faith in action.

Of course the commitment to unity and to justice is not unique to the United Church of Christ. Yet, the UCC continues to call us to faithfulness. They encourage us to cooperating with other Christians and to create a tent that is large not small. All people are loved by God and welcomed at the table of our Lord.