

## “Building on Faith”

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UCC at The Villages, FL  
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Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

*‘... though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ,  
and individually we belong to each other.*

*We have different gifts that are consistent with God’s grace that has been given to us.’*

*Romans 12:5<sup>b</sup>-6<sup>a</sup>*

Let us pray... O God,

May we become acquainted with our gifts – individually and together,  
as a congregation and as a Conference of congregations.

Amen

The Apostle Paul speaks of “the body of Christ” as a symbol for the Church  
just as Jesus Christ himself spoke about God’s Kingdom

‘on Earth as it is in Heaven’,

and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. about the ‘beloved community’  
as a social reality.

They implied that we are all part of that body, that kingdom, that community  
in which each of us has a function to perform –

we all have some special gift for ‘the building up of the Kingdom’.

Nevertheless throughout the history of the Church,

such gifts get stifled by the institution itself –

or as they say on the British TV comedy, “Monty Python”,

‘No one ever suspects the Spanish Inquisition!’

So, we as the Christian church, had to go through a Reformation –

if not a revolution and not just one time in history,

in order to get back in touch with what Christianity is about.

When the Reformers were trying to change the medieval Catholic church

they had to break up the set ways of thinking that people had about ‘church’

by finding new ways to talk about it.

The Greek word for *church* (*ekklesian*) can also mean congregation –

the main concept being that ‘church’ is a gathering.

In the Tyndale Bible – which is an early English translation,

the word ‘congregation’ was used instead of ‘church’ –

though King James of England had the meaning changed right back

in the translation that bears his name, to emphasize ‘church’ as an institution.

The Tyndale Bible, however, would’ve been available to the early American colonists,  
which translates Matthew 16:18a in this way:

*And I saye also unto the yt thou arte Peter:*

*and upon this rocke I wyll bylde my congregacion...*

It is speculated that the naming of Congress was derived from this use  
of the word, ‘congregation’.

Willard, p.2

It's been said about The United Church of Christ that we are 'united and uniting' – formed as a denomination after WWII when there was a movement to bridge differences, bring people together, build on faith. The formation of the United Nations, the World Council of Churches, and our country's National Council of Churches all took place in the post WWII era. In can be said that the UCC is very much a part of an earlier movement that brought thirteen separate colonies together as individual states to form a national unity.

That union endured a Civil War that sought to tear this nation in two. It was a terrible war, fought to hold us together and defeat the threat to one of our country's most sacred beliefs – *'We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal'*.

In Eastern Europe, Russian separatists are at war to break away if not subdue the Ukraine.

ISIS seeks to unify lands once thought to be associated with a pan-Islamic caliphate by conquering land and destroying people who won't conform to their doctrine. Israel and Palestine cannot escape the fact that they co-exist even though they don't cooperate.

In Ferguson, MO, police became the flashpoint between the frustrations and fears of black and white people.

The challenge before any of us is that there are going to be people whom we don't agree with in this life, but like Martin Luther King preached, you may not agree with or even like some people, but you have got to love them if you are going to build together on faith.

Since high school, I have been drawn to stories about people who ventured across the 'no man's land' between strangers – or even enemies, to bring peace, for example:

Francis of Assisi who tried to convert the Sultan of Egypt during the Crusades;

Mother Teresa who entered the Hindu slums of Calcutta to minister to the dying despite cultural suspicion;

The Peacemaker of the Iroquois who brought 5 warring nations together with his 'good news' based on the symbol of the Longhouse as a gathering place of different families.

Crossing 'no man's territory' is no easy task – never has been & certainly with risks, but we can build on faith, reaching out to people of goodwill.

Willard, p.3

I had a chance to do some reaching out this week between friends when  
I visited five UCC churches of the Florida Conference on an expedition  
to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Good News of the UCC,  
and to raise funds for Our Church's Wider Mission.

Each place was different, though I found similar congregational concerns;  
Each of my presentations were different, though I was pleased with what I did  
and learned something new each time in how I set up  
my performance and led discussion about it.

I brought them stories, but there were stories they told me  
like Betty at New Port Richey who had been a teacher in inner city schools  
while raising two children on her own –  
and after a long career, they didn't wanted her to retire.

There was another woman at Sarasota  
who told me how her grandparents would take her  
to the Chautauqua Institute in western NY.

When she was there as a little girl in 1936, she remembered that it had been reported  
that Amelia Earhardt was lost on her flight across the South Pacific;  
and all the people there gathered to listen to this news on a Philco radio.

Two people in ministry – from two different churches,  
told me how tragedy had touched their lives and how they stayed with the faith;  
In the course of discussion after my presentation at one of these churches,  
an older woman spoke of a similar tragedy to that which her minister  
had shared with me earlier –  
enabling this minister to be in a unique position as a wounded healer  
to provide healing for this church member.

I heard how Bill Wealand mentored Steve Heath into ministry with the UCC  
to become pastor for Holly Hill UCC and how Steve mentored Donna Cooney  
to become pastor for St Augustine UCC.

The smaller churches actually had the bigger turn out –  
as well as communities that knew me and had seen me perform before.

I am thinking that it would be very profitable for these churches – and us included,  
in how we work with our local community media resources,  
to get the word out about who we are and what we do  
as congregations of the United Church of Christ.

By the way, there will be a reporter here from the Daily Sun  
next Wednesday when I do my presentation here.

This will be an important opportunity for us to build on our faith –  
literally for people to hear the Gospel in a new way and  
perhaps for the first time.

Willard, 4

Churches are built by the numbers of people who attend –  
but also by the depth of their spirituality.

This will be a growth opportunity and you need to be here if you can  
and bring someone else, or tell neighbors, or people you meet on your errands  
to the store, the bank, the garage, the dry cleaners, the salon,  
or at club meetings, playing golf, bowling, dining out at a restaurant,  
and other daily activities.

What I have done at each location has been to present  
a set of three story segments after a brief introduction and  
outline of my goals.

The first is a ‘prologue’ which provides a sample from three of the Gospels  
to describe the identity formation of Jesus Christ –  
that who he was and the gifts he had been given,  
emerged amidst challenges.

The second is from the remaining Gospel – the Sermon on The Mount  
as a three point sermon.

The third is a ‘day in the life of Christ’ which happens to be a Sabbath  
and shows how Jesus mentored his disciples,  
not simply by teaching them ‘head knowledge’,  
but allowing them to follow along and observe how he lived his life.

After each section, I give a brief summary and open for comments  
and discussion.

The program will begin at 7:00 and conclude no later than 9:00 pm –  
just like a movie, but it will be in ‘the theatre of the mind’.

There were about 15 who attended at the first church, about 40 at the second,  
only 4 at the third, about 40 at the fourth, and 6 at the fifth.

It was like preparing the ground for something new to grow –  
laying the foundation for what could be something our churches do  
every summer when things are slow – like revivals,  
but for the UCC here in Florida.

These events can feature the gifts of our fellow UCC congregations,  
our own unique Hopeful Gospel Quartets, or Play Readers Theatres,  
or Liturgical Dance Troupes, or poets, singers, storytellers.

We are all gifted – even as *wounded healers*,  
we all have the capacity to help others, and even ourselves, to heal.

We can share our gifts to help and forgive and heal one another –  
and to build on our faith, renew hope, and demonstrate love  
for God and one another.

Here is a beautiful poem that my Johanna shared with me  
which was written by her friend Michele Collier, called “The Healed”...

Amen

“The Healed” by Michele Collier

We became the healed and the healers  
for we learned to rise and to awaken  
and we remembered our wholeness  
and we know how to find the path back to our soul  
and we can show you where we came from  
and how we made peace with the weeping of the dark night  
and how we wrapped tight our wounds  
while waiting for the light  
and we can show you how to drink from the river of sorrow  
without being drowned and how we found hope on its banks  
and how to give thanks for its teachings  
and how to weave nightmares into dreams  
and how to heal  
and we can show you the streams  
that lead to the ocean  
and we will be there with you to celebrate  
when you find the shore where your soul waits

*Our lesson today, comes from Romans 12:1-8.*

*In this passage, the Apostle Paul lifts up diversity  
as an attribute of the Body of Christ – and this is in the same way  
that the organs of a body are different yet work together...*

[12:1] So, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercies,  
I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice  
that is holy and pleasing to God.

This is your appropriate priestly service.

[2] Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world,  
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds  
so that you can figure out what God's will is—  
what is good and pleasing and mature.

[3] Because of the grace that God gave me, I can say to each one of you:  
don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.  
Instead, be reasonable since God has measured out  
a portion of faith to each one of you.

[4] We have many parts in one body,  
but the parts don't all have the same function.

[5] In the same way, though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ,  
and individually we belong to each other.

[6] We have different gifts that are consistent with God's grace  
that has been given to us.

If your gift is prophecy,  
you should prophesy in proportion to your faith.

[7] If your gift is service, devote yourself to serving.  
If your gift is teaching, devote yourself to teaching.

[8] If your gift is encouragement, devote yourself to encouraging.  
The one giving should do it with no strings attached.

The leader should lead with passion.

The one showing mercy should be cheerful.

Matthew 16:13-20

[13] Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesare'a Philippi,  
he asked his disciples,

“Who do men say that the Son of man is?”

[14] And they said,

“Some say John the Baptist, others say Eli'jah, and others Jeremiah  
or one of the prophets.”

[15] He said to them,

“But who do you say that I am?”

[16] Simon Peter replied,

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

[17] And Jesus answered him,

“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona!

For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you,  
but my Father who is in heaven.

[18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church,  
and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.

[19] I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,

and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven,  
and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

[20] Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.