

Can the Old and the New Be the Same?

Based upon Isaiah 61:10-62:3 (UCC historical data derived from www.ucc.org)

by Rev. Mark Seifried

First Sunday After Christmas – Townsend Congregational Church, UCC

Most people who visit the church have no idea as to the history of the United Church of Christ. That is also true of many of our long-term members. Sure, most know that our roots go back to the Pilgrims and Puritans who first settled America. If one spends any time touring New England, you could surmise that the Congregational Church has played an important role in most every community. Our churches occupy a prominent place in almost every city, town and village in New England - typically the white meetinghouse on the town green. I would like to highlight some of the actions of the United Church of Christ and its predecessors in America that illustrate how we have lived into the gospel of Jesus Christ. In doing so, I hope to illustrate that the work we have ahead of us both denominationally and as a congregation should be no surprise. We are a people who have taken the gospel seriously since Jesus Christ was born. Before I go further, I invite you to join me in prayer: God of the ancients, God of our parents and our children, Father of our Savior, be with us. Open our hearts and minds so that the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight . . . In their wisdom, those who have made suggestions for today's lessons chose Isaiah's chapter 61 and 62 to amplify the meaning of God incarnate – the Christmas story. In the Bible translation called *The Message*, Chapter 61 begins with the words Jesus reportedly said immediately following his baptism: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . to announce freedom for all captives, to heal the brokenhearted, to announce the year of his grace*, etc. Verse 8 says with the voice of God, "I the Lord love justice. I will make an everlasting covenant with my people." In the United Church of Christ, we have taken the ideas of justice and covenant seriously. Our roots go back to Jesus the Jew, the first disciples and the founding of the Roman Catholic Church. The words from the mid-twentieth century Congregational prayers we are using this morning are similar to the ancient Roman Mass. By all rights,

the UCC is a catholic church – that’s catholic with a small “c” indicating the universal nature of our liturgy and theology. By the 15th century, the bonds that held the catholic church together were beginning to unravel throughout Europe. Dissidents denounced corruption in the church's hierarchy; some began to call for a return to a simpler form of Christianity. These were the Reformers, or "Protestants" because they protested against authority. At first, their intention was to reform the Roman Catholic Church. But as the struggle intensified the result was a split—between the Roman church and a number of new communities that called themselves Protestant, Lutheran, Reformed or "Evangelical" (from the Greek meaning "Gospel").

Reformers like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin believed that the Bible had precedence over the Pope as the source of church teaching. And it was in the Bible that Luther rediscovered a simple idea that would change the history of world religion: that salvation is not earned, but is a free gift from God who loves us and whose power will save us from spiritual death. Just as Luther preached about God’s radical love and scripture’s liberating power, the UCC predecessors did the same. The first Congregational pastor in America, John Robinson, urged the Pilgrims as they departed Europe to keep their minds and hearts open to new ways. “God,” he said, "has yet more light and truth to break forth out of his holy Word." It is no wonder that Congregationalists were the first Americans to take a stand against slavery. Light and truth was breaking forth from scripture that spoke to the social conditions created by the American institution of slavery. In the eighteenth century, The Rev. Samuel Sewall wrote the first anti-slavery pamphlet in America called "The Selling of Joseph." Sewall laid the foundation for the abolitionist movement that came more than a century later. In the 1730’s, the first Great Awakening swept through Congregational and Presbyterian churches. One of the great thinkers of the movement, Jonathan Edwards, said the church should recover the passion of a transforming faith that changes "the course of [our] lives." In 1773, five thousand angry colonists gathered in Boston’s Old South Congregational Meeting House to demand repeal of an unjust tax on tea. Their protest inspired the first act of civil disobedience in U.S. history—the "Boston Tea Party." In 1785, Lemuel Haynes became the first African American ordained by a Protestant denomination. He became a world-renowned Congregational preacher and writer. In 1839, Congregationalists and other Christians organized a campaign to

free captive slaves. In response the Supreme Court ruled the captives were not property. In 1846 Congregationalist Lewis Tappan, one of the Amistad movement organizers, helped found the American Missionary Association—the first anti-slavery society in the U.S. with multiracial leadership. In 1853, Antoinette Brown became the first woman since New Testament times ordained as a Christian minister, and perhaps the first woman in history elected to serve a Christian congregation as pastor. At her ordination a friend, Luther Lee, defended "a woman's right to preach the Gospel." He quoted the New Testament: "There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." In 1897, Congregationalist Washington Gladden was one of the first leaders of the Social Gospel movement—which takes literally the commandment of Jesus to "love your neighbor as yourself." Social Gospel preachers denounced injustice and the exploitation of the poor. The social movements led by Congregationalists are vast and it would take several hours to outline our achievements as a denomination. My point is that our church has always understood the message of Jesus Christ to be based upon a covenant of radical love and revolutionary justice. The gospel of Jesus Christ is religious in nature, but has always informed politics and society. Christians who claim that politics and social issues should be kept out of religion severely limit the scope of Jesus' teaching. We are at a point in our history where I am shocked that many denominations are still grappling over the role of women in ordained ministry. Yes, many of us struggle over various issues to stay in covenant with the denomination. We don't always agree with the actions of the national church. In 1972, there was a rift in the UCC when Bill Johnson became the first openly gay man to be ordained into ministry. This began a church-wide discussion that has gone on for decades. In many settings, the church has attempted to answer the questions of gay and lesbian laity and clergy. The questions to which they want answers are: "Am I welcome here?" and "Can you affirm me as a child of God who lives in the same grace as any other human being?" These are the foundational queries to ONA, the denominationally led discernment of *Open and Affirming*. In this debate there is not a single right answer. But, it is an important debate and the church is called to proclaim what it believes. I have not been ministering with Townsend Congregational United Church of Christ long enough to know how most of you view the denomination, but I would guess that there are mixed feelings like there are in most congregations. Some are proud members of the UCC and tend to agree with many stances taken by General Synods. Some may have

opposing beliefs that have caused angst. Like every covenantal relationship based upon love, there will be high points of appreciation along with disagreement and misunderstandings. We have had a same-gender couple ask if the church would welcome them and nurture the baby developing within one of the partners as we would any other child in the church. When they asked me the question, all I could say was, "This is a decision for the church to own." Last month the Cabinet of this congregation voted to begin discernment so the church might answer how *Open* are we to sharing ministry with gay men and lesbian women; and how *Affirming* are we of their relationships and their families. The questions for the church are not just theoretical. They are questions from real people who want to be a part of this community.

This is about people who want to share their love and minister with Christ's church. It is about people who want to know what the church believes. It is about the truth of God we experience in this community. In

my mind, the church needs to address this issue just as the church addressed issues around women in ministry. In that debate, there were conflicting personal opinions, conflicting biblical interpretations, and fear. Fear is our worst enemy in all debates: fear of divisions in the church, fear of losing members, fear of discovering our discomfort in discussing matters of faith, and fear of the unknown. I am convinced that regardless of the outcome of our discussions on important issues,

the church can and will grow spiritually if we are faithful to one another and the process that emerges to guide the discussions. The old and the new are the same in that we are charged with a gospel that calls us to action. The gospel of the Christian church is based primarily upon the teachings of Jesus Christ and filtered through the personal lenses of our tradition, our experience, and our ability to reason. Our

scripture lesson for this morning was a prophecy and a promise for God's chosen people: "God has clothed us with garments of salvation. God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up." In this New Year, I pray that we meet the God who called the church into being, the God who calls us to justice, the God who asks us to offer compassion and mercy to all, the God who calls us to love ourselves and our enemies.

May we know that we are a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord.

Amen.