

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

June 16, 2019

Trinity Sunday (Last Sermon)

Isaiah 40:28-31
I Corinthians 3:5-7

God Gives the Growth

I'll begin at the beginning, with a portion of the very first sermon I preached here, June 4, 2006 (with a tweaking of verb tenses and pronouns).

Pastors come and go. The list of pastors and their dates of service on the back wall is a good thing for a preacher to gaze on week after week. For it reminds me that this is not my church. It is good that when your pastor stands before you that who they see is not only those who are present in the room, but also a real reminder of those who have gone before.

A retired pastor friend of mine, Rick Floyd, who preached here years ago, said a wise thing (back in 2005) when he preached at the celebration Sunday for the Senior Minister retiring from 22 years at the Acton Church where I served before coming here. Directed at Dick he said, "This was Christ's church before you got here and it will be Christ's church after you leave." So true.

And in this way all pastors - whether they stay 2 years, 22 years, or 13 years - are Interim Pastors.

I think this is a good word for you as well. This was Christ's church before you got here and it will be Christ's church after you leave. What if, from where you sit every Sunday, you could see a roster of every person who'd ever been a member of this church with the date they joined or were baptized or first visited and the date they died or transferred out or moved on? Perhaps it'd give you some perspective on your place in this church's history; perhaps it'd strengthen a sense of how privileged you really are to be in this place.

Perhaps it'd also be a reminder that we belong, not to ourselves, but to God and to each other - past, present and future. And even more, that the Holy Spirit is with us, is faithful (even when we're not), and will not leave us even when our pastors and our friends do.

This is not our church; it's not my church; it's not even your church; it never was and it never will be. This church, all churches, really belong to God. As you conform your life together to Christ, as you seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, you will continue to be a blessed church, where Christ is shared and lives are changed and God is praised for it.

Then February 24, 2008 our relationship changed as I became your settled pastor. And this was also the day the pronouns changed. You see, Interim pastors are taught to rarely, if ever, use the pronoun "our." Interims are to remain at a distance by always referring to the congregation as "you." But settled pastors freely refer to the church they serve with the first-person plural - "we," "our," and "us."

It's a subtle shift in the language, but a real shift in the relationship, one we grew into gradually as the years passed. And the pronouns are changing again - these days I move back and forth between "you" and "our." "Our" is my habit, but now more and more it sounds not quite right.

Through it all - not just these recent weeks and months of transition - but through the past 13 years, I've had those words from Rick's sermon echoing in my head, "It's Christ's church, Gail, not yours." Which weren't his words, but which came from our reading from I Corinthians for today. We do what we can, but God gives the growth.

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. (1 Cor. 3:5-7)

I love that my first Sunday here back in 2006 was Pentecost / Holy Spirit Sunday. And now, today, we are one week past Pentecost. Pentecost is often nicknamed the "birthday of the church," because it was the Holy Spirit that gathered the people all together in one place, spoke to them of Jesus Christ and all that happened, and then sent them out to proclaim the good news of Jesus - crucified, risen, and ascended - to all people.... The pattern of all churches to this day: gather, grow, and go.

After Jesus had returned to heaven, the disciples prayed for the Holy Spirit, for it had been promised to them, and it came - literally blowing them away and changing the world. And you, Union Congregational Church in Groton, are the result of that first Pentecost. You are the changed world that was begun in Jerusalem 1,986 years ago.

And so now would be a good time for you to increase your praying for the Holy Spirit in your life together as a church. And to be on the lookout for the Spirit's work - in big and small ways.

The story goes about a woman who was teaching Vacation Bible School (weeklong Christian summer day camp that churches lead and host). On Tuesday her class was interrupted when a new child was brought in. The little boy was missing one arm, and since the class was well underway when he arrived, she had no opportunity to talk with the parent about his situation - what sort of adjustments she might make in her teaching. She was nervous, afraid that one of the other children would do or say something that might hurt or embarrass him. And so she proceeded carefully.

As they got near the end of their class time, she began to relax. Then she asked the class to join her in their little closing ritual. "Let's make our churches," she said. (We have all done it as kids). They each folded their hands and began to recite. "Here is the church and here is the steeple, open the doors and there's..."

And the awful truth of her own actions struck her. The very thing she had feared that the children would do, she had done; she had excluded this little boy. But then, as she stood there speechless, the little girl sitting next to the boy reached over with her left hand, placed it up to his right hand and said, "Davey, let's make church together." (Gilbert W. Bowen)

That's what we have done together here. With the help, guidance, correction, prodding of the Holy Spirit we have made church together. And it's what you'll continue to do after I leave.

Listen to what Rachel Hackenberg, who writes a devotional for the UCC, said about this *being together* in her reflection on Pentecost Sunday:

After Easter, the disciples gathered together often, trying to make sense of life without Jesus. Sometimes they gathered behind locked doors in fear. Sometimes they met in familiar places, like their fishing boats, with a longing to return to that elusive state called "normal." Sometimes they came together to observe the rhythms of their religious life, the holy days and the prayers and the commemorations.

Together: it's often where we find God. And when we're struggling to find God, together is how we hold on.

Together is also a place where we can become stuck. Together can become sufficient, providing comfort without challenge, adequacy but not abundance. Together can become safe for the sake of staying in, to the neglect of going out. Together can become authoritative, a judgment of "them vs. us," a closed community into which nothing (and no one) new is invited or imagined.

When Pentecost day began, the disciples were all together in one place.

When Pentecost day ended, the disciples had gone out from their one place. Together multiplied. New togethers formed. New dreams sparked. New songs arose. New witnesses testified. New generosity flowed.

And the original together—the disciples who had been trying to hold on one day at a time, trying to make sense of their new normal? They changed. "All together" became their call, not just their comfort. (UCC Daily Devotional, June 9, 2019)

God has placed a call on us - all together - for the past 13 years - which has also been a comfort. And as I leave, and things become uncomfortable, His call on you will remain - all together.

And God has other calls for this church which are clear and strong.

- Sharing Christ so that lives would be changed

- Creating a Christian foundation for families

- Learning more about Jesus

- Serving others

(These are printed for you each week on the front of the bulletin, so you won't forget!)

My hope for you is that this church will become even more about Jesus than it is now. Because Jesus is how we know God. There is nothing in God's character that differs from what we know in Jesus. There are not dual or triple "personalities" in the three persons of the Trinity. When we hear a claim about God that doesn't sound like Jesus, we should be very wary.

And what we know in Jesus is LOVE. Love for God, and love for each other. And when faith looks like love - hospitality and caring for others, faithfulness, generosity, sacrifice, loyalty - then the church becomes the front porch of the kingdom of God.

Sharing Christ ~ Changing Lives: my life has been changed, our lives have been changed.

Sharing Christ ~ Changing Lives: It's who you are and it's who you are called to be.

Amen.