

“An Articulate Faith”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
Sunday, June 21, 2015

Many of you know that this week we had, concluding yesterday, the 50th anniversary annual meeting of the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ at the Koury Convention Center. Ron Barlow was our delegate. This was a celebration, of course, of 50 years of the United Church of Christ in North Carolina and Virginia and the many, many churches which have made up the Southern Conference over those years.

This coming week will be the UCC General Synod in Cleveland, Ohio which is a bi-annual gathering of the entire United Church of Christ as a denomination. All of our churches and all of our instrumentalities and institutions are represented there where we do the business of the national church. This coming week, June 25, is also the 58th anniversary of the United Church of Christ and its formation 58 years ago. We are a young denomination.

I want to talk a little bit about what all of this means. We live in a time when denominations are less and less important. Nondenominational churches are all around us and quite popular these days, but I want to talk about the United Church of Christ and what, in fact, it is that we believe.

One of the phenomena that I experienced, particularly in Tennessee when I was there in Cumberland County, Tennessee (which is a very small, rural county in Tennessee) as I got to know some of my neighbors in the neighborhood where I lived was this. They would often ask “What do you do?” I would, of course, say “I’m a pastor at Pleasant Hill Community Church United Church of Christ. They would inevitably respond “Oh yes, Church of Christ!” I would politely reply “No, not Church of Christ. That’s a different denomination. We are the *United Church of Christ*”. They never knew quite what to do with that, and I never knew if I wanted to get into that discussion with them or not. I knew very little about the *Church of Christ*. All I had ever heard was that they don’t have any instrumentation in their worship. They sing acapella. I said, “In the United Church of Christ, we do just about anything and everything depending on the local church’s tradition.”

In the south, the United Church of Christ is not very well known. In the northeast, the United Church of Christ is somewhat similar to the Southern Baptists. In the northeast there is a United Church of Christ congregation pretty much on every corner or town square. If you’ve ever seen the idyllic postcards of the New England town square, it’s got that big steeple church right there in the middle that is OFTEN a United Church of Christ church, so we are not as big or as well-known in the south as we are in the northeastern states.

Peace Church is going to start working on many things, but one of the things we are going to start working on with our Dawnings Initiative process in this church, which is very important, is a process so that we know and can articulate what it means to be Peace *United Church of Christ*; so that we can begin to articulate and share with people who and what we are when people say “Oh yes, Church of Christ”. We need to be able to engage them in what it is that we believe and how we are a unique congregation and denomination. That’s going to be one of the important processes that we are going to engage in. What do we believe as Peace Church? What do we believe as the United Church of Christ?

When people ask me “What is the United Church of Christ?” I often say, “Well, we are like Methodists. Well, we’re like Presbyterians. Well, we’re sort of like Lutherans. We are mainline Protestants”, or as some people call the UCC, “Unitarians Considering Christ.” We are part of the

mainline Protestant church and we are like those other denominations that I just mentioned, and we often work with them on projects — both local and international. ..but we are different.

I want to begin by talking about what Susie Cressman shared this morning. Those six pieces that she read about (and I will go through those) really, for my money at least, articulate the uniqueness of what the United Church of Christ believes. Of course, we are a Christian denomination. The preamble of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ says “The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior”. That is the first statement we make as a denomination and it grounds us immediately in the Christian tradition. Perhaps any denomination could make that statement, but we make it first in our Constitution and we go from there. That is very established. We are of the Christian mainline Protestant tradition.

So I want to talk about our uniqueness. The first thing that Susie read came out of this brochure called “Who We Are and What We Believe.” I have tons of these if you’d like to read one more closely. It states, as the title suggest, who we are and what we believe. There is a lot of history in it and a lot of different pieces to it. It is a very helpful piece.

First Statement: The first statement comes from the Gospel of John, 17:21, “That they may all be one”. A foundational belief of the United Church of Christ comes from our moment of origin in 1957. There was a spirit in the Christian church and in America at that time of ecumenical possibility. The churches in 1957 were overflowing with youth, overflowing with members. We were in the post-World War II economic boom. The machinery of the church was functioning on all 8 cylinders, and there was, at that time, a sense that we could bring all of the denominations together and be a powerful unit. It was an ecumenical moment for the church. The United Church of Christ was seizing on that moment to say “Our foundational belief is going to be ecumenism”. That is, “We are going to work to bring the body of Christ back together--all the denominations, all the splintering churches—we are going to be about working together to bring the body of Christ back together”. It was a heady moment in American church history. We felt like it was really going to happen.

If you look at the Congregational Christian wing of the United Church of Christ and the Evangelical Reformed wing, they were very, very different traditions and, yet, we were able, for the most part, to bring those two very different traditions together. So, a foundational part of the United Church of Christ (if anyone ever asks you) is that we believe in working together with other Christians, with other denominations, and other faiths to bring together the body of Christ and to help build God’s kingdom here on earth; it is part of our origins that we have forgotten. Partly, we have forgotten that in the United Church of Christ because in 1957 there were other things going on in American culture, and the Civil Rights Movement was one of them. We got caught up, and very appropriately so, in the Civil Rights Movement. Many of our leaders were on the front lines of that movement, so the ecumenical piece of our identity got a little bit pushed off to the side, but we have always kept that, and that is very, very important. I think it will become a more and more important part of our identity, so if someone asks you “What is the United Church of Christ?” you should say “We are the denomination that is committed to bringing together the body of Christ to work for God’s kingdom here on earth”.

Second Statement: “In essentials unity, in nonessentials diversity, in all things love.” I interpret this belief to simply mean that everyone doesn’t have to see everything exactly the same way in the United Church of Christ. We are all on a journey of faith. Our journeys of faith are different for every person. To join the United Church of Christ you do not have to walk in lock step with everyone else so, in essentials unity and in everything else, diversity. Now, we can have long discussions about the essentials, but let’s just say that ‘God is love’ and start there and then we go from there. Think about this moment of history we live in where everyone wants the world to be black and white. The United Church of Christ has said from the beginning that we are all on a

different journey. We are all experiencing God differently. We are all having different revelations in our journey, and to be a part of this church, we honor the fact that we are all in a different place in our journey. Yes, there are some essentials that we would need to articulate, but after that it is all diversity, and that could be the way we worship, the way we reach out to the community, the way we understand God, the way we understand or don't understand the Trinity. There are all kinds of ways, but the point is that we are all called here and bound together through love.

Third Statement: "Testimonies of faith, rather than tests of faith". A testimony of faith is me or any of you getting up and saying "This is how God has worked in my life. This is an experience I have had of the Holy Spirit. This is how God has changed my life, healed my wounds, made me a different person". All of us, of course, have different testimonies of faith. When we go to seminary, one of the things we do is we sit around and give our testimonies of faith. We tell the class how we got to this point. Every one of those stories is unique. Every one of those stories is also similar in some ways, but we honor the testimony.

Tests of faith can be creeds like the Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, or any other type of creed, but in the United Church of Christ, we don't say that you have to believe this, this and this in order to get in. What we say is that your journey with God is valued. Come and continue on the journey with us, so that is a very unique part of the United Church of Christ and its understanding of the faith.

Fourth Statement: "There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's Holy Word". This is a statement of how we read the Bible. You will see occasionally on a bumper sticker "God said it. I believe it. That settles it". That's not the United Church of Christ. What the United Church of Christ wants to confirm and celebrate is that the Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments, is an alive document. It comes from a very particular historical moment and context, but it is, when understood properly, a living document that has something new to speak to us about living in our time and day. As part of that orientation, what I like to tell people is "Don't ever study the Bible alone". Always study the Bible with other people. Always study the Bible with a commentary nearby so that you can understand the context of the scripture or the historical moment. As Karl Barth, a famous theologian, once said "Always read with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other" so that we are always reflecting upon the scripture for understanding what God is doing in our world today. So, there is yet more light and truth in the Bible.

The Bible is a living document and it is critically important for us to understand the historical time frame and then to ask "What does that mean for us in our time?" Sometimes the scripture in the Bible has what I call a negative lesson. When God ordains the slaughter of the Amalekites in the Old Testament, all of their people and all of their livestock, and everything that the Amalekites have, I would say "You know what, God's got a lesson to teach us but it isn't about slaughtering the Amalekites. It requires historical understanding of the context and the fact that sometimes the ancient Israelites misunderstood God's will. That is a very difficult thing to say in our world when we want to say that the Bible is God's truth and all that stuff...well, yes, but... If we take it responsibly and we understand our faith responsibly and we want to be responsible Christians, we have to read the Bible with a critical eye and understand that historical context which is so important. The good news is that the Bible is alive. It is speaking to us. We are the denomination that says "God is still speaking". God is speaking to you and to me, to Peace Church, and saying something new, and that IS good news.

Fifth Statement: "The priesthood of all believers". One of our foundational beliefs in the United Church of Christ is the "priesthood of all believers" which, simply put, just means that God calls every one of us, not just the pastor, and perhaps not even primarily the pastor. God has a call for each one of you—for all of us. God calls us to serve in the name of the church with our own gifts and talents. Every single one of us here today has blessings and curses. We have talents and gifts, and we have things we can't do so well, but God wants us and calls us to use our blessings

and our gifts...whatever those may be...to strengthen and be a part of the building up the kingdom of God. One thing that I certainly learned in my nearly 20 years of ministry is that every single member of every single church has wonderful gifts to share. They have some warts too, but the gifts that each person in a church has to share, and using and putting together those gifts, are what makes a local church strong. In the United Church of Christ, what we affirm is the priesthood, that all of you are called by God, like me, for specific tasks and specific services and you have specific gifts to share. That's why some of you are not in the choir and some of you are. That's why some of you are in leadership roles on the Consistory and some of you are in Peace Care, and so forth and so on. So, we are all a congregation of "priests" in that sense.

Sixth Statement: "Responsible freedom". This has to do with how we experience God's presence, how we experience God's call individually, how we experience the whole tasks of ministry. But what I want to stress is that we, as a responsible part of our responsible freedom, are a covenantal church. This is part of what it means to have responsible freedom — a covenantal church. In the Old Testament, the idea of covenant was that God was in a covenantal relationship with the people of Israel, and Israel was in a covenantal relationship with their God. Covenant is about a deep, deep, deep relationship—a relationship that can be bent, can be stressed, but can never be broken. We are in covenant with one another. We are in covenant with God. We are in covenant with the United Church of Christ. We are in covenant with Nazareth Children's Home. That means we are mutually supportive while recognizing that we all have an individual call to live out our call in those different places. What I love about the covenantal idea, as I understand it, is that if you read the Old Testament, what you learn is that Israel was constantly disobeying, constantly going their own way, constantly building the next Golden Calf, constantly wandering off into the wilderness, and it is wonderful the history of God getting angry. People get nervous about that, but I think the way they wrote that was that God would get angry with the people of Israel for their disobedience, and God would consistently call them back, so the Israelites were living in exile, and the Babylonians came in and they were living this life of pain when they wondered where was God, God has abandoned us, and what has happened to our faith, God come save us. The stories start to come out of God calling them back. So, we live in covenant with one another. We live in covenant with God, and that covenant, that relationship with God can never be broken. It is permanent. God is always calling us back. It is about grace. It is about forgiveness and that is a powerful notion so all of that is to say that we, in the United Church of Christ, have a very, very passionate faith that shies away from absolutes.

We do not want to say that we have the only truth because my understanding is that we all have a piece of the truth. Every individual, every person on this land has a piece of the truth and if that is accurate then we must listen deeply to one another because we have something to learn from every single person if we all have a piece of the truth.

The United Church of Christ as a denomination tries to celebrate the journey that is never ending, the truth that is always being revealed anew, and the God that is always still speaking to our time, to our place, and to our historical moment, so we do need to continue to celebrate our denominational affiliation and the United Church of Christ—what it has been and what it will be—and that we at Peace Church can continue to be a part of that tradition. So, the next time someone says to you "Oh yes. Church of Christ", say "Nope. You got 2-3 hours to sit down? I'll tell you about it" because our history is that rich, and I give thanks to our participation in our membership in the United Church of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.