

“The Three Loves of The UCC”

August 27, 2017

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Matthew 16:13-20

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

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

Matthew 16:15-16

Let us pray... O God,

Jesus was revealed as your beloved Son – and you were revealed through him.

Who’re we as your people in this time & place, and what would you have us do?
Amen

In recent years, the leadership of the UCC has given us new mottos, mission projects, logos, and re-branding to distinguish ourselves – to answer who we are as people of the United **Church** of Christ in contrast with the Church of Christ or Baptists or Lutherans or Bolsheviks, for that matter.

For example, the “God is still speaking” initiative has been around for more than 10 years, along with sayings like,

“Our faith is 2,000 years old, but our thinking is not”
and “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey,
you’re welcome here.”

A few years back, our denomination called for UCC churches to participate in the “Mission One” project by raising money and collecting food to support local anti-hunger programs; We made the big time when our conference minister at the time submitted a picture of all the bags of food we collected, which was posted on our national church’s website homepage!

The mission theme presented this year at General Synod identifies “Three Loves of The United Church of Christ” –
the love of Neighbor, the love of Children, and the love of Creation.

I don’t think it is too big a stretch to say this is derived from the 2 Great Commandments to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself.

The ‘love of Neighbor’ is one priority that we regularly talk about and are actively concerned about as a congregation.

I am so grateful for the commitment we have to pastoral ministry in this church with Pastor Louise Tallman as Minister of Visitation, Becky Dunning, RN as our Parish Nurse, and Jeannie Schmeichel, PK who is coordinator for our Called To Care “Shepherds Program (oh, and ‘PK’ stands for ‘Preacher’s Kid’).

Networking between church members – without being intrusive, is one of the great reasons for being involved in ‘organized religion’ where there is a shared active concern for one another as members of a spiritual family.

Willard, p.2

What is also implied by loving of our neighbors is to recognize our responsibility to reach out beyond the walls of the church to care for our wider church, the wider community, and the world – just as it says in the first half of John 3:16... *For God so loved the world...*

Our Missions Committee is responsible for informing us about the special giving requested by the United Church of Christ, which includes One Great Hour of Sharing, Neighbors in Need, Our Church's Wider Mission, Strengthen the Church, and the Christmas Fund for retired clergy.

We are annually, '5 for 5' in our support of these mission requests.

The Missions Committee continues to search for opportunities to serve locally, like the kind of projects we have been doing for years:

Support for The Wildwood Food Pantry and Wildwood Thrift Store, Community Garden, Ronald McDonald pop tops for education, as well as the Wildwood Elementary After School Arts program, the Epic Reading program, and the 'Little Library' project with Young Performing Artists, Inc. in Royal, the 3 Kings Epiphany Party that we do with the Tri-Co. Unitarian Universalists, and Harvest Sunday with the Caillez de Milagros community.

I would also say our participation with Temple Shlaom, ISLAM, Inc., and the Interfaith Peace Partners, and the prayer vigils we host are examples of loving our neighbors.

What new ventures? How does the opioid epidemic affect us?

Nursing homes are being built as more residents are transitioning to assisted living.

Developments around will bring families with children...

The 'love of Children' stands out as a very significant priority of the United Church of Christ for a number of reasons.

Now that being said, for us as a congregation living in the midst of a nationally known, pre-eminent retirement community, the potential for ministering directly to children – seems remote.

Beyond the occasional grandkids who come to visit and those young adults we meet at a doctor's office, a restaurant or store, as well as our after school program, contact is limited.

However, it is in a broader sense, that the 'love of Children' is very important to us all if we think in terms of the next generation – and not just the following generation, but the next *seven* generations.

Willard, p.3

A proverb from the Native Americans of upstate NY – the Iroquois, says that a society should always “plan with the seventh generation in mind.”

This is represented in a sculpture by Frederick Franck – pictured here as a photo which I took this summer at Pacem-in-Terris in Warwick, NY.

Note the successive human outlines, cut out of a single sheet of metal.

There are only six, with the seventh represented as a fetus.

That idea challenges us to ask such questions as:

“How well are our children being fed?” –

literally, because if they haven’t eaten they can’t pay attention in school, and if they don’t finish school and learn how to read,

it is almost a sure thing that prison will be their future.

For that matter,

“How well are children being ‘fed’ intellectually and spiritually?”

and that implies:

“How well are we teaching our children and what are we teaching them?”

Something nutritious, or “fast food” fake news?

“How well are we protecting children – not simply physically, but protecting their capacity to imagine?”

We can take a lesson from efforts to rebuild wartorn communities

and to respond to the effect of war on children.

This week on PBS Newshour, there was a report by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon

about Syrians returning to the town of Manbij that had been devastated

after 2 years of oppression by ISIS, and the destruction

caused in the process of routing them out by US-assisted troops.

There was a man named Abdulkadir who was painting his house, blue,

while children danced and played nearby.

When asked about what he was doing, he said he was painting his house blue

because it is a happy color.

Through an interpreter, he described how ISIS

would hang people in the city center which the children would see

and he said...

I tried not to let them see such things, and I painted the walls blue,

so they would forget about the black darkness.

I want happiness and joy for my children and neighbors.

Reporter Lemmon said:

...restoring his house helps him share that joy, and create new memories.

Willard, p.4

A cousin of this man, a young man named Rafiq Fouad Ali,
told how his brother was killed fighting ISIS and he was proud of him,
and that he would soon go to fight them, too, saying:
*I don't mind being killed, if it gives the young generation
proper life and education. It is not about ourselves.
We must improve the future of the next generation, not ours.*

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/one-syrian-city-rebuilding-life-isis/>

As Abdulkadir continued to work, painting his house blue,
the children continued to dance and play.

There is a resilience to children, because they see everything new.

One of the contributing causes of the Syrian Civil War is believed to be
a drought brought on by the global warming of climate change.
The effects of this particular drought have not been seen anywhere else in this world
for 900 years.

<https://www.csmonitor.com/Science/2016/0302/Spurred-by-climate-change-Middle-East-faces-worst-drought-in-900-years>

This leads us to the third priority of the United Church of Christ –
“the love of Creation”.

This touches on living out our obligation to those first two loves:
the love for our neighbors – and ourselves, in the process;
and the love for the children of our future.

The ‘love for Creation’ is a timely call for action
as we see ever worsening effects of a changing environment
Former Vice President of the United States,
Al Gore – in the tradition of former President Jimmy Carter,
has been active in a benevolent cause of environmental education.
He presented a film several years ago called “Inconvenient Truth”
that brought into public awareness the image of polar bears at risk
as ice at the North Pole was melting, raising sea levels,
and a prediction that the 9/11 memorial crater could be flooded –
which provoked outraged skepticism.

There is a new film out, “Inconvenient Sequel”, playing in theaters now,
which reports that more and more extraordinary climate events
are happening which are historically unprecedented in their force,
including such phenomena as ‘rain bombs’ that deluge whole cities,
and other such super storms that Mr. Gore characterizes
as a ‘nature hike through Revelation’.

Oh, and his prediction of the 9/11 trench being filled with water
came true when Hurricane Sandy hit NYC and NJ.

Willard, p. 5

This weekend, the Texas Gulf coast is picking up the pieces from

Hurricane Harvey that went from a tropical depression to category 4 storm
in a matter of days, accelerated by warm waters.

Heavy rains and the threat of tornadoes will continue for the next couple days!

Climate Change naysayers declare that the Earth has a natural cycle
of change and catastrophic events;

But even so, doesn't it seem reasonable that we should not do risky behaviors
that could accelerate the potential for such events?

We appear to be getting an answer for that question already.

In his "Inconvenient Sequel", Al Gore asks three questions:

Must we change? Can we change? Will we change?

He answers 'Yes' to the first two – but it remains to be seen for the third...

In our lesson from Exodus this morning, we heard how Baby Moses
was carried through the waters to be rescued by the Egyptian princess.

In time, he would grow up and with God's help, guide the Hebrew people
through the turbulent waters of oppression in Egypt to a vision of liberation.

That vision gave rise to the Jewish community that nurtured Jesus of Nazareth
for the role he would play in introducing God to the wider world.

The Gospel of Matthew gives us a marvelous description of Jesus
when Peter declares, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'.

This is a beautiful description of our God as a 'living God', an ever-present reality
no matter what we face in life, even when we get in over our heads.

This same Peter – Peter the Rock, is the one who would dare to get out of a boat,
a place of safety to dance with Jesus on perilous waters;

And Peter is the one who would lead his fellow disciples into an uncertain future,
to build a church as a refuge and vision of liberation, for generations to come.

Paul spoke of the Body of Christ as the 'body' of believers;

Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God; and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of
a beloved community that is possible.

Isn't this what UCC at the Villages aspires to be?

Willard, p. 6

Let me close by reading the pastoral letter from Rev. John C. Dorhauer,
our General Minister & President, to all the UCC churches:

The United Church of Christ has a vision of a just world for all.

In this world all are welcomed, everyone is loved and justice is inherent.

The 3 Great Loves is the denomination's opportunity to express

how our Love of Neighbor, Love of Children, and Love of Creation

work together to address the inequities in our current world.

Over the course of the next two years, through the lens of the 3 Great Loves,

the United Church of Christ tells the story of how we are impacting and

transforming the world, united in common purpose and mission.

During these upcoming two years,

there will be moments of special invitation to participate

in this denomination-wide undertaking.

One by one we will focus on each of the 3 Great Loves

in service to our communities.

Our expression of love, is and will be our living testimony.

What would it look like for an entire denomination to commit to a shared mission?

How much impact could an entire denomination have

if it worked as one on a mission that mattered?

We're about to find out. We have done this before, and not that long ago.

Five years ago, the United Church of Christ launched Mission One –

an initiative to help alleviate hunger.

Four years ago, we launched Mission 4/1 Earth –

a concentrated effort toward restoring health to the planet.

This year, and for the next two years until General Synod 2019,

we call the faith communities of the United Church of Christ

to engage in the Three Great Loves mission campaign.

In response to our Purpose statement – a call to love our neighbor as ourselves;

and to our Vision statement – to build a just world for all:

we are asking our congregations to seek ways

to live out a commitment in mission

to the love of children, the love of neighbor, and the love of creation.

How does your church embody its love

for children?

How does your church incarnate the love of Jesus

in seeking to love your neighbor?

How does your church uphold the mandate to steward the Earth

by demonstrating a love for creation?

Together, we can change the world.

United in God's spirit and inspired by God's grace,

we can love all, welcome all, and seek justice for all:

for the children, for our neighbors, and for creation.

We can, we will, we must make a difference.

Let our love light the way to a better world, a more just world –

for the children, for our neighbor, for creation.



John C. Dorhauer
General Minister and President

<http://www.ucc.org/3greatloves>

Amen

Last Sunday's message from Genesis told how Joseph saved his father's and brothers' households by bringing them all to Egypt to escape famine.

Today's lesson from Exodus 1:8-2:10 tells about what happened to their descendants in Egypt many years later...

⁸ Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn't know Joseph.

⁹ He said to his people,

“The Israelite people are now larger in number and stronger than we are.

¹⁰ Come on, let's be smart and deal with them.

Otherwise, they will only grow in number.

And if war breaks out, they will join our enemies, fight against us, and then escape from the land.”

¹¹ As a result, the Egyptians put foremen of forced work gangs over the Israelites to harass them with hard work.

They had to build storage cities named Pithom and Rameses for Pharaoh. ¹

² But the more they were oppressed, the more they grew and spread, so much so that the Egyptians started to look at the Israelites with disgust and dread.

¹³ So the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites.

¹⁴ They made their lives miserable with hard labor, making mortar and bricks, doing field work, and by forcing them to do all kinds of other cruel work.

¹⁵ The king of Egypt spoke to two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah:

¹⁶ “When you are helping the Hebrew women give birth and you see the baby being born, if it's a boy, kill him.

But if it's a girl, you can let her live.”

¹⁷ Now the two midwives respected God so they didn't obey the Egyptian king's order. Instead, they let the baby boys live.

¹⁸ So the king of Egypt called the two midwives and said to them,

“Why are you doing this? Why are you letting the baby boys live?”

¹⁹ The two midwives said to Pharaoh,

“Because Hebrew women aren't like Egyptian women.

They're much stronger and give birth before any midwives can get to them.”

²⁰ So God treated the midwives well,

and the people kept on multiplying and became very strong.

²¹ And because the midwives respected God,

God gave them households of their own.

²² Then Pharaoh gave an order to all his people:

“Throw every baby boy born to the Hebrews into the Nile River, but you can let all the girls live.”

^{2:1} Now a man from Levi's household married a Levite woman.

² The woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son.

- She saw that the baby was healthy and beautiful,
so she hid him for three months.
- ³When she couldn't hide him any longer,
she took a reed basket and sealed it up with black tar.
She put the child in the basket
and set the basket among the reeds at the riverbank.
- ⁴The baby's older sister stood watch nearby
to see what would happen to him.
- ⁵Pharaoh's daughter came down to bathe in the river,
while her women servants walked along beside the river.
She saw the basket among the reeds,
and she sent one of her servants to bring it to her.
- ⁶When she opened it, she saw the child.
The boy was crying, and she felt sorry for him. She said,
"This must be one of the Hebrews' children."
- ⁷Then the baby's sister said to Pharaoh's daughter,
"Would you like me to go and find one of the Hebrew women
to nurse the child for you?"
- ⁸Pharaoh's daughter agreed,
"Yes, do that."
So the girl went and called the child's mother.
- ⁹Pharaoh's daughter said to her,
"Take this child and nurse it for me, and I'll pay you for your work."
So the woman took the child and nursed it.
- ¹⁰After the child had grown up, she brought him back to Pharaoh's daughter,
who adopted him as her son. She named him Moses,
"because," she said, "I pulled him out^a of the water."

Let us be challenged & guided by these words...

Matthew 16:13-20

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