

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The GPS (God's Purpose Seekers) Task Force

February 8, 2015

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

A welcoming Christ-centered church sharing His life-changing message of love, joy and forgiveness in service to all people for the glory of God.

What it is to be a truly welcoming church?

Pete Hnath

Leigh Maynard is a friend of mine who was homeless in Boston for 27 years. He often tells the story of how many years ago he attend a church downtown. He sat in the back and kept a polite space from the rest of the congregation. One day a couple of the elders asked to speak with Leigh. They stepped outside and told Leigh that he made others uncomfortable and that perhaps he'd prefer to worship elsewhere. Leigh, stunned and hurt by the comment, asked them, "Are you Christians?"

"Yes" they replied. Leigh shot back, "If you were Christians there's no way you would treat someone like this."

Fast forward... Leigh is walking through Boston Common one morning when a petite woman in a minister's robe said to him, "Sir you look like you need a friend." When Leigh tried to pass, she refused to let him by. Leigh grudgingly joined the service on the Common that morning. Looking back years later, he now says that his life was saved in that moment. Today his testimony is an inspiration to hundreds every year who hear his story and the joy and hope that come from an active relationship in Christ.

Perhaps it's easy to say... oh we'd never be that first church—and I believe that's true. But... are we the second church? The one that is out in the community, proactively identifying those in need, embracing regardless of background. Are we a church that sees a visitor not for what they can contribute to our church, rather what we can do for them? Are we a church that promotes our programs and our facilities or one that focuses on the joy of knowing Christ and being in a community of others serving Him?

Reading from the Message, in Luke 14 Jesus said, "The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You'll be—and experience—a blessing. They won't be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned—oh, how it will be returned!—at the resurrection of God's people."

For UCC to be a truly welcoming church, we need to move well beyond a smile and a treat during fellowship hour. We are called to see God's image in every person, to reach out into our community and encourage them into our church body to experience the richness of a life in Christ. We are to take a proactive, loving and sincere interest in each other's lives and to inspire each other to grow in our faith.

What does it mean to be Christ Centered?

Pete Hnath

Shortly after Jesus' resurrection, he made one of his most emphatic statements to his followers. Again reading from the Message, this time in Matthew 28—"Meanwhile, the eleven disciples were on their way to Galilee, headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion. The moment they saw him they worshiped him.

Some, though, held back, not sure about *worship*, about risking themselves totally. Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: “God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.”

This passage is known as “The Great Commission” and is the essence of what we are called to do as Christians. Let’s step back a second and imagine the roller coaster Jesus’ followers had been on over this week—triumph entering Jerusalem, the gravity of the Last Supper, the anger of betrayal, the frustration of the mock trial, the sorrow of watching the crucifixion and the jubilation (and likely confusion) of the risen Christ.

They find themselves on their way to Galilee, not sure of what to expect. “The moment they saw him they worshipped him”—Well duh! “Some, though, held back, not sure about *worship*, about risking themselves totally—Wow! Think about this,..in the live presence of the risen Christ, some still were afraid to risk themselves! How easy is it for us today to hold back and not dedicate ourselves to Christ?

I love this... “undeterred, Jesus went ahead and gave his charge.” Jesus is showing us the way—always—even if we’re not entirely ready to consume it yet. Onto the big finale— “Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you.”

This was Jesus’ charge to his disciples 2,000 years ago and it is for our church today. As individuals and as a church body we are called to more than “to do good”, rather we are ****commanded**** to boldly profess Christ and make disciples. As a church we will strive to be Christ Centered. Everything that each of us does will point to Christ individually and collectively.

Sharing

Bonnie Biocchi

Growing up, Temple Street, in my small hometown of Medway, was a very busy place. This dead-end street housed 38 kids in nine houses. Just before I went to first grade, the Allen family moved in across the street. These Yankee Protestants had at least one thing in common with our Italian Catholic family. We both had a child named Bonnie. Between our two families, there were 10 kids and like a lot of people who grew up in the 60’s and 70’s we shared every aspect of our young lives. We shared secrets and sleep-overs and every day we shared our hopes and dreams and fears and tears.

My parents were the strictest (by far) on the block, and definitely believed in the spare the rod and spoil the child method of child rearing. And although I was baptized and confirmed in the Roman Catholic tradition, I rarely attended Mass. The Allen’s on the other hand, were at church all the time! Every Sunday! And they were gone for hours. I wondered what they could possibly be doing for all that time? They always got dressed up and carried their bibles, and came home happy. I was curious about this faith they so freely shared. The Allen’s never let my Roman Catholic background stop them from evangelizing about their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Lots of people thought they were Jesus freaks, but they were so continually loving and giving, that you could not help but be drawn to them. Everything they did shared the love of Christ in some way.

They were forgiving, and tolerant, showing sympathy and joy in equal measure. In October of 1978, they gave me this bible and shared God’s love and forgiveness with me. And I have to tell you, my life has never been the same. God gets the credit and the glory, for sure, but without someone like the Allen’s who were willing to share themselves and Christ’s love, the journey to acceptance would have been longer, and certainly more painfully bumpy.

So to me, sharing is an action that is both inclusive and helpful. Sharing implies the giving of something of value that adds, not subtracts. If done properly sharing results in both the recipient *and* the benefactor gaining something. To be a sharing church, then, we must be willing to deliver God's message widely and in a variety of ways. In sharing we have the opportunity to make manifest God's commandment to love one another each and every day. A sharing church is a congregation that actively prays for each other, doubling times of joy and dividing days of sorrow.

A sharing church helps people pursue a relationship with our Triune God. A sharing church brings the message of God's love and Christ's forgiveness to family and friends and is interested in further taking that message into the community at large, fully expecting great things to happen. A sharing Church recognizes that all that we are and all that we have are gifts shared by God with us. A sharing Church delights in giving back to God a portion of what he has given to us. A sharing church showers assistance, hope, forgiveness and love on those in need as well as those who have enough. A sharing church is generous with its time, talents, money and love. It is my hope that our sharing gives new meaning to the lives of those we touch, in the same way that the Allen family's sharing touched mine.

Life Changing

Halsey Platt

Life-changing: The GPS team believes that while God values “living a good life,” that is not enough. When we make Christ the center of our lives, everything in our lives changes because we are different.

I first joined this church loving God and wanting to be “good” in his eyes. I sought to be good by coming to church on Sunday, good by loving those around me, good by being kind to others, good by being ethical at work. I kept thinking I was fine but still wondered if **God** thought I was being “good” *or more accurately “good enough”*. As I continued to pray and as I continued to listen, the Holy Spirit guided me to look away from God and to focus on Christ, to learn why He is called **The Way**.

As I read the New Testament, as I listened much more carefully to Christ's teachings, as I realized that Jesus' guidance is relevant to my life today, I learned that we, as Christians, are expected to be more than “good.” We are expected to study the Bible, to pray daily, to listen. We are expected to love each other in a way that emulates the love Christ has for us. We are expected to live our lives in a way that radiates the hope and peace and forgiveness of our Lord and when we do this *it is life changing*. This is a key message that our church can bring to Groton. I have learned this here. I did not know it when I walked through those doors; I have learned this here with you, here with Gail, here through my journey closer to Christ **and it has been Life-Changing**.

What is the Message?

Stefanie Lempp

The message is the Gospel—the Good News of Jesus Christ, who died for us and who rose from the dead, giving us hope in all things. That message is **WHY** we come to church—we come back, Sunday after Sunday, because of something more than just the music and the Sunday School and the people. We are looking for something else: for meaning in our lives... for God's purpose for us... and for the hope that the Gospel brings.

In order to make God's message really come alive for each one of us, we believe that God calls us not only to come just on Sundays—he calls us to “show up” every day. God is looking for us to learn about what that message means, so we need to practice our faith and we need to grow as Christians. How do we do that? By reading the Bible, by praying, by learning, by talking with others about our Christian faith, by listening to each other, and by watching for the Holy Spirit.

For me, the more I do those things, the more I can tune into how God is working in my life. I find that when I can make time to read and think about a devotional (these days it's Christine Caine), or read from one of the Bible plans that I have on my phone, or talk with others at a church meeting about how the Holy Spirit has showed in some really cool way in someone's life, or find time to pray before an important telephone conversation in my work day, ... when I take that time, things tend to go more smoothly, I get a really strong sense of God in my life, leading me, and I also get a clarity about what's important and what is not.

God never gets tired of us **trying** to be better at following Him. He is the perfect teacher: He is infinitely patient and is ready for us to call on Him any time. He offers us Grace now, whenever that "now" is, and so we get new chances whenever we need them, simply by asking. But our faith also teaches us that God's grace doesn't come without some responsibility and so part of our end of the bargain is to actually work at being better at following him – by reading the Bible, learning, talking with others about our faith, praying. And after a while, that doesn't feel like work – it feels like going to a safe place to refuel and to get ready for whatever is next. It is when we learn more and follow God more closely—starting wherever we are in our journey—that God's message becomes truly life-changing.

Love

Tim Dumont

Love: God loves all people unconditionally. As followers of Christ, the ultimate manifestation of God's love for the world, God wants us to share this love in word and deeds.

So how do we share God's unconditional love in word and deed?

Unconditional love is a concept that we humans don't always do well. But God will teach us, if we push ourselves into action. In my life, I see God showing me opportunities in which I can experience his unconditional love through word and deed. And it starts right here.

Over the last few years, I have been volunteering when our church sponsors the Community Dinner at First Parish Church in January. It is a great experience and an excellent example of God's love through deed. Many of the people in this room have taken a turn or two or many with this deed of service. I have seen our church, God's church, united as one group for a common purpose—sharing God's love. Everyone serving at the event is upbeat, smiling, happy and doing whatever tasks that need to be done without complaint. This "service to others" truly is love in action.

I have volunteered the last two years to bring the left-over food from the dinner to the House of Hope in Lowell. It is *a temporary shelter, providing advocacy and care for homeless families. Rooted in a belief in God.* The people in this home do not expect this food. There is so much joy and thankfulness when the food is delivered that you cannot help but feel God's unconditional love at work in the room. This year the woman receiving our delivery commented on how nice the people in Groton are for this program and on leaving said God Bless You. That is not for me but for all of us! It has made me feel closer to God and, because we are one church body in Jesus Christ, it brings us all closer to God and his unconditional love.

God Bless Us All!

Joy (Jesus Owns You)

Bonnie Biocchi

I want you to think about a time when you felt so happy you thought you would burst. Maybe it was the first time your spouse told you they loved you. Perhaps it was the birth of a child or when you became a grandparent. Maybe it was when the Red Sox won the World Series in 2004. Or maybe it was when you found out you didn't have cancer. These are fleeting moments that produce an indescribable feeling of joy. Joy creates a wonderfully pervasive sense of peace inside of us.

Without even trying, joy fills us up and makes us feel safe and happy and loved simultaneously...like everything is right with the world.

J.O.Y. Three little letters. Like the Trinity, the word Joy conjures up both majesty and mystery.

While happiness is an elusive and fickle emotion, joy is pure. Joy is not reliant upon circumstances or interaction with others but in fact exists all the time, ready for the taking. In the Bible, the word joy is coupled with phrases such as unspeakable joy, abundant joy and everlasting joy and is expressed in song, praise, and shouting. And a joyful heart is what resides in those who love the Lord.

I am fond of saying "You have to find the joy in every day," which generally produces some eye-rolling from my children or at least some objection of from my husband with the words "yeah, sure." The feeling of joy can be triggered by a simple thing like the smell of homemade bread, or the array of colors of a November sunset, or the sound of waves crashing on the shore. These outward things can trigger joy in me easily. But the real source of that peace is that I know that J.O.Y. is God's way of saying "Jesus Owns You." That he has claimed you. And because Jesus, who is the source of all joy, died for my sins and I am forgiven, I can live joyfully. I don't have to worry about tomorrow. I don't have to fear what's coming because I know Jesus has me covered. When you live faithfully you can live fearlessly and that, in turn, means you will always have joy. And that same joy is available to everyone who comes into relationship with the Lord. And when you are in relationship with the Lord, joy will naturally flow to you and through you and touch every aspect of your life. When you know that Jesus Owns You in your heart—your home life, work life, church life and community life will reflect it. And Jesus Owing You will be the roots that ground you and the wings that make you soar. JOY doesn't mean you will never have a bad day, or never feel sorrow, but Jesus Owing You, means that those things will be redeemed for good. Sharing a message of Joy, transforms hate into love, turns sorrow into gladness and helps the lost to find their way home. And that is a message worth sharing.

Forgiveness

Tim Dumont

Forgiveness: Live our lives so that it is evident to those around us that we are joyfully living in the forgiveness of Christ... and when they ask why ... we point to Christ.

How do we make it evident to others that we are living joyfully in the forgiveness of Christ?

From the book of Acts chapter 10—"All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives **forgiveness** of sins through his name."

I want to directly focus on who this line is speaking about. So, I am going to read it again only this time replacing the word "him" and "his" with the name "Jesus."

All the prophets testify about **Jesus** that everyone who believes in **Jesus** receives **forgiveness** of sins through **Jesus'** name." **Forgiveness is ALL about Jesus!**

Why do we need Forgiveness? Our sin is the reason that we need forgiveness. Sin can be found everywhere that we humans exist. Where we live, work and even play (yes hard as it is to believe - even when we play - given the recent attention to football and the rules and accusations—I have to believe that there is sin in action somewhere there). Everyplace on the planet where humans are—sin exists.

It is hard to personally admit to sin and certainly a downer to have to hear about it. How often do you listen to the news and after hearing a couple of horrible reports of the hate, violence and wrong-doing going on in the world do you either mute the television or shut it off?

So how can we be joyfully living while being sinners? Because **IN** our belief **IN Jesus Christ we are forgiven**. Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead and sits at the right hand of God! From Ephesians chapter 1 we read - In him (**Jesus**) we have redemption through his (**Jesus**) blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his (**Jesus**) grace.

“In Jesus Christ we are forgiven and in HIS forgiveness there is redemption and joy that others will see!

What about Service?

Stefanie Lempp

Jesus commands us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:38) – we will practice this as consistently and faithfully as possible, by actually doing the serving, both near and far, and by giving our resources.

We believe that God is calling us – as a church, so collectively – to change lives outside the walls of this building. It sounds obvious, but the reason we have church – as opposed to some other grouping of people -- is because of GOD: we are gathered in community in response to God’s call. Jesus said in Matthew 18:20 that church happens where two or three are gathered “in my name.” THAT’s why we are here. We are here because we are a people of God and because we believe we are called to love each other and to serve others, as Jesus did.

We are blessed to have this beautiful white church in the center of a quaint little New England town; and we work hard at trying to be good at taking care of our congregation, and growing our faith, and managing our money, and taking care of our buildings and our property. But God calls us – as a church – to do more than look after ourselves. What good is all our learning and praying and reading the Bible and hearing the message if we don’t go out and share that?

We believe that God has knit us together in the form of this congregation in order to go out and serve. We are called to find opportunities to use our collective gifts and resources and all the blessings we have within our walls to go out into the world to do things for others --- in our local community, in our greater community, and maybe even farther away.

This is a call to action for all of us, together - and that’s a challenge! Think about this with me for a minute: Could we, as a church, be doing better? Imagine, that we routinely offered service opportunities to the entire congregation... And imagine, if each one of us (who is able) committed regularly – say once a quarter -- to a service project that was planned as a church activity.... What would that say about UCC Groton as a church to the community and to the world? Doesn’t that feel like something we should be doing?

One last thing about serving others: we believe that we as a church are called to serve and give to others by doing so **IN HIS NAME**. This means that in offering our time and our gifts and our resources (including money) to help others, we also share God’s message. It’s something the teens who go on mission trips every year learn, and it’s something that I’m reminded of when I have been on these trips with them: Ultimately, handing someone a sandwich or a pair of clean socks or a blanket is not life-

changing. But caring about someone in relationship with them, and sharing God's message of Love and Hope and Forgiveness – that **does** make a difference in the lives of those we serve.

What do we mean by “To all People”?

Mary Hanson

I would like to talk to you about the phrase “To all People.” In Leviticus it says “*The stranger residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt.*” That seems simple... We're Christians, of course we welcome everyone! Many of you know how easy it is to greet that new family with the cute kids at coffee hour. But we need to challenge ourselves as a church to welcome all people; even the tough ones. Do we go out of our way to greet that new person, who's all alone? Maybe they have never been here before; maybe they have never been in a *church* before. They are courageously taking a step closer to God. It might feel a little awkward talking to a stranger on Sunday, but imagine what it feels like to be that stranger. We need to show them what the Holy Spirit looks like and make them feel at home in God's house.

But should we be waiting to see who comes through the door? No! God wants us to help all people get to know Him. There is a whole community out there where we can put our faith into action. We need to expand our faith beyond these walls and we should put God into our daily routines and keep Him front and center. We can offer to pray for a friend or a co-worker who is going through a tough time. Telling someone, “I'll say a prayer for you” can feel odd when you don't do it very often. But it might be that little spark that someone needs to bring Christ into their lives. Think about asking someone to come to church with you. Not long ago I did that with my brother, who hadn't been to church since we were teenagers. It's opened up a dialog about religion between us that was never there before and it's been good for both of us.

Last year Tom, Emily and I went with Reverend Gail and others here at church to bring sandwiches to the homeless on the streets of Cambridge. I thought it would be good for my daughter to see how some people have to live who have no other means. In the past, these were people that I would have walked by. Instead we actively engaged them by offering food, a little conversation and a prayer. We met a man in a wheelchair who had trouble talking, so he wrote his story down slowly on some paper. He wanted to share his experience with us so much. And we prayed with him. I was filled with the sense of the Holy Spirit being with us in that moment. Here was someone who had nothing and yet he still had his faith! It humbled me. I really saw that God's light shines in all kinds of places! I look forward to participating again. And I want that kind of experience for each one of you!

So “To all People” should be a challenge for us to actively help all people find God and feel the Holy Spirit.

What do we mean by “For the Glory of God”?

Larry Robinson

What is the Glory of God? The Glory of God is the visible manifestation of God's presence. In the old testament, the Glory of the Lord would fill the temple when God's presence was there (2 Cron 5:14). But now the temple is no longer a building where God comes down and resides there in the midst of his people. WE are the temple that the Holy Spirit lives in (God wants to manifest His presence in our lives individually)—1 Cor. 6:19. How do we get God to show up in our lives everyday and not just visit us every now and then? It is through our continual act of obedience and putting God first in EVERYTHING. Viewing life through God's perspective on a matter, rather than our own.

It is not enough just to show up for church and spend quality, focused worship time with God on Sundays and then leave God out in our homes, at jobs, and with our friends. That's a part time love affair and God is not into that. God wants to be first in EVERYTHING, EVERYDAY! All that we do, act on, and

think about we stay in constant contact with God to get from Him what He has said about it, rather than using our own human opinion or soliciting the opinion of others. This is how we draw near to God and the Bible says that He then draws near to us—James 4:8

Jesus said it best in John 14:21, “He that has my commandments and keeps them is he that loves me, he that loves me shall be loved by my Father and I will love him and will manifest myself to him”. The key word is manifest which means display or show (a quality or feeling) by one's acts or appearance; translation: Glory. God wants us to follow him and walk with Him (in obedience, faith, and instruction in ALL things) and by doing this as a lifestyle, the Glory of God will show up in our lives, because God is now free to reveal Himself to us and to others that will be able to see Him working through us.

What is the bottom line based all that has been said from the previous 10 elements of the mission statement? Ecclesiastes 12:13 states this summary well:

All has been heard; the end of the matter is: Fear God [revere and worship Him, knowing that He is] and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man [the full, original purpose of his creation, the object of God's providence, the root of character, the foundation of all happiness, the adjustment to all inharmonious circumstances and conditions under the sun] and the whole [duty] for every man.