

More Light & Truth

5/28/2023

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Mike Haywood, Seas So High

Preaching on:
Acts 2:1–21

In 1620, the Pilgrims boarded the Mayflower to come to the New World. One of their most influential leaders was their pastor, John Robinson. Without him it's unlikely the Mayflower would have ever set sail. These precursors to the Congregational Church were living in exile in the Netherlands and they came to believe that their best bet at survival as a community would be to emigrate to the New World. Before the small group of Pilgrims left their community in the Netherlands, the whole community came together for a farewell worship service. In his sermon that day John Robinson said, "...the Lord hath more light and truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word. For my part, I cannot sufficiently bewail the

condition of those reformed churches which...will go, at present, no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw; whatever part of His will our God had revealed to Calvin, [the Lutherans] will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that great man of God, *who yet saw not all things*. This is a misery much to be lamented..."

It might be hard to hear why, but this is an astounding and history-altering statement: There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's Holy Word. These words have come to define a great deal of how we, in the Reformed Tradition, in the Congregational Church, and in the United Church of Christ have come to understand ourselves.

It's a bit ironic, actually, because even in his day John Robinson was a radical conservative. But in articulating his vision for the reform of the Church, he becomes in a real way, (to put it contemporary lingo) not a liberal but a progressive—someone who believes that “the way things have always been done” is not the best indicator of the way they ought to be done. Instead, the way things should be done is still being revealed to us. To get to God's vision for the Church we must look to our past, of course, but that vision will only be fulfilled in a future we have not yet seen. And to get to that future will require faithfulness, risk, sacrifice, and a heart and mind open to the fullness of the truth that is being revealed to us.

“There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's Holy Word,” is essentially a Pentecost statement. By faith and by the power of the Holy Spirit EVERYBODY—young and old, male and female, slave and free—EVERYBODY—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—will be empowered to speak and to be heard.

The problem, according to John Robinson, was not that people were reading their personal Bibles wrong. Read your Bible any way you like. The problem was that people were being exclusive rather than inclusive—so the Lutherans couldn't stand the Calvinists, and the Calvinists couldn't stand anybody else, and on and on.

John Robinson and the early Congregationalists were separatists, but not by choice. They were living in exile as a means of survival, and their pastor longed for a future for them in which even the minority voice of his little (and at the time, radical) flock could be heard and understood, could participate in the life of the Church. It's not your size, it's not your power, it's not even your specific beliefs or your interpretation of scripture that makes you a part of the Church—it's the power of the Holy Spirit giving you a voice to be heard, and ears to hear others, even if you are speaking two radically different languages.

Whenever we exclude from the life of the church any group or any community that seeks to be a part of it, we are denying the power of the Holy Spirit to work through them. We are silencing voices that have the potential to bring new perspectives, new understandings, and new revelations of God's truth.

As many of you have heard through the eNews, through a special email sent out on Friday, and by the notice posted on the doors of the church, our Church Council has unanimously approved an "Open & Affirming" statement to be voted on by our members on Sunday, June 11. It's a wonderful statement, produced over the past year through discussions in our Open & Affirming process and with the special attention of John Dobbs and Nikki Ramirez, and I'll read it to you in case you haven't seen it yet:

"Glen Ridge Congregational Church believes in Christ's central message of love, justice, and inclusion. In promising to keep this message at the center of all we do, we declare ourselves to be an Open and Affirming congregation.

"We invite and welcome people of all economic backgrounds, ages, abilities, gender identities, ethnicities, races, sexual orientations, cultures, and marital statuses to participate fully in the life, worship, fellowship, sacraments, ministries, leadership and joys of our church.

"We commit to being a respectful and safe community for all people to explore their faith. Honoring and embracing the rich diversity of God's world, we celebrate the opportunities within our church family to share in both our similarities and differences on our faith journey."

As we consider the opportunity to add this statement to our bylaws and to then officially become an Open and Affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ, let's remember the words of John Robinson: "There is more light and truth yet to break forth out of God's Holy Word." We can never forget that our journey as a church is far from over. It will never be over. Because, as the famous UCC tagline put it, "God is still speaking," It is our responsibility to seek the truth that what have not yet seen and to seek it through a Holy-Spirit-inspired inclusion that doesn't leave anyone out.

Becoming an Open and Affirming congregation means that we are committing ourselves to a more inclusive vision of the Church. It means that we're opening our doors wider, embracing the diversity of God's creation, and affirming the sacred worth and dignity of every individual.

It means that we are ready to welcome and celebrate our LGBTQ+ siblings as full members of our community, without judgment or discrimination, and that we're willing to go public on that invitation. I think we all know that if an LGBTQ-identified individual or family were to show up at our church, we'd treat them no differently than anybody else. Becoming an ONA congregation means making that invitation public, so the wider community knows before stepping through the door what kind of welcome and treatment and theology they will discover here.

So, the statement incorporates LGBTQ+ inclusion, but it goes beyond it as well. “We invite and welcome people of all economic backgrounds, ages, abilities, gender identities, ethnicities, races, sexual orientations, cultures, and marital statuses.” This invitation is not a departure from our tradition; it’s a continuation of the progressive spirit that has defined our history. Just as John Robinson challenged the status quo of his time, we’re called to challenge the norms and prejudices that still persist in our world. We are called to be a beacon of love, acceptance, and justice. But even more foundational than that, we are called to include, to learn to speak our neighbor’s language, to learn to understand our neighbor’s speech, no matter how different we may be.

The journey towards becoming an Open and Affirming congregation for us today is nothing like the decision the Pilgrims must have wrestled with to leave the Old World behind forever and travel to the New World. But still it will require of us faithfulness, risk, and sacrifice. We may encounter resistance from within and outside our community. We may face difficult conversations and disagreements. Yet, it is precisely in these moments that we must remember the power of the Holy Spirit IS at work within us.

The story of Pentecost reminds us that the Holy Spirit transcends boundaries and empowers all people to speak and to be heard. It is a reminder that the Church is not defined by its size, power, or uniformity of belief, but by the inclusivity and love it embodies. By embracing EVERYBODY, we are affirming the transformative power of the Holy Spirit to break down barriers and create a community where all are welcome.

The decision to become an Open and Affirming congregation is not just a statement or a label; it is a commitment to love, justice, and equality. It is a step towards building a more inclusive and compassionate world. May we embrace this opportunity with courage and humility, knowing that we are not alone on this journey. There are more than 1,800 ONA churches in the UCC and thousands more churches with similar designations in other denominations. There are 13 UCC churches within about 7.5 miles of us. Eight of them are already ONA—some for decades. We have the full support of our Association and the Conference. And we have the Holy Spirit inspiring us to remember that there is more light and truth to break forth from God’s word, and the only way to discover it is to draw the circle as wide as possible, to listen to all of our neighbors, and to see the light, hear the truth they bring.

As we move forward, let’s remember that the light and truth we seek are not confined to the past. They are still being revealed to us, as we listen to the whispers of the Holy Spirit and open our hearts to the voices that have been marginalized and silenced. May our actions reflect the radical love of Christ, as we strive to create a church where everyone can find a home, a community, and a place to belong.