

St Paul's Congregational Church
December 2, 2018, Advent 1C
Jeremiah 33:14 – 16; Luke 21:25-36
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last Thursday evening we made history in the New Jersey Association, Central Atlantic Conference, of the UCC: by a unanimous vote of the delegates, we received 4 Reformed Church in America churches into dual standing with the United Church of Christ. Clergy and delegates from as far away as Princeton, as well as our Interim Conference Minister, Roddy Dunkerson who came from Baltimore, gathered to hear the story of these 4 churches, listen to their reasons for seeking dual affiliation, and some amazing testimonies as to why they love their churches!

This has been a two year process for both the New Jersey Association and these churches culminating in this Ecclesiastical Council. Why, you may wonder, would these churches want to enter into this relationship with the United Church of Christ?

The original conversation was motivated by dynamics and pressures within our Formula of Agreement partner, the Reformed Church in America – the focus of concern was how large or small the RCA tent would become in relation to LGBT ministers, members, and marriages. There has been and continues to be movement within the RCA to foster anti-LGBT sentiments and regulations within the denomination, including the possibility of punishment to churches and pastors for their activity in violation of these sentiments and regulations.

Each of these 4 churches has declared themselves as “Open and Welcoming” and struggled with what these pressures meant to them as the gathered body of Christ – one of the ministers spoke eloquently at the meeting on Thursday when she said, “I love my denomination but I love Jesus more. We can't NOT welcome everyone, no matter what!”

Members and pastors of the 4 churches spoke to the gathered delegates and talked about their ministries – the churches range in size from 49 members to over 400 – they describe their churches as gathered to “do justice, share love, show mercy, and walk humbly with our God.” Another described itself as “the church that feeds people: body and soul.” Another: “Small but mighty! A fabulous church of love.”

They are all involved with extraordinary outreach ministries to their communities – soup kitchens, food pantries, providing meals daily to anyone who is hungry, holding Sunday evening programs called “The Table” – a time of dinner and worship with an emphasis on service. And their service includes immigration support, affordable housing, health care provided by volunteers from their congregation: the list goes on and on.

As Chair of the Association Church and Ministry Commission, that body responsible for clergy standing and churches coming into the UCC, it was truly an honor for me to preside over this Ecclesiastical Council. And I found myself as these people told their stories and made their testimonies thinking about our church and our struggles and challenges. But I also felt a sense of hope rising within me and since that evening, I’ve been continuing to reflect on what I heard and saw and experienced: the passion and the love that I saw in both the pastors and members of the congregations who spoke, the courage of these churches to stand for what they believe is the right thing to do in spite of possible punishment by their denomination, and the joy expressed by both the delegates and the churches at the unanimous vote to join together in partnership to support each other in our journey of faith, on our journey to follow Jesus together. The Holy Spirit was alive and moving among us.

When I got home Thursday evening it was late but my heart was full. I’d begun my day at Brown’s, leading a funeral service for a dear 90 year old lady – there was a picture there on display painted by her mother of a rendition of the Parable of the Lost sheep – Doris knew, no matter what, that she was surrounded by the love of Jesus who would never let her go – this deep and abiding faith informed the way she lived her life and how she treated everyone she met. At home that night, images of that painting kept coming to me. And I kept hearing Trish’s words at the ecclesiastical council: I love my denomination but I love Jesus more.

Today begins the season of Advent: a time of preparation, of waiting, of expectation. We heard the words from Jeremiah: “the days are surely coming when I will fulfill the promise I made.” And Luke warns us, “to be on guard, to be alert.” And today we lit the candle of hope – and we prayed to the God of hope – come to us again. Be born among us, that all the world may be made new.”

What if we accepted a challenge this advent season: to reflect on our life together here at St. Paul’s with the same depth and courage as those churches have done – what will our next 125 years of ministry look like? What if we lived in a hope that God is still speaking here? What is God saying to us?

One of those 4 churches nearly closed a few years ago – they had an average worship attendance on Sunday of 6 but they’ve come back! One of those churches had a membership of about 30 and now has over 400 people engaged in their various ministries. One of those churches remains small but feeds hundreds of people a month – they entered into partnership with a community lunch program and 5 days a week open their doors to hungry people. One of those churches makes soup each week – yes, a fundraiser for the church, but nobody is refused this delicious soup if they are in need.

What are the opportunities in front of us that we haven’t seen yet? Where are we stuck? What do we need to leave behind? How can we let our light shine? That Advent candle of hope shines – and don’t we yearn for that in the darkness of our lives? But here it is, burning before us expressing hope that all things will be made new with the coming of the Son of Man. The hope, the very truth, that no matter how hard our life is, no matter how anxious we feel, no matter what clouds hang over our lives and our life together here – Jesus comes to share our burdens, to carry us through and over those very burdens.

The good news in the gospel lesson is this: despite the fact that we live in anxious times, despite the fact that the world seems to be falling apart around us, Jesus tells us that we can stand and lift our heads high, for our redemption is near. When things look most frightening, most discouraging is when our lives are closest to God, and God is doing a new thing in our lives, in our life together here at St. Paul’s.

The gospel challenges us, during Advent especially, to live as people who expect God to be near – that God is doing something new. In this advent season of preparation, the time of Christ coming into the world, we are to live as if we expect just that. What does that mean to our life together? Can we do that? Are we willing to take that risk?

Maybe we are to see the challenges in our life together as opportunities. Maybe we are to look in a new way for the signs of God’s near and living presence. Maybe it means that you and I can look anew at any challenging situation and offer it to God, because God has promised to be near, and these situations might just be a moment of redemption, a moment when we will be made whole. Maybe you and I have to stop trying so hard to rise to the challenges ourselves – friends, we can’t without God’s help. And maybe, just maybe, the answers will come when and where we least expect them – maybe we have to let go and let God! The prayer that has never failed me is this simple statement: “God I can’t do this – you have to.” And God has never let me down.

Our journey of the past ends now, here at the Table. And now our journey of a new time, a new future, begins here at the Table. We gather at the Table of Hope. We gather at the place where all are welcome, all are nourished, all are given strength to face the days ahead, no matter what they hold for us. And isn't that good news! Isn't that amazing, hopeful news! Let us prepare ourselves for Emmanuel, God with us, by participating in this sacred feast.

Let's realize how much we really do need the love and direction of God in our lives. How much we really do need the power and great glory of the Son of Man.

Let's allow the coming Christ into our hearts and let him turn our individual lives around, let him turn the life of this community around – let him help us decide what to keep, what to let go: let Jesus heal us, let him love us, so we can experience the true light of the world in all its glory. That gift comes to us right here at the table. This table where everyone is welcome. Come as you are. Just as you are. Come into the light of God's love and be strengthened and empowered to share that love with all we meet – in this church family, in our own families, in a world in desperate need of healing. Let us live in the profound hope that Jesus brings.

O come, O come, Emmanuel. Show us your path and give us the courage to follow. Amen.