

*A Pastor's Prayer*

Based upon Luke 18:1-8 on October 21, 2007

Rev. Mark Seifried at Townsend Congregational UCC

A couple of surprising things happened in the last week or so. Well, actually more than a few surprises happen in this place everyday, but there are two I'm going to talk about. Since I got here over two years ago, I've been asking for information regarding the founding of this congregation in 1734. I was looking through my library for a book I wanted to consult for a sermon I'll deliver in a couple of weeks. By chance, I came across an unrelated book on the history of Townsend, which I bought last year from the Townsend Historical Society. I looked through the book for pictures and descriptions of the church but didn't find the information I was looking for. Then, on a wing and a prayer I sent an e-mail message to Melinda Ryder who was one of the esteemed authors of the book. I know Melinda as a relentless woman. Once she puts her mind to something she doesn't give up. Within a few hours of receiving my e-mail, Melinda discovered with some important information regarding the origins of this congregation. I won't go into detail now, but did want to share with you that within the first year of the church's founding that the congregation welcomed a freed slave into church membership.

The second situation was a phone call I received at home from a woman who attended a funeral at which I presided here last week. She told me I had not done my job as a pastor. I thought to myself, "What is she talking about? The family of the deceased thanked me profusely for the service and specifically for the stories I shared in the eulogy." According to the caller, as a minister of the gospel I was supposed to be earnest in an appeal that all those people who had attended the funeral accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. The caller was afraid that the deceased had not done so because she never heard the words uttered while the person was alive. Evidently there is a key phrase taught in her church and if you say it enough you'll be assured a spot in heaven.

So here we have these two seemingly unrelated events: first, the discovery of some important church history that includes evidence of this congregation practicing racial justice since 1735; the second was a telephone call from a woman who told me I was inadequate as a pastor because our congregation isn't saying the right words so that we all get into heaven. They are both related because to each of them I can say, "THANK GOD!"

Thank God this congregation has had such a wide understanding of grace that we can look back 275 years and see that we welcomed a black former slave woman into full church membership and that this year we have continued widening the circle of people who are welcomed into the fullness of grace in the church.

Thank God that we are a church where we don't have to say just the right words to believe that we'll earn God's favor. I told that post-mortem caller that the only time myself and others in our church believed we fell from God's favor was when we judged

others to be unworthy of God's grace and that our human imaginations cannot imagine the totality of God's love. Thank God for simplicity of faith. Thank God that we are justified by faith and not merely words we say.

Thank God for Townsend Congregational Church. Thank God for the United Church of Christ. Thank God for each of you – for you are the church of Jesus Christ – from the oldest to the youngest, from the smartest to the silliest, from the strongest to the weakest, from the richest to the poorest, from the most musical to the most cacophonous, from the most talkative to the quietest. You are Jesus' beautiful and wonderfully made body: you are Jesus' heart, Jesus' hands, Jesus' voice, Jesus' arteries and kidneys and the hair on his head.

I'm sure that those who are in church leadership tire of my prayers before and after our meetings. Ninety-nine percent of the time, I go on and on about how thankful I am for the church and our witness and ministry. I pray that prayer every day, several times a day. It's gotten to the core of my very being. When I hear bad news about something in the church and I refuse to believe the bleak picture that is painted because I have prayed over and over: "Thank God for TCC-UCC!" Thank God for our witness where we can have people lead worship and talk about their struggles with mental illness like we did last week. Thank God that we have teenagers helping lead worship. Thank God we have a church where any one of you can preach the word of God that comes to you – if you but feel the call and have the courage to do so. Thank God that we have so much activity in the church that announcements go for 15 minutes. Thank God that we have to bump heads sometimes when it comes to sharing space in the church. Thank God we have a church where we can be holy child-like fools and that children can be children here and truly enjoy themselves. Thank God that we are now doing business so that the minority voice means at least as much as the majority – if not more. Thank God that it doesn't matter how much money you have, that we are all equals in the church. Thank God we are a church where love is at the center of all we do. Thank God. Thank God. Thank God.

I asked Sharlene put the black and red inserts in the bulletin. Did you get one? They tell about the unique place the United Church of Christ has in our society and about the Good News that has permeated our life as a church. I am praying that you might be thankful to God for something or someone in this church. My prayer is that there are a good number of things about the church for which you are grateful. I pray that you would either hand one of the brochures to someone or send it to someone who needs what you have. Tell them that you have something they need – your church. This was the heart of our gospel lesson for today. The widow had something she needed to judge to share: justice.

We have something we need to share with the world – Jesus: Jesus who is made known in justice for all, Jesus who is offering hospitality to all, Jesus who is ministering with compassion to all, Jesus who is proclaiming grace and salvation to all: Jesus who taught

that there was no insider crowd who would be first in the kingdom except for those who served with the most humility.

If you want this church to thrive beyond five years which is a real concern because of finances, you hold the key to its blossoming. All you have to do is invite people to join us in offering Jesus to the world. If you are as excited as I am about this congregation's record of doing justice for 275 years and wish others could experience the beauty, truth and light of living in such a gracious community, you hold the key to sharing the good news. All you have to do is invite people to join us in offering Jesus to the world. If you have found the blessing of the United Church of Christ's insistence that we not adhere to any single creed or code of belief, you hold the key to others' path toward salvation. All you have to do is invite people to join us in offering Jesus to the world. Invite them to inquire about God with us and discover the blessed life of this community.

There are hundreds of people in this town and surrounding communities that know nothing about us. Metaphorically they are like the widow in our story for today. Their knuckles are metaphorically bleeding as they seek justice, compassionate healing for their weary spirits, radical hospitality, and extravagant love we share with one another and with our God. They are yearning for what we have to offer. You are the judge. The card you hold may be the key to someone else's renewal. Share it, please, for Christ's sake. Amen.