

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY

Last Sunday After Pentecost - November 14, 2004

Stewardship Sunday

Anne G. Cohen

Isaiah 65:17-25

, God is Still Speaking ,

When the people of God come together, they share the stories of faith with one another, and listen for how God is speaking to them through these stories and through their being together NOW. In doing this, the people are standing in the stream of history which has been created by these stories. At the same time, the people are continuing the creation of the stories and carrying them on into the future. Today, as we gather as the bearers of the Story of God With Us in the community of United Church of Christ people, we, too, will listen for how God is speaking to us individually and to the church that we are together, as we move toward the future into which God beckons us.

- UCC Identity Campaign

God is Still Speaking

John and I attended a workshop yesterday in L.A. on Transracial Adoption. It is likely that our adoption will expand our family identity racially – so we thought we might learn something about it before the reality of life with children overwhelms us.

The entire seven hour workshop was story-telling – mostly by the main speaker – a Caucasian Bay-Area mother of an African-American son and a Latina daughter (specifically Guatemalan-American). Every story hit home with an issue or a feeling or a human experience. And every story was about building “family.”

As a family, they get a lot of attention and questioning. So, as a family, they made some contingency plans on how to handle situations. When the kids were pretty young, they agreed that if someone was staring at them from another table in a restaurant, the one who noticed would tug on their ear and the four of them would all stare back at that person intently.

If a person in the grocery store asked the Mom or Dad if “this was really their child” – or any other deeply personal question – the parent would turn to the child and say, “Do you want to take this one or shall I?” They had each other’s backs. They had their rituals. And they were a family – first.

When I was ten, my parents began adoption proceedings with a bi-racial child. By the time I was eleven, he was no longer among us – having been removed by the County because of the danger our neighbors posed to his life. The feelings that surrounded that chapter in the life of our family are as deep and alive today as they were in 1965. And I am aware of this because as our speaker told her stories, I relived my own experience – with shock and rolling tears.

But I also know at least two things now that I didn’t really understand back then. One: My brother knew the people he went home to – and recognized them as family. And Two: Our family survived that trauma as a unit – in large part because of our extended family – at the United Church of Christ in Fullerton.

Throughout my life, my Church family – which has grown exponentially larger over 50 years – has been my rock and my shelter when I needed it the most. When I had questions about God’s complicity in the murder of a friend, I went to numerous people – mostly United Church people – and among the variety of answers I received, I found a theology of evil that worked for me. When I was

young and idealistic and didn't even know I was privileged, the United Church gave my idealism focus – gave me work to do with people living in poverty in Los Angeles and Baja – introduced me to people of different races within their socio-economic environments – showed me how to begin to build relationships rather than impose my sense of justice on people I didn't know.

When I needed to match my values with my work – and couldn't even articulate that need – I found work with kids in my local UCC – then with all ages at Pilgrim Pines – then in the parish and Conference – then on a college campus – and then in this strange but perfectly suited itinerate ministry. I met my first husband at a church camp, my second husband in seminary and my final husband while serving as a campus interfaith clergy-person. Just about every child that I had a hand in raising – was the child of someone related to the UCC.

The UCC allowed me to define myself in opposition to it in my young adult years – a developmental necessity. And the UCC gave me the stories that shaped my identity – gave me possible tools for relationships – showed me that I always had options. The Church forgave me and treated me with forbearance – affirmed me and argued with me – saved my life and gave my life essential meaning – without me even knowing – most of the time. The United Church of Christ – in our wild variety of forms and populations – brought me home again and again from the wilderness – inner and outer.

And I've learned some things over the years about my Partner in Life – this United Church. I've been part of congregations that saw our purpose as one of support on the faith journey and an outlet for creative expression, others that took seriously the mandate to be a transformative social change agent in their world community. I've served two mostly Caucasian congregations, one intentionally self-identified with bi-racial marriages and kids (and numerous single parents), and one congregation that evolved as multicultural because that's what happened in the lives of their family members on this Pacific-Rim.

All of those congregations were represented in this room on the day of our Building Dedication in September. We are still family – and we still share each other's joys and have each other's backs.

Every church I've been in has had: parking shortages, space problems (too much or too little for the program they were offering), ongoing conflicts about something (large or small or both), building maintenance issues due to use and age, budget challenges, and stories. They all had stories.

The churches that were thriving had all of those things – but also had these: Openness and acceptance of newcomers of every persuasion, a natural and oceanic sense of hospitality and generosity, a vision of where they wanted to go – even if it was just around the block, a healthy way of managing conflict early and often, enthusiasm for being together AND for being part of the wider church, AND a sense of HOPE about the future – even if the future was just tomorrow.

AND the churches that were thriving had stories - that were interconnected – with each other, with history and tradition, with a Cosmic / Divine Story, with the Big Story. And the stories were about inclusiveness and forgiveness, hospitality and generosity, uncertainty and courage, vision and hope, enthusiasm and faith, poor choices and second chances. And the stories were relevant to our lives and strengthened us as family.

Does this congregation have stories that strengthen us as family – maybe stories about living Gracefully with Uncertainty? I'm thinking we do: Abraham and Sarah leaving home for a promise - Moses and the Hebrews leaving Egypt for the wilderness; stories about people who have recently spent more than they have in the bank to build a place of refuge and transformation on Royal Ave. There are stories about families related to the military, foster parents, job seekers, anyone with a

mortgage, a 13 year old with a heart transplant wondering how to keep that heart beating. Yup, we have some stories here about (at least) TRYING to live Gracefully with Uncertainty.

How about stories of Courageous Living? People taking risks on behalf of others? Living counter-culturally in opposition to prevailing cultural norms? Living with flexibility in the midst of enormous change and upheaval? Micah, Jeremiah, so many of the prophets? The Disciples, Moses, Mary and Joseph? Harold and Ellen Kameya, Marilyn Davis, anyone who is out of The Closet? Yeah – we have some stories about risk taking and Courageous Living.

Do we have stories about living with Open Hearts? How about Mary of Bethany, Jesus of Nazareth, Ruth and Naomi, Queen Esther or King Solomon? How about Carla and Elina, John and Kevin – and all of their children? Ellen Horie and Edythe Miller? Frank Johnson and Bill Greene? Do we have stories about Open Hearted living? Yes.

And then there are the stories of Generous Living – Joseph with his brothers, the widow who gave everything to God - Almeda Babcock and Will Peterson who work with homeless and mentally ill and seniors and sometimes all three at once – Bill Schatz and Margaret Potts and other Saints of the church who left land and money and vision as a legacy for all of us and those who come after us. We have stories about Generous Living.

Every person in this room has more than most people in the world - materially speaking – enough to give some away and not have to miss meals. We also have more than we can comprehend - in every way – because we are a family – God’s family – members of the United Church family – the Human family – this Earthly family of everything that breathes.

We have everything – and more. Because we are a family with a story about risk taking and courage, open hearts and generosity. God has been telling this story for a long time now – and will not STOP telling it until eternity is no longer a possibility.

Now its time for this United Church - in East Ventura County - to write the next chapter of the story – something of mythical proportions worthy of our Story-Telling God. The United Church of Christ is fundamental to who I am and why I am. So my part of the story – this year – this decade - is going to be about how I lived out my love for this family. I am doubling my 2004 pledge to my home church for 2005. And I am going to write a love letter to my church – hopefully through my home church newsletter – perhaps even to the national UCNews.

And I am going to make a point of telling people who are NOT in the UCC the story of my family – and listen to their stories too. Perhaps our stories will intertwine. MAYBE adoptions will go through and the family will expand. But, most certainly, God will still be speaking - when I am silenced and Life goes on.

TWENTY- FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Stewardship Sunday

November 14, 2004

10:00 a.m.

The cross marks (+) in the order of service are an invitation for those in the congregation who are able to stand to do so.

The New Century Hymnal or “Hymnal” has a black cover; prayers are in the back.

The Chapel Songbook or “CSB” is a blue, looseleaf notebook.

When the bell rings you are invited to engage in reflection and quiet listening.

WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION

Musical Call to Worship

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Please give the minister your announcements in writing before the service.

Music for Reflection – A Time for Centering

Jo

+ **Call to Worship** (unison)

Micah 6:6, 8

One: With what shall we come before the Holy One, and bow ourselves
before God on high?

Many: **Shall we come before God with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?**

One: God has showed you, O people, what is good and what does the Holy
One require of you?

Many: **To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly
with our God.**

+ **Opening Hymn**

O How Glorious, Full of Wonder

Hymnal # 558

+ **Opening Prayer** (unison)

We give you thanks, eternal God, for those who have run the race of faith before us and now surround us like a cloud of witnesses, and for those who pass the word of your love to each new generation. And, too, we give you thanks, living God, that here and now you give us parts to play in the great drama of your love. Speak through us and move through us that the story of your mighty deeds will be known in our time and place. With faithful people of all ages, tongues and races, may we be Christ’s body on earth. Amen.

+ **Our Common Prayer** (unison)

**Creator God who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,
on Earth as it is in Heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts**

As we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil,

For Thine is the kingdom and the power

And the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection (you may be seated)

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: **God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.**

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

Never place a period where God has placed a comma.

God is still speaking!

Sung Response “Hallelujah... God be praised!” (CSB #5 Refrain)

WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM

The Just Peace Reflection was introduced to our worship service by our Just Peace Committee.

It is a weekly reminder of the need for social justice in order to create a peaceful world.

Just Peace Reflection

Conversation with Our Children

Random Acts of Kindness

Reading from the Hebrew Prophets

Isaiah 65:17-25

Sermon

God Is Still Speaking

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION

We Offer Our Gifts and Pledges So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory

Prayer of Dedication

The Gifts That You Gave Me

CSB # 68

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Our Joys and Concerns

Call to Prayer *Be still and know that I am God*

Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Offering of Prayer

Sung Response

In Solitude

Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

+ Sending Hymn

Touch the Earth Lightly

Hymnal # 569

+ Commissioning (unison)

**“In order to be united we must love one another;
in order to love one another we must know one another;
in order to know one another we must meet one another.”
Let us meet and hear in one another the voice of God – still speaking.**

+ Sung Response (You are welcome to form a circle)

CBS # 42 refrain

**Draw the circle wide. Draw it wider still.
Let this be our song, no one stands alone, standing side by side,
draw the circle wide.**

+ Postlude

*** MEMORIAL FOR EDYTHE MILLER FOLLOWING WORSHIP ***

WORSHIP NOTES

Call to Worship is from the UCC Identity Campaign, “God is Still Speaking”

Opening Prayer Ibid.

Commissioning is based on the words of Desire Joseph Mercier (1851-1926) in The Monitor (S.F. Roman Catholic Archdiocese) December 1960

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