

6/16/24

Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15; Hebrews 4:12-13; Mt 22:37-40

I was so excited in 2004 when the UCC launched its “God is still speaking” initiative! Its scriptural foundation is Hebrews 4:12, “The word of God is living and active.” We will explore that more in a bit.

Since seminary in the 1980s I had long wondered why some Christians thought God stopped revealing things to us once the canon of the Bible was closed. That didn’t make any sense to me. Our Bible covers from the beginning of Jewish history to about year 95 in the common era upon the completion of the book of Revelation, the last to be written. The Bible as we know it today was canonized – that is, declared complete, in the council of Hippo in year 393. The Council of Hippo was a gathering of church leaders in Hippo Regius, which is in present-day Algeria, northern Africa. The council's purpose was to determine which books should be included in the Christian Bible, clarify church doctrine, and establish rules for church governance.

As a seminarian I thought surely God has spoken in the roughly 1600 years since the Bible was declared complete! At the very least, look at all the activity around Saints!

Our history includes the spread of Christianity, the dominance of Catholicism, and then the Reformation in 1517 when Martin Luther (1483–1546), a German monk and university professor, posted his ninety-five theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg stating the reforms needed in the church.

Our own denomination, the United Church of Christ, was born on June 25, 1957 out of a combination of four groups. Two of these were the Congregational Churches of the English Reformation with Puritan New England roots in America, and the Christian Church with American frontier beginnings. These two denominations were concerned for freedom of religious expression and local autonomy and united on June 17, 1931 to become the Congregational Christian Churches. I would be remiss if I didn’t mention

that the Congregational churches with Puritan roots were concerned about their own religious freedom, but were in fact persecutors of Indigenous people and Quakers.

The other two denominations were the Evangelical Synod of North America, a 19th-century German-American church of the frontier Mississippi Valley, and the Reformed Church in the United States, initially composed of early 18th-century churches in Pennsylvania and neighboring colonies, unified in 1793.

Last week, we briefly explored the UCC statement of faith, which is also the GCC statement of faith (you can find that on our website, guilfordchurch.org). As part of our exploration of who we are as GCC and what we believe, it's helpful to understand the progressive nature of our denomination, including its various congregational initiatives. There are eight congregational initiatives - creation justice churches; just peace churches; accessible to all (A2A) churches; the UCC economic justice movement; the global mission church; open and affirming churches; WISE churches –a network of churches that are welcoming/inclusive/supportive and engaged across the spectrum of mental health; and finally, the immigrant welcoming churches. All of those initiatives – Wait, we are all those things, right?

Well, we're a just peace church, and an Open and Affirming church. This is from our church covenant:

We, who feel called by God to join ourselves into this Church, do hereby solemnly covenant to walk together in all of God's ways made known, or to be made known, to us. We do this in the name of Jesus Christ and we ask for his grace to help us. With that help, we will do our best to fulfill this Covenant, no matter what the cost. Specifically, we covenant

- to seek to live supremely for God and to consecrate ourselves, our households, and our property to God;
- to submit to the Gospel discipline of this Church and to labor for its peace, purity, and usefulness;

- to exercise and promote Christian fellowship with all sister churches of the common head;
- to respect other faiths and seek community that is inclusive of ALL people

Including but not limited to:

- conventional Christians and questioning skeptics,
- believers and agnostics,
- those of all races and ethnicities,
- those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
- those of all classes and abilities;

We, the members of the Guilford Community Church, UCC, declare ourselves to be a Just Peace congregation.

In describing the marks of a Just Peace theology, the pronouncement adopted by the Fifteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ affirms that “a Just Peace is a basic gift of God and is the force and vision moving human history. The meaning of a Just Peace and God’s activity in human history, especially the life and witness of Jesus, is understood through the Bible, church history, and the voices of the oppressed and those in the struggle for justice and peace. Nonviolent conflict is a normal and healthy reflection of diversity; working through conflict constructively should lead to growth of both individuals and nations.”

As a congregation of the United Church of Christ, we recognize the importance of promoting justice and peace throughout the world, in our nation, in our community, and in ourselves. We therefore covenant among ourselves and with God to seek the ways of justice and peace in order to make a difference in our lives and the lives of all who experience injustice and violence.

As a community and as individuals, we commit ourselves to embodying Just Peace in the following ways:

- Supporting racial equality and indigenous rights
- Standing in solidarity with, and advocating for, the poor, the homeless, and the oppressed
- Embracing people of all backgrounds, abilities, and sexual orientations
- Working to promote the ethical use of environmental resources
- Engaging in self-reflection and honestly confronting our own privilege and shortcomings
- Finding effective ways to work through conflict
- Resisting divisiveness and injustice; rejecting violence
- Serving as witnesses for Just Peace in our community
- Acting as true neighbors to all people

And from our Open and Affirming Agreement (May, 2003):

The Guilford Community Church, United Church of Christ, acknowledges that those who have become members and those who actively participate in the church community share a variety of beliefs, yet remain joined in Christian love and respect.

The Guilford Community Church is open to all. It affirms the spirit of God found in those who seek fellowship, comfort, and guidance here whatever their age, race, gender, ethnicity, education, disability, sexual orientation, financial situation, national origin, or any other circumstance that has historically been a barrier to a full life, participation, membership, mission, work, and ministry in the United Church of Christ. We embrace those brothers and sisters as equal partners in the Body of Christ with full access to every opportunity to serve God.

Our church covenant and our participation in denominational initiatives are a reflection of our desire to follow the instruction of Jesus: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment, and a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

On the bulletin board in the back of the sanctuary is this vision statement, dated 2023:

“We seek to gather in a beloved and inclusive community to joyfully celebrate God’s love, and to inspire in one another courage to work for justice, to care for others, and to live in right relationship with the natural world.”

So, we as a congregation have made commitments to broad justice and radical inclusion. We believe that God is still speaking, that the word of God is living and active, and that God may yet reveal to us more ways to be inclusive and to pursue justice. Note that Hebrews tells us that the word of God is “sharper than any two edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow. It is able to discern thoughts and intentions of the heart (discern is the KJV translation of the word “judge” that’s in our NRSV). Dividing soul from spirit means that God’s word can distinguish our individual souls from the spirit that is upon and within all of us. It means God’s Word can penetrate the thoughts and motives of an individual, piercing as it were clear to the marrow. The Word is unique in its ability to discern thoughts and intentions of the heart, revealing what the person really is.

Every difference that exists offers us an opportunity to re-consider how we are being just and inclusive. It’s important to factor in that with differences, we need to make sure we also have in place protocols for when our inclusiveness results in clashes – clashes of personalities, clashes in beliefs, clashes in priorities. As a congregation of a hundred, we have a hundred unique ways reflected about our interactions with God and with each other. We operate on the idea that we all love each other, and respect each other; but

what do we do when it doesn't FEEL like we're loved or respected? How do we confront conflict and restore relationship?

Our psalm today tells us that "the righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of God; they flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap."

One reflection of our covenants and commitments is our "flourishing." That flourishing could take many forms - it could be that we grow in size, and it should be that we grow spiritually. As a person of a certain age, I'm grateful that "in old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap." So if someone says "you're full of sap!" you can say "thanks!" No matter our age, we still have the potential to grow in our faithfulness and to have that growth reflected in the ways our church community interacts with each other and with the larger community around us.

I'll close with thanks to Peter Amidon for this quote *by Walt Whitman* from the preface of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

This is what you shall do; Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.

Amen.