

A Baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, at The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Trinity Sunday, June 3, 2007, dedicated Hannah Long-Higgins on her Confirmation day, to the 17 new members joining the church today and especially to Corrine Ashley Benner and Benjamin Michael Rowley baptized into faith today and always to the glory of God!

“One From Many”

Psalm 8, Romans 5:1-5, John 17:20-26

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Today is Trinity Sunday. In the early church, this Sunday was observed as the Octave of Whitsun, which is “the eighth day of Pentecost.” By the Middle Ages, the observance of the Holy Trinity was placed on this Sunday. While only our text from Romans 5 addresses the Trinity, through the baptisms of Cori and Ben, we have witnessed the Trinitarian blessing of Father, Son and Holy Spirit for those baptized into Christ this day.

Today begins a month in which through our preaching, music, and prayers we will lift up and celebrate 50 years of the United Church of Christ. While Congregationalists in the United States are ancient at 376 years old, the UCC will gather in Hartford, CT. in three weeks to celebrate our ecclesiastical mid-life crisis at 50!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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As the United Church of Christ hits 50 on June 26, we need to remember that we come from a long line of “Act Up” people! According to the late Roger Shinn of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, “*We are a heady and exasperating mix.*” We are more than heady and exasperating. We are strongly independent and

autonomous to the core in the ways in which we organize and live out our life together in Christ. Beyond independence and autonomy, we are also covenantal. We are constantly seeking to build covenantal relationships across our 6,000+ congregations and even more boldly, across the diverse faith traditions that make up religious culture in 21st Century America.

We, in the UCC, have always been a people of faith who head into the wind and set our course for new lands and new theological terrain. Like the Starship Enterprise, we boldly go where no one has gone before. We do this with holy boldness, radical inclusivity, open-armed expectation, and often light-hearted delight in the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

Beginning in October 1620, the seeds of our independent theological and philosophical roots were planted by Pastor John Robinson. Before leaving the port in Leyden the Netherlands, Pastor Robinson urged his congregation to always keep their hearts and minds open to new ways. He said, "*follow me no further than I follow Christ. . . and always remember, God has yet more light and truth to break forth out of his holy Word.*" We have always risked being different. Our first risky difference might have been the decision to travel the North Atlantic to Massachusetts' shores in the late fall and early winter of 1620. That was different.

Ours was never merely a colony of true believers on America's north coast beginning in the 1620s. Ours was an experiment in democracy. Each congregation was self-governed and elected its own ministers. The Congregational Way established a model intent on creating a more just society living fully in the presence of God. At the time, it was theocratic more than democratic. But, seeing the failures of this approach, it was our forbearers who led the fight for the separation of church and state.

Freedom of the Press in North America took shape in 1640 when the Congregationalists publish their first book - *The Bay*

Psalter. In Europe, the first “Pilgrim Press” was seized by the government to suppress any criticism of King James. But, here in America, the new press (today’s Pilgrim Press!) was free to publish and not perish! Publish they did! Congregationalists established the oldest publishing house in the U.S.

But they published more than hymns to God! In 1700, The Rev. Samuel Sewall becomes the first Euro-American to take a stand against slavery. Sewall writes the first anti-slavery pamphlet in America, “The Selling of Joseph” - based on the story of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers. In this tract, Sewall lays the foundation for an abolitionist movement which grows out of the Society of Friends and Congregationalists 100 years later.

By the 1730s the first great Evangelical spiritual awakening is led by Jonathan Edwards. He proclaims that the church must recover the passion of a personally transformational faith. “Faith must change the course of our lives,” said Edwards, “not merely be an exercise in religious practice.”

In 1773 the first act of civil disobedience is led by (none other than... Congregationalists) as 5,000 angry colonists who gather at Old South Meeting House in Boston to demand the repeal of the tea tax - which leads to the “Boston Tea Party.” The same year, a young member of that same South Meeting House, Phillis Wheatley, becomes the first published African American author. “Poems on Various Subjects” is a sensation and Wheatley gains her freedom shortly after her book’s arrival. Many years later, poet and author, Alice Walker said: “Phillis Wheatley kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, the notion of song.”

During the Revolutionary War, our German Reformed forbearers in faith save the Liberty Bell when, under the cover of night, they take it out of (what is now) Independence Hall in Philadelphia and hide it under the floor boards of Zion Reformed Church in Allentown,

PA for the remainder of the war. Had it remained in Philadelphia under British occupation, it most certainly would have been melted down and manufactured as cannon balls against the Revolutionaries.

Our firsts are only beginning as the nation is born in the 1780s.

In 1785, Lemuel Haynes becomes the first African American pastor ordained by a Protestant denomination. In 1839, free Africans who have been held captive and are being transported to be sold as slaves, break their chains and take control of the schooner *Amistad*. Soon they are captured and held in a New Haven, Connecticut jail. They are defended by Congregationalists and other abolitionists and eventually win their case before the US Supreme Court, as aging John Quincy Adams defends them. This leads in 1846 to the first racially integrated anti-slavery society established by Lewis Tappan. Tappan organizes as the American Missionary Association (AMA) and begins the march toward freedom, which will eventually transform America through ending slavery.

It is this AMA abolitionist movement, which inspires 42 abolitionists to give birth to our congregation on September 26, 1852 here in Columbus. Following the Civil War, the AMA opens 10 schools to educate free blacks in America's south. Knowing that we are not truly free without being educated, the AMA takes seriously their calling to give African Americans equal opportunity through equal education. These institutions become the centerpieces for a higher education among African Americans.

But, we aren't finished changing the landscape of American religious and social history. In 1853, Antoinette Brown graduates from Oberlin College and becomes the first woman since the New Testament times to be ordained as a Christian minister. She is, perhaps, the first woman in Christian history elected to lead a congregation! This all happens as the Rev. Charles Finney, President of Oberlin College, and the fiery pastor of First Congregational Church in Oberlin is leading the Second Great Awakening.

There is a wonderful story that Finney is on an evangelical preaching crusade in England when he hears of Brown's pending ordination. He sends a telegraph to her saying she cannot be ordained without his approval. She writes back, "My approval comes not from you, but from Jesus Christ and His church!"

By 1890s, the Social Gospel movement, led by our own pastor, The Rev. Dr. Washington Gladden, takes to heart Jesus' commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself." The social gospel preachers denounce injustice and the exploitation of the poor. Gladden posits that personal salvation and social salvation are in a symbiotic relationship. One cannot be without the other. This movement transforms our thinking in the industrial revolution and shapes the growth of social justice for generations to come. It is the social gospel movement, which Dr. King turns to and quotes often as he leads the Civil Rights movement 70 years later.

When the 20th Century arrives, this "Act Up" people to whom we belong are only hitting high gear. In the 1940s, the son of German milkman from St. Louis, Missouri and now one of our greatest theologians, Reinhold Niebuhr, authors the "Serenity Prayer" and Moral Man and Immoral Society. In 1952, another German immigrant, Paul Tillich writes The Courage to Be, considered to be one of the great books of the 20th Century.

In 1957, the United Church of Christ is born in Cleveland, Ohio, and we become the first denomination in Protestant history to unite four streams of religious traditions: Congregationalist, the Christian Churches (the "CCs"), the German Reformed and the German Evangelical churches (the "E&Rs").

Twenty-five years later when I announce in southern Pennsylvania that I am headed to a CC seminary named Yale, the committee on the Ministry expresses grave concern and disappointment, saying "Why are you not going to our E&R seminary

in Lancaster?” I answer, “I am not E&R. I am UCC!” It is the answer the committee expects to hear and they pass me through my opening examine with great consternation.

You see, we have always been “united and uniting.” Our history ever since 1957 has been to bring the people of Christ from across Christendom together into partnership with each other. “One from Many” should be our mantra!

Through the Civil Rights Movement, the Viet Nam War, the United Farm Workers’ organizing movement, and Wounded Knee in 1973, the UCC - including our own great pastor The Rev. Dr. Chalmers Coe, takes front line positions for justice and peace. In 1972, we ordain the first openly gay minister, The Rev. William Johnson. The first openly lesbian pastor is ordained a few years later. In the following decades, we take the leadership role for equal rights for homosexual citizens and call upon all our congregations to welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered members. In 1976, we elect The Rev. Joseph Evans as the first African American president of a racially integrated mainline church in the United States. And when, in 1995, our New Century Hymnal is published, we become the first Christian church to honor in equal measure both male and female images of God.

We are a feisty, “Act Up” people. God is not finished with us. I happen to believe that “God is Still Speaking” in the United Church of Christ. I happen to believe Jesus’ words that one day, “we will all be one.”

As we venture into the future of this denomination and our congregation, I pray that we will continue to reflect the feisty, loving, justice-driven, “Act Up” spirit of God here in Columbus and across the world. It is this Godly Spirit which has given us birth on Broad St. and this Spirit will lead us well into the future - a future bright with hope! As our words at the close of communion say, “May we be the rainbow of hope in an uncertain world!”

The United Church . . . of Christ. I have often said when the Christian Church decides to stop fighting itself and others and comes to experience the true Pentecost Spirit of unity in Christ, we will be waiting. Our name should be a welcome to all who are Christians. We are THE United Church . . . of Christ! And that is Good News! Amen.

*I have drawn many of these historical illustrations
from the UCC.ORG website.*