

A Love Story

When Susan and I moved to Petaluma, five years ago, we literally knew no one in Sonoma County - well, except the realtor who helped us buy our house. She was nice. So, we began making connections, and started looking for a church - a UCC church. And it took us a while; but we eventually found you. You welcomed us with open arms, and we quickly felt at home among you. Truly, First Congregational of Sonoma, United Church of Christ, has now become our spiritual home, our friends: the place where we are grounded.

Some of you know that Susan and I recently bought a second home - a small condo - up in Portland. Turns out we have been spending a lot of time up there, since three of our children and five of our grandchildren have ended up in the Portland area. It's a strong draw.

We are still figuring it out what it means to live in two places, but one thing we recognized right away is that, in addition to family, we needed to have some Portland friends and connections of our own! So, we immediately started looking for... a UCC church.

And we found one. Actually, it's a church a lot of this one: strong commitment to social action, and care for the environment. They host a Jewish congregation. And, the pastor is a dynamic woman whose wife is also an ordained minister - and, they have young children. And that church, like this one, has given us a very warm welcome.

So. As advertised, the sermon today is a love story. Now, it's not a Valentine's Day kind of love story; but for me, it's very personal. You see, what I want to talk about today is my lifelong love affair with the United Church of Christ - which is my extended family, and my spiritual home on this earth.

In our 50 years of marriage, Susan and I have lived all across the country, in 6 states. And everywhere we have gone, we have managed to find "our people"; that is, people who are kind, compassionate, open-minded, respectful toward those who are different from us, and thoughtfully engaged with the issues of the day.

These are the kind of people we meet in the United Church of Christ. Now, I do not that doubt such people can be found in other churches as well, and synagogues, and mosques. But UCC people are my people. My family.

Now, some among us are lifetime Congregationalists and UCC members. But we are also the kind of church that attracts those who didn't grow up in the UCC - or any church, for that matter - as well as people who have been away from the church for a long time. My hunch is that for many of us, this may be the first United Church of Christ we've ever belonged to - and we are still trying to figure it out.

And I think all of us wonder at times where we fit into the broad pantheon of religious groups in America. I mean, we hear all the time about Catholics and about evangelicals. But where do we fit in? What makes the UCC distinct?

Well, one way to answer that is to go back to our roots. We all know the story of the Pilgrims, who came over on the *Mayflower* in 1620. The Pilgrims were Puritans, so-called because they originally had hoped to "purify" the Church of England; but they had to give up on that idea and decided instead to form their own church. Before long, in order to escape persecution, they had to move to Holland. And from there, they decided to emigrate to the New World.

You may also remember from history class that before they landed at Plymouth Bay, the Pilgrims drew up a document called the "Mayflower Compact," which was a crucial

moment in American history, because it set the stage for self-governance in America - which was to develop into a nation not run by kings and queens, but by democratic self-rule.

Now, what you may not realize is that those same Pilgrims and other Puritans who settled in New England in the 17th century decided to call their churches "Congregational" churches. They wanted to emphasize that each congregation was autonomous.

Their churches were not ruled over by bishops, but instead they could choose their own ministers, by vote of the congregation - what a radical idea! Each congregation owned their own buildings, made their own decisions. And this model of democratic self-governance within Congregational Churches is credited with helping to shape American democracy.

Now, over the years, we Congregationalists have always loved the idea that we are descended from the Pilgrims. Our church publishing house is called Pilgrim Press. And our previous hymnal, as many of you know, was called the *Pilgrim Hymnal*. The church youth group that Susan and I attended as teenagers was called PF: Pilgrim Fellowship. The local church camp I went to was Pilgrim Hills, and we have a beautiful UCC camp in southern California, called Pilgrim Pines.

So, you get the idea. We like to claim our Pilgrim heritage. Although we don't seem nearly so fond of the equally-accurate term "Puritan"! The truth is, we in the United Church of Christ have moved far away from our strict Puritan background.

So, how did that happen? How did the church body that is directly descended from the Puritans evolve into an open-minded, liberal denomination that has so often been on the cutting edge of social change and theological ferment? How did the Pilgrims and Puritans evolve into the broad-minded and progressive Christians that we are today?

Well, it's not a simple story. But I do have a couple of insights into how it happened, which I'd like to share with you. First of all, let me tell you about a bold and gifted leader named John Robinson. The Rev. John Robinson was the pastor who led the Pilgrims in Leyden, Holland. And he is the one who organized the *Mayflower* voyage - although he did not make the trip to America but instead planned to come later.

In 1620, in his farewell speech to the departing Pilgrims, John Robinson said this: "I truly believe that the Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy word."

Now, just consider this for a moment. This is a 17th-century Puritan pastor saying to his followers that he figured there would be new truth to be revealed from the Bible, new ways to interpret the holy word, new ways to think about God, and social issues and such.

I find this remarkable. And, I think it sets a tone.

Now, take out the hymnal, if you would, and turn to hymn #316: "We limit not the truth of God." So, two hundred years after Pastor John Robinson, along came another Congregational minister, George Rawson, who wrote this hymn based on Robinson's words. And if you look at the small print in italics on the bottom left of the page, you'll see that reference.

Now look at the hymn: "We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind, to notions of our day and place - (which are) crude, partial, and confined. No, let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred; O God, grant yet more light and truth to break forth from your word."

Again, I find this remarkable, in the 1800's: just the humility that is expressed here, and the self-awareness of our own limitations, and our limited perspective. This is profound.

In fact, I want to suggest to you that it is a telling piece of our heritage as Congregationalists; because it is so different from those Christians who are so sure of

themselves, even today, in our pluralistic society - Christians who are so sure that their interpretation of the Bible is the right one, the only one, and everybody else is wrong.

And you see, it is precisely because we, as Congregationalists, and now, as the United Church of Christ, it is because we have not limited the truth of God - and not assumed that we had the whole truth - that we have been open to new insights, and open to new understandings of what God requires of us.

That's why Congregationalists were the first people in all the world to call a woman to ordained ministry: The Rev. Antoinette Brown, who was quite a pioneer herself. That happened all the way back in 1853. And, it's why our churches have always fought for women's rights, both in the church and in society.

You see, this openness to new insights and "new truth to break forth" from the scriptures is part of our DNA. It's why we were also the first church in the history of the world to ordain an openly gay person to the Christian ministry - 46 years ago, right here in northern California: The Rev. Bill Johnson. And it's why the UCC continues to be a leader in affirming gay marriage and welcoming gays and lesbians and more recently, transgendered people, into our congregations.

So, I think this openness to new understandings helps explain why, down through the years, we have so often been out front, and bold, on social issues. But I also want to look at how we in the UCC have evolved in our theology. How did we get from the strict Calvinism of the Puritans to the open-minded, progressive, still-seeking theology that you and I participate in today?

Well, for this piece of the story, I want to lift up a man named Horace Bushnell. Bushnell was a 19th-century Congregationalist, who is now regarded as the father of mainstream liberal Christianity in America. In many ways, it is Horace Bushnell who is the pivot point between our strict Puritan heritage, and a much more liberal theology.

Bushnell was the son of a Congregational minister, and was raised in a staunchly Puritan home. But as he once said, "I have been greatly blessed by my doubts."

Horace Bushnell was deeply affected by transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and thus came to believe that God was everywhere, in nature, and in human relationships; and that God was trying to communicate with us, and reach out to us in love. Thus, Bushnell rejected the old Calvinist idea of predestination. He argued instead that God loved everyone and wanted to communicate that love to us.

Bushnell was also influenced by the brilliant German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, who sought to reconcile Christianity with the insights of science and the Enlightenment.

In 1847, Horace Bushnell published an extraordinary book called *Christian Nurture*. Actually, *Christian Nurture* is still in print - you can order it on Amazon! In this book, Bushnell disputes the notion that people have a sudden conversion experience, in which they accept Jesus as their Savior.

He argues that instead, children are gradually nurtured into faith, through the church and the home. They first learn about the love of God through the love of their family.

Bushnell maintains that, if properly nurtured, children should never know a time when they are not Christian, and not beloved. He says that if we teach children from a young age to seek the Good, then they will act according to Christ's teachings of love throughout their lives.

Well, this book was a big hit, and it led to some major changes in church and family life. Parenting became more important, and the role that women play in the home and in child-rearing took on new status. In the church, Sunday School now became a top priority. A

new theology of nurture and love began to take hold in Congregational Churches, and spread to other churches as well.

Now, there is much more to the story, of course; but we can safely say that this is the moment when we made a decisive, sharp turn away from our Calvinist, Puritan heritage.

Now, so far, I have only been talking about Congregationalists. But 60 years ago, Congregationalists merged with the Evangelical and Reformed Church, to form a new denomination, called the United Church of Christ.

And if you look now at the front cover of today's bulletin, you will see our church emblem, which says, "United Church of Christ," and then on the bottom of the oval, is our official motto: "That they may all be one."

This motto is based on the scripture passage that Alexanne read for us today, from John 17, where Jesus prays for his followers "that may all be one"; that is, they will be united in love and in faith, and working together.

And the UCC is deeply committed to working with other Christians. But more than this, I believe Christ calls us to unite in love and purpose, not just with other Christians, but with the whole human family. The point is not that we are all the same, or should be, but that we love one another, and treat each other with dignity and respect - across different religions, different ethnicities, and in these days, even across different political views. (!)

Now, take a look at the other image on the bulletin cover - the colorful one. This is the new official symbol of the United Church of Christ. The blue circle is several things. It is a stylized comma, and it also looks a bit like planet earth. And you may even see a person or a Madonna figure in it.

The comma comes from the saying, "Never put a period where God has placed a comma." In other words, never assume that there is not "more light and truth to break forth from the holy word." Which has inspired another UCC motto: "God is still speaking."

Now, the other image here, in green, is both a hand cradling the earth, and also a bird, a dove of peace. Do you see that? And the words come from the newly-adopted UCC mission statement: "A just world for all."

My friends, this is who we are in the United Church of Christ: open-minded and spiritual seekers, who are committed to justice and peace for all.

This is my UCC, a great love of my life, and my spiritual home.

Well, there is so much more to say, so many other juicy UCC stories - from the *Amistad* affair that Stephen Spielberg made a movie out of, to the Boston Tea Party that was hatched at Old South Congregational Church, to a crucial Supreme Court case we won during the height of the Civil Rights Movement.

But I'll close with just one more, quick story. Ten years ago, in 2007, our church leaders invited a young senator - who was an active member of a UCC church in Chicago - we invited him to speak at our national meeting (General Synod). And the young senator gave an electrifying, moving speech about how his UCC faith informed his politics - a "politics of conscience" he called it.

You may have heard of this man. His name was Barack Obama.

And Curran was there at that speech. She can tell you all about it; it was a significant moment in her life.

Well, if you'd like to learn more about this extraordinary church of ours - here's your chance! Curran and I are leading a four-week course that we are calling, "Our Edgy, Progressive Denomination." I hope you can join us, starting Feb 28.

My friends, we come here from so many different places, a great variety of denominations and diverse faith journeys: so many amazing life stories among us. But here, together, we are a people. We are the United Church of Christ in this place, this valley, at this moment in history.

May we do honor to a proud heritage. And may we be the people Christ calls us to be. Amen.

