

Marquand Chapel
December 1, 2005

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Matthew 15:1-20

Dear God: Open our hearts and our minds to experience your word in ways that let your truth and light shine through.

“I work for Jesus Christ.” These are the words that Davida Foy Crabtree, CT Conference Minister for the United Church of Christ used two years ago to open an address to YDS students.

“I work for Jesus Christ.” This declaration has stayed with me and serves as a reminder of why I am here. Jesus Christ is the sole head of the United Church of Christ, so technically, I work for Him.

It is that simple, and it is that complex. Imagine sitting in a staff meeting with Jesus as the chair. You have heard him call people on their hypocrisy, so you know that you want to be honest. He has encouraged you to pay attention to what comes out of your mouth, so you want to sound compassionate and smart. He has made it clear that your actions should match your beliefs so you want to be genuine and deliberate.

But you also know that Jesus offers love, mercy and grace, so making a mistake will not be the end of the world. You are accepted for who you are.

Jesus' words in today's reading speak to the heart of the UCC. We are a faith tradition rooted in the love of Jesus Christ and motivated by God's call to the joys and challenges of discipleship. We live our faith with open hearts, open minds and open arms. No matter who you are or where you are on your journey, you are welcome in the United Church of Christ.

Matthew's gospel today reminds us to look into our hearts to know who we are and to understand what motivates us in our lives. In this reading Jesus uses all negative examples of what comes from the heart: evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness and slander.

Later, though Jesus reminds us that the greatest commandment is to love God with all of our heart. We are encouraged to recognize that both good and evil come from the heart. The choice is ours. We are reminded that following empty traditions or worrying about man-made rules will not bring us closer to God.

The United Church of Christ was officially founded in 1957 when two denominations, representing four traditions, joined together to form a new church. The Congregational-Christians brought a historic vision of a covenantal church and a commitment to ecumenism. The Evangelical-Reformed stream brought a deep commitment to education, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and a warm heart

open to receiving the Holy Spirit. The rich heritage of the UCC continues to nourish us today as we celebrate “unity in essentials, diversity in non-essentials, and Christian love in all things.”

Together, we make up the body of Christ. Individually we are each called, to look deep into our hearts, into our souls and see what is there.

I would encourage you to do that. What I hope you will find is Love of God. Love of God that fills in all of the emptiness that we sometimes seek to fill with manufactured products. Love of God that provides focus when we are making difficult choices, Love of God that nourishes your hearts and souls to carry on in this world where we are barraged with distractions.

When Jesus uses the words of Isaiah “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” he is reminding us that we have a covenant with God, which is written on our hearts. In exchange for the breath of life, for creation, we have agreed to do God’s work on earth. We acknowledge that it is by God’s grace that we are here and we agree to use our gifts and talents, to be the hands and hearts of Jesus each day.

In the United Church of Christ we remind one another that God is still speaking. Our creator continues to create. Our sustainer reaches out a hand of grace to help us along. Our redeemer forgives our transgressions. We are baptized in Christ as infants, but our baptism is lifelong. Just when we think we have reached the pinnacle and are ready to reach for the prize, God lets us know that there is more to be done.

God wants us to keep going. We set our sights on a goal, what we believe to be the ultimate and we work tirelessly to achieve that goal. Sometimes when we get there we are disappointed. The caution here is that disappointment or anger can often block the path. We may feel upset that something has not turned out as we planned. We may be angry at God for outcomes in our lives that we are unhappy with. Sometimes, we are making so much noise complaining about where we are that we cannot hear the voice of God telling us where it is we need to go.

But if we listen to God speaking, the result may be that we have new opportunities that we never dreamed of. A new path may be before us, one that redirects our energy and passion and introduces us to people, places and ideas that are completely unknown.

We could see this ever-changing landscape as a threat to our stability, or we can view it as an opportunity to embrace the rich possibilities laid before us. In 1957 the Christian-Congregationalists and the Evangelical-Reformed Churches united to form the UCC. The foundation of their union was theological agreement on authority of the scriptures, congregational freedom, continuing reformation and belief in a loving, Trinitarian God.

Together a group of people united in Christ through worship, work and witness created a church. This is the journey of faith. This is how we move closer to God. God’s love is the power of transformation that can lead us to new life.

We must have the courage to go down those new paths, to recognize that this is the life we have been given and to determine how to make the absolute best of it. We must take the time to be still and listen for God.

God is always creating and calls on us to be God's faithful partners. We need only hear God's call to know where our journey will lead. We can depend on the fact that God is always with us, that faith will give us strength for the journey and that trusting our heart will lead us, ultimately, to God.

We work for Jesus Christ who promised to all who trust in him. Forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, God's presence in trials and rejoicing and eternal life in God's realm.

May the peace of God and the love of companions be with you on your journey. In Christ's name I pray. Amen.