

“That They May Be One”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
May 13th, 2018
7th Sun. of Easter/Mother's Day
Psalm 1, John 17:6-21

[Jesus said,]

*“I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word,
that they may all be one; even as thou, [Abba]Father, art in me, and I in thee,
that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”*

John 17:20-21

Let us pray... O God,
Though the world be divided by its differences,
yet we trust in your healing mercy and our diverse gifts
that we may all yet become one as a Beloved Community that is possible.
Amen

Before there was the “God Is Still Speaking” initiative or the “3 Loves of the UCC” –
which are ‘Neighbors’ or Community, the Next Generation or Children, and
‘The Environment’ or Creation,
the motto of the United Church of Christ was “*That they may all be one*”.
This phrase comes from Jesus’ prayer at the conclusion of his final discourse –
his final speech with his disciples before crossing the Kidron Valley
to go to the Garden of Gethsemansee.

He was bolstering their courage – and his own for the trials ahead.

Now, some scholars will argue that Jesus was only talking about the Church.
The Gospel of John was written at a time of great diversity
among those who believed they were followers of Christ.
The Gospel of John seems to challenge the Gospel of Thomas in particular
and in general, the “New Age-y” mysticism of that first century
after Christ’s earthly mission.

The Nag Hammadi Library is an example of this diversity;
It is a collection of Gnostic Christian texts, discovered in Egypt in 1945 CE
which had been hidden probably since the 4th Century CE,
to protect them from being destroyed.

When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire,
the pressure was on the early Church
to define the “right way” of being “Christian” –
which is what ‘orthodoxy’ means.

It was to the Empire’s advantage to get Christians on the ‘same page’, so to speak,
but they wanted to do it in terms of ‘my way or the highway’!

‘Gnostic’ means ‘Knowledge’ – as in mystical knowledge,
and though these books are not officially included in the traditional Bible,
they serve to show us how some of the first Christians
were thinking about what they believed.

Willard, p.2

'That they may all be one' has been tough enough to make work
just between Christians, let alone the rest of 'the world' which includes...
Jews, Muslims, Baha'i, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Sufis, Pagans,
scientists, humanists, atheists, nihilists, anarchists, communists, capitalists,
socialists, artists, materialists, industrialists, environmentalists,
pacifists, militarists, vegetarians, carnivores, pet owners, rap music listeners,
Country Western listeners, sports enthusiasts, opera lovers,
and each & every individual person right here in this room, etc...
has their opinion about the 'right way' of doing anything...

Just the same, I really do believe there is only 'One Way',
but it doesn't mean twisting everybody into the same conformity.
You have heard that it was said, "You can't legislate love".
because "legislating love" would just be another way of coercing people
to do what somebody else thinks is the 'right thing'.
But I say to you, we need to "legislate *lovingly*" in order to do the thing *right*.
So, to *empathize with* human diversity,
is to *maximize* achievement through common unity –
or community, the beloved kind!
By working together to achieve group goals,
we meet our individual needs in the process –
as we "*legislate with love*" to do the thing *right*.

The United Church of Christ is 'covenantal' and not 'creedal' –
that means we seek consensus on issues of faith,
as opposed to members being told what to believe.
We are a faith community of conscience.

On the ucc.org website, it says:

In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity.

*The unity that we seek requires neither
an uncritical acceptance of any point of view,
nor rigid formulation of doctrine.*

*It does require mutual understanding and agreement
as to which aspects of the Christian faith and life are essential.*

http://www.ucc.org/about-us_what-is-the-united-church-of

So, as a congregation of the United Church of Christ,
we basically agree to a Trinitarian view of God as Creator, Christ, & Holy Spirit;
we observe two sacraments: Baptism & Holy Communion;
and we accept Christ as the head of the Church, the Bible as a guide,
and the congregation makes decisions about how to run the Church.

When the United Church of Christ was formed in 1957,
a Statement of Faith was drafted, not as 'test of faith',
but rather to be instructive as a guide to faith:

Willard, p.3

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit,

who is made known to us in Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify:

God calls the worlds into being,

creates humankind in the divine image,

and sets before us the ways of life and death.

God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord,

God has come to us and shared our common lot,

conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.

God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit,

creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,

binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,

to be servants in the service of the whole human family,

to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil,

to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,

to join him in his passion and victory.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel

forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,

courage in the struggle for justice and peace,

the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing,

and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God. Amen.

http://www.ucc.org/beliefs_statement-of-faith#MOSS

One of the architects of the UCC Statement of Faith was

The Rev. Dr. Robert V. Moss, Jr. who was described as
a 'scholar with a passion for justice'.

During the turbulent era of the War in Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement
in the late 1960s, Dr. Moss –

who had been president of Lancaster Theological Seminary,
was elected president of the United Church of Christ.

At his inauguration, he wore 'a stole of heavy chains' in solidarity
with those who had suffered under slavery,

demonstrating his commitment to the struggle for justice and peace.

http://www.ucc.org/ucc_roots_october_2015

His motivation and inspiration came from

'his understanding of the church as the body of Christ

constantly developing, growing and changing in each generation.'

Willard, p.4

Dr. Moss worked to get the UCC to talk about and to take action on
*'amnesty for conscientious objectors during the Vietnam War,
helping veterans with addiction problems, PTSD and job needs;
supporting expanded opportunities for women in church and society;
redistributing wealth to aid developing nations;
standing in solidarity with the United Farm Workers in California,
and promoting racial and economic justice.'*

http://www.ucc.org/ucc_roots_october_2015

“That they may all be one” from John 17:21

This text is the seed for what the United Church of Christ has stood for,
and the achievements of our denomination through the years
as a church that is ‘united and uniting’,

This heritage has given us our roots that withstood the challenges of other times
and will help us in the times yet ahead.

We are the church of the future – if we can hang on and survive
as the next generations discover what we are about.

Ecumenical outreach to other church denominations
is part of that characterization of the UCC as a church
that is ‘united and uniting’,
but so are our efforts to coexist with other faith communities
especially Judaism.

We are the first Christian church to recognize the Jewish faith as a sibling,
with no obligation to turn them into something they are not.

They already have a viable, time-tested relationship with God
that has nothing to do with what anybody else has to say or do about it.

On the other hand, they have given birth to Christianity’s basic traditions
and what that means to us, nobody else can say or do anything to the contrary.

I suppose Roman Catholicism & the Protestant Reformers are the parents
of the UCC, though they did get a divorce back in the Middle Ages.

However, these days, Catholics & Protestants have had some healing
and that relationship is more amicable.

More and more, we – as a denomination and as a society, need to
‘respect our elders’ – or at least recognize that we came from ancestors
who faced similar challenges in their time.

More and more, we need to recognize our shared need as human beings
for healing, forgiveness, love, understanding, purpose, and belonging...

Our ‘Statement of Faith’ speaks to these needs, especially these words:

*forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,
the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing,
and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.*

Willard, p.5

Besides the symbolism of the words of our faith – of sacred songs and stories,
Christianity has a rich tradition of imagery.

Christ crucified on the cross speaks to the strife that is
too often a sad reality in the human experience of life on Earth.

Yet, the suffering of Jesus on that cross also serves to create empathy
for the suffering of other people – in this way, God is one with us
and we are one with each other.

There is yet another image that speaks to our oneness –
the love of a mother for her child,
the love of Mary for Baby Jesus in the manger of a Nativity scene
like a poor mother who had no other place to lay her child down for the night.

There is another image that portrays this relationship of mother & child,
but with that child now grown up and taken away from life too soon –
an image of our oneness as human beings for love and grief.

One of the great masterpieces of art is the “Pieta” by Michaelangelo... [show image]
I first saw this sculpture at the 1965 World’s Fair at Flushing Meadow, NY.

Look how much larger the figure of Mary is compared to her child, Jesus –
this image symbolizes God; It symbolizes God’s love and grief for us, too...

It evokes a sense of wonder and a reminder that Jesus was born of Mary
and together, they are like any of us, as a daughter and son of man & woman.
In this way, we all are one...

Amen

*Our lesson from Psalm 1 describes what makes for a happy life –
and what does not...*

- ¹ God blesses those people who refuse evil advice
and won't follow sinners or join in sneering at God.
- ² Instead, the Law of the LORD makes them happy,
and they think about it day and night.
- ³ They are like trees growing beside a stream,
trees that produce fruit in season and always have leaves.
Those people succeed in everything they do.
- ⁴ That isn't true of those who are evil,
because they are like straw blown by the wind.
- ⁵ Sinners won't have an excuse on the day of judgment,
and they won't have a place with the people of God.
- ⁶ The LORD protects everyone who follows him,
but the wicked follow a road that leads to ruin.

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

John 17:6-19

[Jesus said,]

- ⁶ “I have manifested thy name to [those] whom thou gavest me out of the world; thine they were, and thou gavest them to me, and they have kept thy word.
- ⁷ Now they know that everything that thou hast given me is from thee;
- ⁸ for I have given them the words which thou gavest me, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from thee; and they have believed that thou didst send me.
- ⁹ I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine;
- ¹⁰ all mine are thine, and thine are mine, and I am glorified in them.
- ¹¹ And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee.
Holy [Abba] Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.
- ¹² While I was with them, I kept them in thy name, which thou hast given me; I have guarded them, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition, that the scripture might be fulfilled.
- ¹³ But now I am coming to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.
- ¹⁴ I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.
- ¹⁵ I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one.
- ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.
- ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth.
- ¹⁸ As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.
- ¹⁹ And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth.
- ²⁰ “I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word,
- ²¹ that they may all be one; even as thou, [Abba] Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

He was a ‘justice and peace’ kind of guy
and what I also call an “old time Jesus man”.

The Rev. Robert V. Moss Jr., president of the United Church of Christ and a noted ecumenist, died of cancer yesterday at Mountainside Hospital, Montclair, N.J. He was 54 years old and a resident of Upper Montclair.

William Thompson, president of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, said yesterday that Mr. Moss had been deeply committed to the unity of Christ's church and to the struggles for racial justice and human rights.

Bertram H. Gold, executive vice president of the American Jewish Committee, observed yesterday that Mr. Moss had a deep commitment to the prophetic tradition of social justice.

Mr. Moss not only was a leading Protestant ecumenist and president since 1969 of the 1.8 million member United Church of Christ but also an outspoken champion of liberal causes, secular or religious.

‘Absolute Equality’ for Blacks

Dr. Moss was also a vice president of the National Council of Churches, chairman of its commission on faith and order and a member of the central committee of the World Council of Churches. He frequently voiced support of amnesty for Vietnam War resisters.

When Dr. Moss was elected seven years ago to the first of two four-year terms as president of his church, he urged the denomination to “pursue relentlessly and With singleness of purpose absolute equality for the black man and his right to determine his own destiny.”

“We have become keenly aware of our separation from the poor, the black and the powerless in this world,” he said in his acceptance speech.

“They are our brothers. We know clearly that they rightly have something against us. We must take a step toward reconciliation and declare our unity with the dispossessed of the world.”

Church Formed in 1957

The United Church of Christ was formed in 1957 by a merger of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church. It was the first union of American denominations with different backgrounds and forms of church government.

Congregationalists were mainly New England professional people, while the Evangelical and Reformed church-goers came out of a Pennsylvania agricultural background.

Speaking in Los Angeles three years ago on behalf of the National Council of Churches, Dr. Moss called for amnesty to “heal the wounds” of the Vietnam War.

‘Our feeling is that there should be total amnesty for all those in legal jeopardy—deserters, exiles and those in trouble with the Selective Service System,’ he said.

He pointed out that his son, John, who is now 26 years old and a former Marine, who was wounded and disabled in Vietnam, agreed.

A Biblical scholar and theologian, Dr. Moss was president of Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lancaster, Pa., from 1957 until his election as church president in 1969. When he became president of the divinity school, he was one of the nation's youngest seminary presidents.



In 1970, Dr. Moss urged all religious bodies to call women to “highly visible” positions of responsibility. And under his prodding, the United Church of Christ established a Task Force on Women in 1971.

Early this year, Dr. Moss led a team of 25 leaders of the United Church on tour of the Far East to examine reports of oppression in Indonesia, martial law in the Philippines and the divided Christian church in Japan.

Midway in the tour, he undertook trip to Seoul to protest the South Korean Government's arrest of 27 Korean Christians.

New Unification Sought

One of Dr. Moss's last official acts was to bring about an agreement for the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to undertake discussions aimed at the eventual union of the two denominations.

Dr. Moss, 6 feet 1 inch tall and 183 pounds, was born in Wilson, N.C., on March 3, 1922.

He graduated from Franklin and Marshall College and the Lancaster Seminary and in 1954 received a doctor of philosophy degree from the University of Chicago.

Dr. Moss was one of 32 official Protestant observers at the Second Vatican Council and was a delegate to the third assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi in 1961.

From 1966 to 1968, he was co-chairman of the Roman Catholic-Presbyterian and Reformed Dialogue Group and during the same two-year period, he served as president of the American Association of Theological Schools.

Dr. Moss leaves his wife, the former Junia Evelyn Keppel; three sons, John, Robert 3d, and Timothy; two sisters, Margaret Hodnett and Sarah Clark; a brother, Charles, and his parents, Robert V. and Constance.

A memorial service, will be held Thursday at 2 P.M. at the First Congregational Church in Montclair.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1976/10/26/archives/rev-robert-v-moss-jr-54-dies-united-church-of-christ-president.html>

