

WHO? US?
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Romans 12: 1-8 (NEB)

Therefore, my brothers (and sisters), I implore you by God's mercy to offer your very selves to him: a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart. Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable, and perfect.

In virtue of the gift that God in his grace has given me I say to everyone among you: do not be conceited or think too highly of yourself; but think your way to a sober estimate based on the measure of faith that God has dealt to each of you. For just as in a single human body there are many limbs and organs, all with different functions, so all of us, united with Christ, form one body, serving individually as limbs and organs to one another.

The gifts we possess differ as they are allotted to us by God's grace and must be exercised accordingly; the gift of inspired utterance, for example, in proportion to a man's faith; or the gift of administration, in administration. A teacher should employ his gift in teaching, and one who has the gift of stirring speech should use it to stir his hearers. If you give to charity, give with all your heart; if you are a leader, exert yourself to lead; if you are helping others in distress, do it cheerfully.

Someone recently asked me what do we mean when we say that University Congregational Church is the Body of Christ. And what do we mean when we say that Christ is the Head of the Church. We might think that this is antiquated language that we cannot relate to in the 21st Century. We might think that this is Roman Catholic language that has nothing to do with Congregationalism. We might think these are broad universal terms that speak in generalities and have little to do with a particular congregation. In all cases we would be mistaken. When we say that the local church is the body of Christ, and Christ is the Head of that body we are making a very fundamental and very Congregational assertion. These two statements reflect the radical movement of the Protestant Reformation.

Remember that we have roots in the Separatist movement of the Church of England in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. I am talking about our Puritan parents who would plant their feet in New England and eventually join ranks with the Pilgrims and create the Congregational churches in the colonies of North America. And these two ideas, the Body of Christ and Christ is the Head of the Church, are thoroughly woven into our Congregational identity today.

Please suffer with me a little more history. Remember that the Separatists in the Church of England would become Pilgrims. They believed that the Church of England was beyond redemption and they sought to separate themselves from the church. The Puritans thought that the Church of England could be purified; and initially they did not imagine that they would separate from the established church.

The Separatist preacher who forged these values of Body and Head into principles of Congregationalism was Robert Browne. The Rev. Browne believed that the church is a body of professed believers in Jesus Christ. The believers are united to one another by a covenant. The covenanted congregation is independent of the state. Likewise, it is self-governed and does not depend on any hierarchy of churches such as the Pope, Cardinals, Bishops, or denominations.

The Puritans would quickly follow the Rev. Browne and in 1658 offered the Savoy Declaration.

These particular churches thus appointed by the authority of Christ, and entrusted with power from him for the ends before expressed, are each of them as unto those ends, the seat of that power which he is pleased to communicate to his saints or subjects in this world, so that as such they receive it immediately from himself.

Besides these particular churches, there is not instituted by Christ any church more extensive or catholic entrusted with power for

the administration of his ordinances, or the execution of any authority in his name.

Now you might be asking, “Who? Us?” What are the Puritans asserting?

They are claiming that each and every one of us is a saint by calling and the local church is the gathering of saints and has all of the authority it needs in the name of Jesus Christ. As Jesus declared, “Wherever two or more are gathered together in my name, there I am also.”

Understand that one of the meanings of the word “saint” is witness. We are gathered as a cloud of witnesses at University Congregational Church in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ. And just so there is no misunderstanding let me read one more statement from the Savoy Declaration, “There is no other Head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ.”

When we say, “Christ is the head of the church,” we mean the embodied God who blesses the children, feeds the hungry, searches for the lost lamb – the lost coin – the lost child, and the Jesus who judges no-one. This is the Jesus Christ who always goes to the end of the line, washes the feet of stubborn disciples, and lays the healing hand of compassion on the fevered brow, the deranged mind, the diseased and dying, and the troubled soul. This is the Son of God who breaks down every barrier to God and one another, including the poor, people of color, the powerless, the disabled, and any person who is considered a social pariah at any point in history. That is the example of Christian faith that Jesus offered to us. That is what the Head of the Church looks like. That is the leadership for the local church to model after.

A Sunday School teacher decided to have his second grade class learn the 23rd Psalm, one of the most quoted texts from the Holy Bible. He gave the kids a month

to memorize the whole chapter. One of the girls was really excited about it, but she simply couldn't memorize the Psalm. Although she practiced hard, she could scarcely get past the first few lines.

So the day came for the children to recite the 23rd Psalm before the congregation and that little girl was very nervous. When her turn came, she stepped up to the microphone and proudly said, "The Lord is my Shepherd and that's all I need to know!"¹

Members of University Congregational Church are the saints called to witness to the Good Shepherd who guides the flock to greener pastures and cleaner waters of peace. We are God's people who bear testimony to the Healer who renews life within the very core of our being. We are the gathered Body of Christ that meets on Sunday morning to hear the Rabbi's story about right relationships with one another. We are the children of God's Light who takes us by the hand and leads us through dark canyons of death and despair.

The gateway to God is not a minister, priest, bishop, cardinal, or Pope. The gateway to the love of God is found in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, his compassion for every human being, and his willingness to lay his life on the line for every son and daughter of God's grace. Radical self-giving by the Carpenter is our bridge to God's love. All we have to do is open the gate – cross the bridge. We are not the gatekeepers but the ushers who welcome every soul into the communion of grace.

¹ <http://www.everyday-wisdom.com/church-humor.html>. Downloaded 8/17/11.

Who? Us? Yes, each and every one of us. You are those saints. As Paul declared to the Romans we each bring gifts to the life and ministry of the church that are indispensable. No one is just a member of the church. In the words of St. Theresa of Avila,

"Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion for the world is to look out of; yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good; and yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now.

Yes, your hands, your feet, your eyes! Every one of you is an essential saint in the body of Christ. We cannot spare one of you.

Imagine, if you will, a 5,000-piece jigsaw puzzle. If one piece is missing you will notice it right away. It does not matter that 4,999 pieces are all in their proper places. You will think, "That puzzle is incomplete. Something – someone – is missing." You cannot take your eyes off the missing piece. You might look on the floor to see if it fell off the game table. You might gently press on the puzzle to see if perhaps the lost piece is underneath the whole. Or you might go back to the game closet to see if the missing link is on a shelf.

That is what Jesus said about the importance of every human being on the entire planet. As the family of God each of you is essential to the ministry of University Congregational Church.

I fear we often fail to make the connection between this Jesus and the leadership of the church. I know that I often fail to remember under whose Lordship I am called. Like most clergy of my generation I have taken classes

and seminars in church administration, membership growth and marketing, advertising, programming, pastoral psychology, multiculturalism and world religions. We have sent lay leaders off to a host of seminars and retreats on stewardship, transformation of worship, Christian Education, and so on. All of us are constantly under the gun of all the things we should be responding to in our society, all of the unmet needs in our congregation and community, and all of the opportunities that we should address. I wonder if we don't get a little overwrought. I wonder if we rush to these programs or events out of fear that the church will die or be diminished in the future. And, God forbid, what if our church is not "successful"? Perhaps we have a greater fear of being irrelevant than we have of being unfaithful. I confess that all too often in my career I have been confused about who is the head of the church with the means that might help make the church embody the love of God. And I have too often shouldered alone the burden of responsibility that laity should carry for the purpose and mission of the church.

I invite you to join with me as we read together the Covenant of UCC. It is printed every Sunday on the cover of our bulletin.

"In the love of truth, and in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, this Church exists to serve those who believe that the Christian faith affords our clearest insight into the nature and will of God. Accepting that faith as our guide, we join one with another to worship and work so that peace, justice, and brotherhood may prevail in this world."

That is the kind of covenant that Robert Browne spoke of over 300 years ago. You can read in these lines the Lordship of Jesus Christ and our calling one to another for the work and worship of University Congregational Church. On the one hand the

only requirement for membership at UCC is an affirmation and a commitment to this covenant. On the other hand this is the core statement of who we are as a congregation, our identity and purpose. It is our organizing document under which our constitution and bylaws follow. It should be the guiding document of everything we do.

During this coming week we will spend some time with Dr. Tom Richard, the executive secretary of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches in conversation and discernment about plans for our future. On September 11th our new church program year begins with Christian Education opportunities for every age. This fall we will initiate our stewardship drive for the 2012 fiscal year. I hope that during this week you will prayerfully and actively engage these conversations. I encourage you to come and grow with us in Christian Education and the Brueggemann lecture. May each of you faithfully consider the means by which you enrich University Congregational Church by the commitments of your time, talents, leadership, and financial support. I hope that you will re-discover the gifts for ministry that each of you brings to the life of our congregation. It is my prayer that all of us humble ourselves before the leadership and Lordship of Jesus of Galilee.

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