

It's Not About Me or You
Based upon John 6:24-35 - 9th Sunday after
Pentecost – August 6, 2006
Rev. Mark Seifried at Townsend Congregational
Church, UCC

A few years ago I had to go to court. I won't go into detail except to say that, unbeknownst to me, my insurance company mistakenly reported to the Dept. of Motor Vehicles that I was driving without insurance. That made my registration and driver's license invalid. A police officer caught it, took my license, impounded my vehicle and issued me 3 tickets. The insurance company apologized for the angst they had caused, gave me a check to pay the tickets and impound fees and provided a letter for me to take to court.

Going to court was an education. Knowing that I had done nothing wrong, I didn't worry about hiring a lawyer. I went to court and took my seat until the court clerk called me. When I heard my name called, I proceeded to the bench in the most direct route. Within walking four steps, I was grabbed by 2 police officers and forcefully escorted away from the area. Apparently, I was not supposed to be so close to the lawyers for the district attorney.

After getting jostled into the correct position in the court, the judge quickly read 3 charges and asked me how I pleaded. My response was, "I'm sorry. I didn't understand what you said. Could you please slow down and speak up? I have a bit of hearing impairment." He scowled at me and the police officers got closer. The judge again read the charges and asked how I pleaded. I responded by saying that I had documentation from the insurance company and the DMV. The judge snapped, "That is not what I asked. How do you plea to these charges?" I told him, "'Not guilty,' I suppose, but I really didn't understand the charges. My insurance agent assured me that I have the documents to provide an explanation that this was all a mistake." The judge told me that I was on the verge of contempt, but that I should step to the bench with the documents. He scanned them, scribbled something on another piece of paper and told the court that the case was dismissed. He suggested that if I ever needed to appear again in court that I should be accompanied by an attorney. I assured him I would.

I remember the feeling of complete humiliation. This was one time in my life when I wasn't trying to be fresh, but was acting foolish – mostly because of my ignorance of legal processes and judicial terms of engagement.

I pretty much felt the same way I had that day in court as a result of my first congregational meeting at another UCC church. The meeting began with a prayer from the pastor, the moderator banged her gavel and for the next two hours I was overwhelmed by the proceedings. The meeting was in the sanctuary. In front of the congregation were some long tables where the moderator, the church treasurer, and two people I had never seen in the prior 6 months attending the church. They were the church parliamentarians. They were considered full members of the church, but never attended, except for business meetings. That gave pause for thought along with the rest of the meeting.

Prior to that meeting, I had only experienced a UCC congregation in worship, but apparently it is the norm for churches of the Congregational tradition to use Robert's Rules of Order as the rules of engagement for church business. In that congregation, if you didn't use the correct microphone, hold up a certain colored card when you wished to speak, or follow other protocol, you were directed by a parliamentarian –like an officer of the court – how to speak and act. Not only that, people whom I perceived to be kind-hearted, acted like their primary business was hostile corporate take-over. They spoke their mind without regard for their sisters and brothers who had different opinions, never mentioning the merits of the others points of view.

I left that meeting befuddled and empty. I was irritated that the church's business procedures were so demeaning to those unschooled in Roberts' Rules. More than that, I was disappointed. What they professed in worship on Sunday morning was so very different than the other practices of the church. Because he was never mentioned, I am sure that Jesus wasn't the Lord and Savior of the church. Some guy named Roberts was. I didn't understand how people who prayed every week, "Thy will be done . . . give us this day our daily bread" and sang songs with words like, "Savior, like a shepherd, lead us" could profess one thing and act so differently outside of worship.

My experiences and feelings are not the same that people in our churches have been experiencing all along, I hope.

We have been using the word “discernment” around the church for a while. Today’s scripture has given me an opportunity to explain it a bit.

Let me first say that it should be no surprise that the rules of engagement for a democracy do little to bless a church. We are **not** a *democracy*. We are a *theocracy*. Jesus is supposed to be running things here and we are supposed to act on God’s will.

Jesus said to the people, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” He talks about “bread that perishes” as the opposite of the eternal bread that he offers. In reading this section of John’s gospel it is clear that the author is making the point that Jesus will provide Christians with all the spiritual food and sustenance they need if we but trust and act – in faith – as if it were so. Through our prayer life, through meditating on the scriptures, and through our personal experiences of the holy, Jesus is principal actor. When we intentionally seek God’s will, we don’t just ask people what they think. We make time and space for Jesus in study and prayer. We pray as individuals asking what Jesus would do. We come together for worshipful meetings. We weigh the results of our prayers and understanding of the scriptures with others in our community. When we call a vote, we don’t ask what the will of the people is. We say, “In our affirmation, we believe this is God’s will.” If we do not reach consensus, then we need to pray some more and find other alternatives.

You see, Jesus is at the heart of discernment practices. Our faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior is the reason we gather as the church. I am of the mind that unless we gather and invite Jesus to lead us through worship, prayer and connecting spiritually, we should not be pretending to be the church. Using the secular world’s rules of engagement makes the church no different from a business or service organization. Whether it is choir practice or a committee meeting, Sunday School class or church supper, it is paramount that we call upon Jesus and praise God first and foremost. It doesn’t matter what the activity or the business at hand is. We have to create the conditions so Jesus can join us.

Jesus is what and who it is that turns commonplace things like bread and juice into a sacred banquet. Jesus is the what and who of worship. Jesus is the what and who of the business of the church, the fundraisers of the church, everything in the church. The wonderful thing about church is that it is not about me or you. It’s about Jesus. That is how we can say we are united. It’s not because we look or act the same.

It's not even that we believe the same thing about Jesus. It's that we believe that there is one head of the church who is the embodiment of God's love and should be at the forefront of all that we do. Therefore, Jesus should be the basis for all our decisions. That is why we discern: to ask what it is Christ wants us to do and what means we shall use to accomplish Christ's work.

Discernment practices enliven our theological imaginations – individually and corporately – and unveils the thin line between the profane and the sacred. Discernment creates the capacity to see to the essence of the matter. Discernment helps us see the true from the false, the good from the evil, the path toward God and the path away from God. Discernment requires both individual faith and the wisdom of Christ made known in community. Discernment practices are inducements for Christ to lead us into blessedness.

You know what? When we are genuinely open to Christ, he appears. I've seen it in other church groups and I've seen it here at TCC. Think about the visioning meetings. Think about the spring planning meeting. Christ showed up because the stage was set for Him. Some of you may not know, but it happened this week at the band concert. Some of us began praying on Wednesday for Christ's Spirit permeate the fabric of the church. It's not coincidence, but Providence that one of our members could say, *Those prayers are unleashing power already. I have never seen such a good turnout of members and friends for a band concert fundraiser as I saw last night. In addition to that, everyone seemed to find great joy in the fellowship. Praise be to God. Let the prayers continue...*

According to one commentary, today's gospel is a reminder that the Christian faith is more than a set of beliefs, a list of intellectual propositions. The Christian life is a matter of being encountered by a person, Jesus; a matter of God getting personal with us, engaging us, taking over our lives, and possessing us. For those who want to fill their souls or stomachs that day with Jesus, or to have a discussion about spiritual matters, Jesus says, I'm the bread of life. Feed on me."

I hope that as you receive the bread and juice today, the very symbols of Christ's body and blood, for you the faith will become personal, the word will become flesh, that Jesus will mystically penetrate every fiber of your being, and that your personal relationship with Christ will be

nurtured, fed, and strengthened. Prepare to come to the Lord's table
and know that you will be fed. Amen.

From *Discerning God's Will Together* by Morris and Olsen.

Pulpit Resource by William Willimon, Volume 34, Number 3, Year B.
Logos Productions.