

I have a boring story to tell. Perhaps almost too tedious in its telling, because unlike so many people whose stories I have heard over the years, it is a simple tale of love and acceptance at the hands of the church. I am almost embarrassed by the plainness of it—so devoid of gossiping congregants, judgmental deacons or miscreant priests and pastors that I feel quite sheltered compared to some of the anecdotes others have told me. I have no account of ostracism, rejection, abuse—sexual, verbal or otherwise; no-one within the church told me I needed to “get right with God,” though many outside of the church have—no-one dismissed my opinions, rejected me, condemned me or drummed me out of the church doors. Yet.

I was given great opportunities to learn about love, acceptance, and the need to give back to the world with equal measures of that love and lack of judgment.

When I rebelled in my late teens and left, shaking my fist at the church and blaming it for the world’s ills, I returned to Riverside Church in New York because of a crisis of spirit and health. I was handed a bunch of letters to sign and envelopes to stuff them in. I was given a tray in the cafeteria filled with Sunday fare topped with a jello-salad, and it was as if I had never been away and there was nothing to forgive or even talk about.

“Welcome. Tell us about yourself...or not (as was the case at the time). Just be yourself, but you know, there’s a lot of work to be done. How would you like to be on a committee?”

“Yes. I think I would. Thank you very much.” It has been like that ever since.

I am proud of being a part of a church tradition that has been so nurturing and accepting. In fact, some might say that I have taken the UCC KoolAid. So let me say in fairness, that we are not alone in being a part of many faith traditions in this country that teach their people to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. But, I am proud to have had the fortune to have been brought up in this church, with the wisdom to know to return when I needed to come home.

Some of you may share my experience to one degree or another. I know that many of you did not have the experience of growing up in a faith tradition that affirmed you and reminded you that God loves you exactly as you were born to be. Perhaps you were embraced, but there was anxiety or the lack of a spiritual health in the community. This can be just as dispiriting.

I recently heard the story of one of our church leaders whose family was told that they were not welcome to take Communion with the rest of the congregation. There is another member whose sister divorced and was not welcome at the table in their previous church. The worst story I was confronted with was that of a young man whose hand shook as he handed me his own funeral service bulletin, from an afternoon when his church gathered to “spiritually bury” him and leave him as dead to the community after he admitted he was gay. His mother sent him the bulletin with a note telling him that she would always love the memory of the child he had been. Last week, we showed a documentary called, “Bullied,” to a nearly full sanctuary, and I met teenagers who were no longer welcome in their churches, and one barely welcome in his home.

There but for the grace of God go I...and I suspect for any number of other reasons, go many of you as well; unable to be a part of religion that claims to have all the answers, and places that do not affirm or sustain you in your own particular walk.

Anne Lamott once said, “You can safely assume that you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

Knowing that I have not said this enough...let me say, “thank you” to all of you for working so intentionally to act with kindness, respect and loving intent towards each other. It is a great gift that says so much about you as a congregation, and I have to tell you with great gratitude that this spiritual health combined with a desire to be at your best as a congregation is what makes me so really very happy to be one of your pastors. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. For whatever reasons, I have been always been able to find myself in a healthy church family.

I don’t need to remind you of just how important that is. Can I get a witness to what it feels like to be in a church when that health and trust are eroded?

We are a church that is making a decision today to move into our future.

The mission of The Center for Progressive Christianity defines a little of how they see that future: To reach out to those for whom organized religion has proved ineffectual, irrelevant, or repressive, as well as to those who have given up on or are unacquainted with it.

To uphold evangelism as an agent of justice and peace.

To give a strong voice both in the churches and the public arena to the advocates of progressive Christianity.

And...To support those who embrace the search, not certainty.

In doing this, we can reclaim the symbols of our faith, and imbue them with God’s love, Christly compassion, and the movement of the Spirit among us that calls us to be a constructive force for social and environmental justice and peace in the world, especially for those who have been oppressed and powerless.¹

But, I see it in even more personal terms, based on my own personal experience of the church. This is why I want to share what we have with as many people as have need of finding our doors. The progressive Christian voice is rarely heard in our culture, buried as it is in the stridency of louder and more aggressive voices, and we have a very important message to share. I want kids growing up to be affirmed and nurtured in their church as I was. I want them to learn to respect others and appreciate the message that love can always include one more, and that prejudice is something that should be repudiated, not learned, in the church. I want people to know that it is all right to question and that having honest doubts can lead to the building, not the eroding of faith. And, I want a community that is trained in care and compassion towards each other. Can I get an “Amen?”

I am counting on you to help me get the word out.

There are two theological questions to be asked. What is our essential nature, and what is our essential purpose? A church that knows who it is and why it is, can then figure out HOW to be who and what it is. We know who we are. We know that in the chill of theological certainty, we are the church that promises to extend Jesus’ radical welcome to anyone, whoever they are, and wherever they are on their faith journey. We know that we look primarily at the gospel to the example of Jesus, and try to be every possibility we can be of that example’s expression. We know who we are; we just need to be reminded.

Stewardship Sunday is the one day of the year when I repeat myself by quoting church-systems author David Ray when he says, “Most churches think the biggest issue is fiscal—how to buy and pay for what they think they need. But the major issue is and always will be theological—how to be the kind of church God is calling us to be. The *sub-plot* is how to pay

for it. But any church that knows who it is, and why it exists will figure out HOW to be what it wants to be.”¹

We have been moving in a direction. After interviews, planning and a long discernment process about where you wanted to go as a congregation, we find ourselves smack in the middle of a new time.

Today is about affirming where you have said that you find your greatest treasure, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Your church is becoming more of a haven in the community, a place where we can at least aspire to be who we say we are. You have communicated a direction, and the goal in this direction is sailing in sight of us. Today is the day of the year that we set aside as a barometer of how important that direction is to us.

It was a year ago on the 15th of November that we met after church for a congregational meeting to vote not only on calling Elizabeth Griswold as our Associate Pastor, but to show in this vote that we were willing to take a big leap of faith for our future.

In theory, we knew that calling an Associate who would be charged with developing a ministry for children, youth, young adults and families might just increase both the presence of younger people, and bring a new dynamic to the church through increased activities.

In theory, we knew that by taking a leap of faith and keeping our current staff person for what was then called, “Christian Education,” at her present hours and allowing her to concentrate on expanded adult classes and events, there might just be more going on at the church, including high-profile speakers and programs.

It turns out that through thoughtful work, and not a little faith on your part and that of our leadership – these **theories** have become the **results** we hoped for.

Many of you can join me in remembering what a wonderful day it was a year ago this Sunday when Elizabeth preached her candidating sermon, and there was so much joy in the room at the unanimous acclamation of her call.

I recall the days and months afterward, when both Elizabeth and Robinmarie set out to define and redefine their roles at IUCC with many of you serving to guide them, and the results are in front of us.

It is because of *your* vision and *their* good work, that we are seeing a new generation of Progressive Christians in our midst.

Young families are joining the church, babies are being baptized, and the front steps of the chancel are often crowded.

Programs are happening at the church for both adults and kids on a much more frequent basis.

In fact, because of this, another leap of faith was called for: the Rev. William Summerville was ready and willing to take what had been a youth leader position, and with the consent of our leadership, turn it into a half-time position as Youth and Young Adult Coordinator. I hope that you can see these results and affirm as a congregation what we are doing today by helping your church meet the goals that we have to meet in order to move forward.

Carl and I have increased our pledge this year, despite the uncertainty of the economy, because where our treasure is, our hearts are also, and that is in walking this particular path of faith with you.

I don’t want to embarrass myself too much, so please help me out here.

I am excited about being a part of what we have been doing together. Do you share that excitement?

We are exactly the right church in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. We need to believe and know it. We also can never take it for granted.

That's it. It is over. The yearly expectation that the preacher deliver on the Stewardship sermon, or as Bil Aulenbach calls it, "The Sermon on the Amount." It won't happen again until November 13, 2011, if you want to mark your calendar.

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Maya Angelou said, "Love life, engage in it, give it all you've got. Love it with a passion, because life truly does give back, many times over, what you put into it." I am counting on you to find that place in your heart to give back to your church community for all the things we have done, and all that we have yet to do, always guided in Spirit.

Will you do it?

AMEN.

Sermon Resources

1. From the mission statement and words following: The Center for Progressive Christianity, www.tpc.org
2. David Ray, "Big Small Church Book," Pilgrim Press/United Church Press, Cleveland, (October 1992)

Scripture for Stewardship Sunday, November 14, 2010

Matthew 6:19-21

19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.