

What Time Is It?
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8 (NRSV)

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die;

A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal;

A time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;

A time to mourn, and a time to dance;

A time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to seek, and a time to lose;

A time to keep, and a time to throw away;

A time to tear, and a time to sew;

A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate;

A time for war, and a time for peace.

What time is it anyway? What season are we in? What stage of life are we growing out of and in to? No one in this room is immune from the changing seasons of life and history. In his essay, "The Age of Social Transformation," Peter Drucker reports, "No century in recorded history has experienced so many social transformations and such radical ones as the twentieth century."¹ The article reminds us that at the beginning of the 20th century farmers in all Western countries made up the majority of

¹ Peter F. Drucker, "The Age of Social Transformation," *The Atlantic Monthly Company*; November 1994, Vol. 274, No. 5; pages 53-80.

national populations. Today farmers make up less than 5% of populations in the Western world. When farmers began moving off the farm to take industrial jobs in cities they already possessed most of the mechanical skills they needed to make the transition. In other words they required little education. These workers grew in number and became organized. In 1900 industrial workers had no pensions, paid vacations, overtime pay, extra pay for Sunday or night work, health or retirement insurance, or unemployment compensation. All of this changed by 1950 as unionized industrial workers gained a place in the middle and upper-middle class. Drucker points out that they had also achieved political power. But by the end of the 20th century the number of industrial and unionized workers has shrunk considerably and they are losing economic and political clout.

A new kind of worker is emerging in the global economy, the knowledge worker. These are also identified as information and technology workers. This group of worker is highly educated and specialized, ranging in job classification from radiology technician to neurosurgeon, computer engineer or software programmer to computer based auto mechanic. No one can walk off of a Kansas wheat farm today and take up one of these positions.

To everything there is a season. Information technology has changed everything from how we make telephone calls, to how we travel, to how we cook our food. Knowledge in partnership with technology will create more social and political change in the future than military force.

Given the reality of change in our lives and in the world, can anyone really believe that the church has not or should not change? Is the church immune from the seasons of life and history? I think not. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's 2008 report reveals the shift in America's religious landscape. While nearly 90% of Americans claim some belief or faith in God, one in four say they are not affiliated with any particular religious organization. The number of Protestants now represents barely 51% of religious persons. Within all religious identities one finds a great deal of diversity or fragmentation. There is a constant movement of persons between various religions, denominations, churches, and sects. While it is true that six in ten Americans over the age of 70 are Protestants, four in ten Americans between the ages of 18-29 have no religious affiliation. If that trend is not changed, the percentage of American Protestants will continue to decline.²

² Statistics on Religion in America Report: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life at <http://religions.pewforums.org/report>, downloaded 9/10/2009.

The religious landscape of America is changing and the local church as we know it is also caught up in this shift. Only 18% of the U.S. population goes to church in a given week. The average church size is 75 persons in worship services. Ninety percent of churches in the U.S. are declining in membership or have been stagnant in worship attendance. Fifty congregations in the U.S. close every week.³ I once heard church consultant Lyle Schaller say, “If you want to see the future size of your congregation, go down stairs and count the number of kids in your Christian education program.” Another measure of a church’s future strength is found in the number of adult and infant baptisms. Vital congregations see growth in baptisms, and also a growth of 5% in worship attendance per year, a rise in stewardship and financial commitments, an increase in the number of community service hours provided by the congregation, vibrant outreach ministries, and opportunities for small group ministry.

Now let me disabuse you of a myth that has been flying around churches and denominations since the 1970’s. I have often heard that people have left our churches because of political issues such as the Civil

³ The Atlantic District – Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, “Transforming Congregations.” <http://www.ad-lcm.org/pages/transformingcongregations>; downloaded 9/9/2009. These statistics are not specific to the LCMS and are similar to statistical studies that have been done over the last several years in many denominations and church consulting organizations.

Rights movement or a variety of wars such as Vietnam and Iraq. Yes, it is true that individual members will get angry and resign their church membership because of a sermon that a minister delivered on a social issue, or an op-ed piece in the local newspaper; or a stand that a board or committee took on a controversial matter. But that does not account for the massive loss of members in such denominations as the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, or Christian Church, Disciples of Christ. This loss of membership is more than a simple loss in numbers of persons. The greater loss is found in the drop of market shares. Please excuse the expression, but the percentage of persons from the entire population who belong to these “mainstream” congregations has fallen off dramatically.

People have speculated why these losses have occurred. The answers that seem to emerge consistently are: (1) loss of cultural relevancy, and (2) the loss of a transformative message. The loss of cultural relevancy is focused on the so-called worship wars and the place of music in the Sunday service. But cultural relevancy also has to do with other questions such as ethnic diversity and lifestyles, technology, communication, and the search for community and intimacy. These are often generational.

The challenge of a transformative message is the one I would like to focus on. The church used to employ the term “salvation.” The question was, “How many souls have you saved for Christ – or won for Christ?” Salvation meant a turning away from sin. The Greek New Testament word is “*metanoia*.” *Metanoia* means to change your mind, repent, or turn away from something. Carl Jung thought of *metanoia* as the reforming of the mind, as in healing. You know the old adage: Change your thoughts, change your mind, change your life – or the world.

Transformation works in a similar fashion. The word transformation has several applications. In math, for example, a transformation occurs when you modify or change a variable, which gives a new solution to the problem. In grammar a transformation occurs when a new sentence is added to a paragraph that gives it new meaning. In biology transformation is the genetic alteration of a cell. This is especially important in the study of streptococcus pneumonia for the treatment of virulent strains of that virus.

So the question is, what does the church offer, specifically, what does University Congregational Church offer that might be transformative of our lives or the world? Do we have a variable, or fresh word, or basic

life ingredient that changes the minds and lives of human beings? What is the transformative Christian message that can turn around a world satiated with consumerism and drowning in human blood?

Do you remember the old hymn by H. Ernest Nichol, “We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations?”

We’ve a story to tell to the nations,
That shall turn their hearts to the right,
A story of truth and mercy,
A story of peace and light,
A story of peace and light.

We’ve a story to be sung to the nations,
That shall lift their hearts to the Lord,
A song that shall conquer evil
And shatter the spear and sword.
And shatter the spear and sword.

This is a hymn, of course, about transformation, or if I may, redemption.

And the question that I pose is, what is our story? What is our song?

What is our message? Do we know that story, and song, and message to tell to the nations?

Our covenant states that we “believe that the Christian faith affords our clearest insight into the nature and will of God. Accepting that faith as our guide, we join with one another to worship and work so that peace, justice, and brotherhood may prevail in this world.” In the mission statement that we adopted with our strategic plan we claim the

responsibility of inspiring, thoughtful and welcoming worship; spiritual exploration and fellowship in a dynamic and accepting atmosphere; and the sharing of talents and gifts in service to our community and to the world, following the example of Jesus.

All of these statements suggest that we believe that the life, teachings, and example of Jesus Christ offers a new variable to the terms of the human condition. We have a word to hold against the rhetoric of hate and the weapons of oppression. We have a new song for the drums of sadness and the dirge of materialism. The life, teachings, and example of the Carpenter can transform conflict into peace, oppression into justice, and enmity into genuine fellowship. That is what we say is the purpose and ministry of University Congregational Church.

Now it seems to me that we have to be conscious of our covenant. We have to decide whether or not we believe in it and have faith in its efficacy. Our covenant is the only means by which we define membership and the mission of University Congregational Church.

Our reason for existence is the transformation of human beings. That is why we gather on Sunday mornings, call a minister, engage in Christian education, conduct a choir, and seek ways to serve the needs of others. Because we are in the ministry of transformation we erect

buildings, hire a staff, and create programs that will bring the light and love of God to anyone who will hear. We come to ask for your financial support through our stewardship campaign because we are about the business of transforming lives.

Why should you give money – enough money that will make a difference – to University Congregational Church? Because we believe that Jesus Christ offers “our clearest insight into the nature and will of God.” And we believe that God’s will and nature is one of deep and abiding compassion, the kind of love that can lift a broken human up to the full measure of his or her dignity. Father Louis Evely wrote of this God of love:

“He’s near us, benevolent, young and happy, companionable and loving. He begs for our friendship if we wander way from Him. He runs after us in the thorns and brambles if we stray from home. He watches for us till we’ve come back, and when we do He’s overflowing with tenderness and just can’t do enough to celebrate our return.”⁴

No matter how progressive or liberal or humanist I may think myself to be, I cannot escape the Good News of the Carpenter that God is love. I am a Christian called to this ministry because I not only believe that, but I also believe that such love transforms people and their communities.

⁴ Father Louis Evely, *That Man is You*, translated from the French by Edmond Bonin (Maryland: Westminster, 1966), pp. 13-14.

God's love is the variable, the word, and the DNA of human transformation.

I believe that the future of our church hinges on our commitment to transformation. As an institution we are constantly changing the ways and means by which we engage a constantly changing culture.

Information, knowledge, and technology loom before us like whirlwinds of diversity, modification, mutation, and brand new paradigms. If we believe in the Gospel and in the words of St. Paul, "hold fast to that which is true," we will welcome the opportunities to reframe the Good News to emerging generations. We will relish the paradox of a timeless love in an ever-changing world. We will cherish the discovering and rediscovering of ancient fountains for new thirsts. We will make new wine skins and break fresh bread to nourish the young.

This is the time to affirm our covenant. This is the season for transformation. This is the age for God's people to declare that a new era of grace is about to change the minds and lives of human beings.

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