

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from January 14, 2007

Rev. Patricia L. Liberty

“A Whole New Life”

Scriptures:

John 2:1-11

1 Corinthians 12:1-11



On a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often occur, there once stood a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut and only one boat was available for rescue, but the few devoted members of the station kept a constant watch over the sea. With no thought for themselves, they went out day or night tirelessly searching for those in distress. Many lives were saved through this wonderful little station, and it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give their time, money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews were trained. The little life-saving station grew.

Some of the new members of the life-saving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and so poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those plucked from the icy ocean. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in an enlarged building. As time went on, the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they redecorated it and furnished it beautifully, because they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do the work. The life-saving motif still prevailed in the club decoration, however, and there was a life-saving boat in the room where the club initiations were held.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them were from foreign countries. The beautiful new club was considerably messed up. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities, seeing them as unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members claimed that life-saving was their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a life-saving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own life-saving station down the coast.

They did, and as the years went by the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another life-saving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself and if you visit that seacoast today you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

It's not a new story, but it is renewed in the lives of lots of organizations and churches. Balancing change and tradition, honoring membership tenure, staying focused for mission in an ever-changing world—it's the challenge of every church on every street corner. Some would argue that parts of the Protestant Refor-

mation weren't just about corruption but about the trend of voting with your feet, leaving a church or even an entire denomination when there is discord, theological disagreement or conflict of a more practical nature.

The reality is that the face of the church is always changing for reasons that are clear and some that are not. Throughout history the church, in all of its manifestations, has spent inordinate amounts of energy trying to smooth away differences between and among our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The United Church of Christ as a denomination was born out of a desire to change that trend. Back in 1957, the United Church of Christ was founded out of the merger of the congregational and Christian traditions, and the evangelical and reform traditions. It was fueled by a spirit of unity that gave rise to one of the organizing principles of our denomination. When negotiations were underway to form the denomination, it was widely agreed that unity in Christ and covenant relationship with one another would be the most important places of connection for the newly-forming church. People believed that it was the most important response the church could make to the rising tide of secularism.

Early on, the words of Augustine were quoted as a guiding principle for the vision of the United Church of Christ ... *in essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty, in all things, love.*

But unity was never to be confused with sameness. In fact, the United Church of Christ remains radically committed to being one body in Christ, but recognizes that, within the one body, there is great diversity and that diversity is to be celebrated. Every theological position from very conservative to ultra-liberal is represented. We are a denomination of many languages, many colors, many ethnic representations, churches with great variations on understanding of mission and the place of social action. It's all in the mix of the United Church of Christ.

And that is a big part of what is behind the writings of Paul from this morning's reading. For Paul, it was always the dissimilarities, even the dissonances between and among all the members of the body of Christ that keep it vital and alive. The multiplicity of spiritual gifts, the honest debates, the coming together to hammer things out, and the great diversity of its membership is actually a sign of health. He praised the diversity of spiritual gifts that created a church that was always full of one-of-a-kinds. And he bravely asserted that all of the differences, all of the abilities, all of the energy that people brought to this new community in Christ, could be harnessed for the work of building God's realm.

But there were a few guidelines to this new life and new community and there was no shortage of Corinthian folks who had wrong-headed notions about what was and wasn't a gift of the spirit and how those gifts should be used.

For example, there were those who believed that the gifts of the spirit were given to individuals for individual use and gain. Paul says, no, the gifts are given for the good of the community, for the strength of the whole. One of the litmus tests was and remains the question, for whose benefit is this being done? For Paul, spirit and service were equal and parallel means of expressing God's love. And they couldn't be separated from each other. For Paul, it was all about mission, using one's God-given abilities to further God's purposes.

Another wrong-headed notion that the Corinthians held onto was that there was some pecking order of importance to people's abilities. It created an elite group within the church who thought they were better than others. Paul democratizes the church and its gifts in verse seven claiming that each and every person has a specific manifestation of the spirit and that each gift is equally important.

In the church of my youth, there was an unspoken rule that you had to be member of the church forever before you could be a deacon. It was a privilege that was reserved for those who had been members the longest, those who had "earned" it. It was also an indicator that this person was a favorite of the minister, because no one ever became a deacon who wasn't a big fan of the minister. In short, it was as status symbol in the congregation, an indicator that you had "arrived", that you were a part of the inner circle. Ask any of our deacons who has served in the last year. I think they'll tell you that's not what's going on here and that's a

good thing. In the church of my childhood, there was an assumption that wisdom and spiritual maturity automatically came with age, and that those who were closest to the minister were the most spiritually insightful.

Paul, on the other hand, would have none of that. He said that in the church of Jesus Christ, every believer is filled with the spirit, the spirit is no respecter of age or person but rather grows in the life of each person as God intends. And because it is God's work in each person, there are no second-class citizens in the church. Those who just walked in the door are as likely to be leaders as those who laid the cornerstone when the building was built. Tenure is a human invention, not a divine one.

Finally, Paul is clear that, in order for the church to be the vital, thriving community God intends it to be, there must be room for everyone. Some will have the gift of wise speech, others will have knowledge (and notice that he separates those two things because they are not the same thing). Others will have faith, some healing and doing miracles, some the gift of prophecy, and still others the gift of discernment. These abilities sometimes come in packages we might not expect, and here's the rub. These things that the church needs to be vital, strong, alive and growing are present in everyone. It isn't just preachers who speak the truth, some of the most prophetic words I hear came from people who never set foot in a seminary. Some of the most courageous and faithful actions I witness come from those who people the pews of the church. I am constantly challenged, inspired and encouraged by the faithful witness of God's servants, ordinary people with extraordinary gifts whose life and witness embody the gospel in remarkable ways.

I believe that we clergy types have it easy. After all, when I walk in the door in Sunday morning I know where I'm supposed to sit. Caring for the life of the institution and the people who are part of it is my primary responsibility. It's not one that I do on my own but it's a big part of what my job is. All of you who venture out into the world in your daily work and who live out your faith and values in places that have little or no regard for all things faith are far more challenged than I.

There are countless faces that come to mind when I think of God's great saints—people who took seriously their call to be stewards of the gifts God entrusted to them. When I leave here, no doubt I will tell the stories of many of you, as well, who have challenged and encouraged my own journey. But for today, I will share with you a little snippet of the story of a woman named Mabel Smith.

Several days short of her 88th birthday and just 7 days before Christmas, her years of ministry in this world drew to a close. In many ways, Mabel was an ordinary woman. Widowed at an early age, she raised her children alone, and struggled with them as they struggled with themselves to figure out who they were and what they were to become. She held about every position in the church there was to hold having been a member at Peace Dale Church, which is my home church, for over 70 years. In the Rhode Island Conference, she was well known as she held about every leadership position there was well. At the Biennial Meeting in Providence a few years back, just several months before her death, she was named Lay Woman of the Year.

I encountered her when I met with the Church and Ministry Committee of the Rhode Island Conference as I was in the process of changing my denominational affiliation from American Baptist to United Church of Christ. It was there that I learned what made her truly extraordinary. Mabel had the gift of discernment, an uncanny ability to ask questions that cut right to the heart of the matter. She possessed a level of clarity that grounded her in a profound way and, from that place, she invited me to a deeper level of clarity about my own journey in ministry. She unrelentingly pushed and prodded and poked at my strengths and liabilities. There were moments when I think she knew almost as much about me as I did about myself. She wanted to make sure that I knew what I was doing in making this huge change in ministry. She also wanted to make sure the United Church of Christ wasn't letting any crackpots in their ordained clergy. She may be re-thinking her decision from the other side of the Jordan.

I learned at her memorial service that Mabel spent years in spiritual direction, seeking a deeper understanding of herself and God's presence in her life. She cultivated her gift and used it for the good of the community of not only the local church but also the wider church. She was a good steward of God's gifts in her life.

I could tell you the stories of countless women and men who were and are faithful stewards of God's gifts in their lives but mostly I think we just have to turn our heads from side to side and look lovingly at those who sit around us, because it's as true here as it is in any church I have served.

In our quest for oneness and for faithfulness, for a new life in Christ, we need the skills and gifts and abilities of each person for the whole is always made of many parts. The whole is not the "melting pot" that was the popular metaphor of the last century. In this new century, we need a new image and historians are now suggesting that we use images such as a "salad bowl" or a "stir-fry". Yale historian Carl Degler explains that "though the salad is an entity, the lettuce can still be distinguished from the chicory and the tomatoes from the cabbage." Raymond Winbush, Vice provost at Vanderbilt University thinks the "stir-fry" image is more accurate. In stir frying, there is a flavoring that takes place so none of the elements remain the same, but all are enhanced by the others. It is kind of how we are as a church—a great salad or a great stir-fry where we spice and flavor and encourage each other and where our own identity remains clear in the spirit of Christ.

Al Carmines, composer, playwright, performer and teacher, is a United Church of Christ minister who penned the words to this hymn that I offer as our closing prayer. Let us pray.

*God of change and glory, God of time and space,
When we fear the future, give to us your grace.
In the midst of changing ways,
Give us still the grace to praise.*

*God of many colors, God of many signs,
You have made us different, blessing many kinds.
As the old ways disappear,
Let your love cast out our fear.*

*Freshness of the morning, newness of each night,
You are still crating endless love and light
This we see, as shadows part,
May gifts from great heart.*

*Many gifts, one spirit, one love known in many ways.
In our difference is blessing, from diversity we praise
One giver, One word, one spirit, one God known in many ways
Hallowing our days
For the giver for the gift praise, praise, praise!*

Thanks be to God and a men.