

CHURCH AS GIFT NOT ACCOMPLISHMENT

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Scripture: I Timothy 6:6-19

After our service today we will have a Christian Nurture sharing session about the United Church of Christ. What is the UCC? It is a denomination. It is a particular brand of Christian church. But what is it? How is it different from Presbyterians, or Lutherans, or Roman Catholics?

Before we can deal with this question, I want to explore some basic ideas about the nature of the church. In many religious traditions the idea that individuals should gather weekly in community, or belong to a religious group or congregation is alien. Japanese Buddhists (we met many of them during our years in Japan) do not even imagine that it is important to go to a temple each week to pray with a community. Some Jews might go to the synagogue to study torah, some Muslims might go to a mosque to pray together, some Hindus and Buddhists (especially monks) seek out monasteries or temples to practice meditation or bring offerings to the gods. But the idea that ordinary people, everyone, should join, belong and participate in weekly communal religious activities is distinctively Christian. In fact some scholars say that Christian practices are pressing other religions to establish congregations and weekly worship—patterns not part of their heritage. For most religious people around the world, beliefs and rituals are individual, or in family groupings. They are done at special times in the life cycle or at religious festivals, but not every week and not in public congregations. Scholars point out that Christian practices and cultural dominance are “Christianizing” the practices of all religions these days, in spite of the fact that weekly congregational worship is not part of their traditions.

Of course, Christians applaud individual faith and practices, but the core of Christian discipleship is not individual, it is communal. Authentic Christian life participates in “church.” Some people say that it is really impossible to be a Christian all by oneself.

In the early years of Christianity, the followers of Jesus Christ viewed themselves as the *ekklesia* – the fellowship of those called out of their personal and family worlds to be together in something bigger (something glimpsed in the life and message of Jesus Christ.) Belonging to the church of Jesus Christ, stretching back in time and stretching around the world is at the core of Christian identity. To be Christian is to be part of a network of congregational and denominational practices and relationships.

As the *ekklesia* (the called out ones), what is our ecclesiology? What is our view of the church? Church is not merely another club or organization like the Rotary club, or a fan club. It is not necessarily an affinity group of like-minded people. It is a community of support. It is a center of learning. It is a resource to under gird discipleship and challenge our very being. It is always personal, but it is bigger than individuals. Church is literally more than the sum of its parts.

When I teach courses about the history of the church I often say that Church is obviously made up of individuals seeking to DO God’s will. However, it is primarily a human community struggling to receive the wonder of God’s blessings. When we see a sunset, or have a wonderful experience we want to share it. In fact the sunset becomes more beautiful when we see it with others. The experience is more meaningful when we share it.

Think about it. People sometimes say that it is more important to give than to receive. Yet it is actually much easier to give than to receive. When we give a gift we are in control. We choose the gift, we decide who will get the gift, and we determine when to give. Giving a gift is

fun and satisfying. We make people happy and it makes us feel good. There is no surprise and little embarrassment.

Receiving a gift, however, is more difficult. We may not know it is coming. It may be a surprise. We may not want the gift. We may not understand the gift. We may not like the gift. Gifts may make us feel obligated to the giver in ways we wish we could escape. To receive a gift is a humbling experience.

The biggest challenge for most of us is NOT to learn how to be good “givers,” but to learn how to be good “receivers.” The Christian message (the “Good News” or the “Gospel”) is that God has freely given fullness of life to everyone – not because we deserve it, not because we earned it, not because we gave any gift of equal value to merit a comparable gift, but simply because God loves us. There is no way to repay it or balance this gift. The only thing that a Christian can do is give praise to God and thank God for such extravagant love. It is foolish to worry about what we can give back to God. What we need to worry about is whether we can actually gracefully accept the gift of God.

Our scripture lesson this morning from the letter to Timothy emphasizes that accepting what we have been given is more important than striving to get more. God gives life to all things. Timothy, a young disciple, is encouraged to help people get their priorities straight. He is told to persuade people receive life rather than accumulate life. Rich people must be chided not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but to hope only “on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” The letter encourages Timothy to remind people that they brought nothing with them into the world, and they can carry nothing out. It suggests that money is a problem, because it leads to temptations and cultivates senseless and harmful desires that lead to ruin and destruction.

Timothy must reclaim his earlier testimony of faith made in the presence of many witnesses. He is part of a community. He must keep his personal priorities straight and help

others do the same. He must remind rich people not to be haughty or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but to seek God who will provide “everything” (to receive God’s blessings).

The letter says, “They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.” [1 Timothy 6:18-19]

What does it mean to take hold of the life that really IS life? This is the question that “church” seeks to answer. At its best living in the community of the Christian church people discover how to focus upon receiving the gift of life. It is true that churches do not always do that. Churches are human and faulty institutions. Their calling, however, is ultimately to help us “take hold of the life that is really life.” That life is not something we have to earn; it is a gift from God.

Many religions (even parts of Christianity) emphasize the obligations of believers. Believers are taught how to do the right things to earn or deserve salvation. The focus is not on the teachings or blessings given by God, but on obligations. Good Christians, Hindus, Muslims, or Buddhists learn when and where they should pray, what ceremonies they should attend, how they should live and work. Guidelines, doctrines, and religious laws detail instructions about what human beings must give to God or religious organizations to achieve a good life.

Yet, the letter to Timothy reminds us that faithfulness invites us to receive life. Receiving gifts from God is scary, so Christians come together in communities to receive God’s gift of life. Faith is right relationship with God, and love is right relationship with others. Obviously Christians are called to follow the life and teachings of Jesus, to put the gifts they receive into service for the common good. At the same time their individuality and personal integrity thrives in community.

There are many practical reasons for local congregations like this one to come together to engage in mission and to support each other. Trying to follow Jesus is hard and we don't want to go it alone. But the Christian church is more than a support structure that humans create to keep the faith, it has a deeper purpose. It is the primary setting that enables us to receive God's love. Church is a gift, not an accomplishment. The gift of Divine love is a mystery. It is unbelievable. It is outrageous. In community Christians learn how to receive that gift.

The primary setting of the church is local—where two or three gather together in the name of Jesus—we call it a congregation. Congregations enable individual faithfulness as well as collective action. Furthermore, when congregations participate in networks of support with the “wider church,” the capacity of Christians to receive God's blessings expands. From the earliest years Christians knew this. They stuck together, meeting secretly. They circulated letters of support. Being a faithful Christian was communal. Recent conservative Christians who dwell upon whether people have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior sometimes miss this point. We need each other to receive Divine blessings.

Over time isolated communities and congregations established formal links and created denominations, still later denominations came together to create united and uniting churches, and to form councils of churches and interfaith networks. Christians do this, not just because it is more efficient, but because in wider communities we discover how to embrace and understand God's love. Church is a gift we share with each other. It is not merely an engine for action.

For this reason First Congregational Church of Washington, DC is part of the United Church of Christ. We need this wider church membership, not to ACT better or to DO more, but to BE better Christians.

Of course there are practical reasons to be part of a denomination. Membership in wider church bodies can regulate and authorize leadership (for example, help us find an interim minister). Denominations coordinate educational resources, enrich mission efforts and increase our impact in the world. This afternoon, during our Christian Nurture adult education program, some First Church members who attended the UCC General Synod in Hartford, CT last June will share insights they gained from that experience. The United Church of Christ is an amalgam of congregations made up of people like us. The Constitution of the UCC says that the basic unit of the denomination is the “local church.” The General Synod does not create or regulate local congregations; local congregations create the General Synod.

The UCC organizational chart starts at the bottom with the local setting (congregations like us), moves to neighborhood settings (we are part of the Potomac Association), comes together in regional settings (we participate in the Central Atlantic Conference), and all of that stimulates a national identity and setting (our national UCC offices are in Cleveland, Ohio). Congregations gather every Sunday; Associations convene twice a year, Conferences meet once a year and the General Synod occurs every two years. The most important thing about these relationships is that they enrich our capacity to receive, interpret and share God’s blessings. This is not a top down structure, it moves from the bottom up. Wider church meetings (like the General Synod) and the President and General Minister of the UCC, or Conference Ministers in 38 regional UCC conferences make statements and challenge local assumptions, but they have only moral power. Each setting, guided by the Holy Spirit, is fully the church, yet in covenantal relationship with the other settings of the church. No part can mandate or require compliance. All parts need each other to unwrap the gift of God’s love.

To me, the most important benefit of the wider church is the way it enriches my personal and our local capacity to receive and process God's blessings. When I am part of a Christian church Jesus Christ is not simply my personal guide or window into the Divine, saving me and mine from human finitude and sinfulness. As a UCC church member I belong to a company working in community (as the Preamble to the UCC Constitution puts it) to affirm "the [shared] responsibility of the Church in each generation to make [its] faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God."

This is our ecclesiology (*ekklesia*). We are a called out people. According to a statement on UCC Ecclesiology developed in 1991, we are called out of the secular world and into Christian community. As part of the United Church of Christ we are called to proclaim the gospel (that is the news about God's love) to the entire world. We are called to gather and support each other and all communities of faith in their celebration and mission. We are called to labor for the creation and increase of God's realm of justice and love in the world. And we are called to manifest more fully the unity of the church, all humankind and the whole of creation. [UCC Ecclesiology paper (1991)]

In the words of the final hymn (#177) that we will sing together in a few minutes: There are:

Many gifts, one Spirit, one love known in many ways.

In our dif-fer-ence is blessing, from di-ver-si-ty we praise

one Giver, one Word, one Spirit, one God

known in many ways, hallowing our days.

For the Giver, for the gifts, praise, praise, praise.

Amen.