

“Questioning our Faith”

Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-17, 25-27

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

June 9, 2019

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost Sunday 2019, June 9, 2019, dedicated to all who trust the Holy Spirit in their lives and to the Christian Church on our 1986th Birthday and always to the glory of God!

“Questioning our Faith”

Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-17, 25-27

+++++

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.

+++++

We are living in a time when more and more people define themselves as “Spiritual But Not Religious” (SBNR). SBNR has become a popular phrase used to self-identify a life stance of spirituality that takes issue with organized religion as the means to further spiritual growth. In this understanding, “spirituality” becomes associated with the interior life of the individual and places emphasis upon the well-being of the "mind-body-spirit," while **religion** refers to organizational or communal dimensions.

What you and others may not realize is that we belong to one of the first **“Spiritual But Not Religious” (SBNR)** groups in human history. On this day, on the streets of Jerusalem, a handful of people were swept away by a spiritual revolution. They were “filled-up” with spirituality, hope and courage and began speaking in languages which they did not know and could not understand. Soon their numbers swelled to over 3,000 and something special was beginning to sweep across Palestine and eventually the whole world. We call it the birthday of the church, but on Day 1, while the Holy Spirit was blowing through the crowds in Jerusalem, those who were witnessing what was going on questioned the faith, the people and the behaviors of all who were experiencing spiritual growth and transformation.

From an outsider’s perspective all the folks who we call “the first Christians,” were declared drunk. Their faith was questioned. Their behaviors were questioned. Their integrity was questioned. Their motives were questioned. They were mocked and laughed at as “Galileans” or stupid country folk who were acting weird in the big city. Those all around them ridiculed them and treated them as though they were ridiculous.

But The “Spiritual But Not (Yet) Religious” group leader, named Peter, declares all his folks are sober (after all it is only 9am in the morning and who gets drunk by 9am?). When he makes this declaration, the “sober curious” in the crowd begin to listen. He goes on to quote the prophet Joel. He says:

‘In the last days, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy...and everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

With this prophetic proclamation, there are now 3000 people in the movement. This is our origin story. What we call “the church” was simply eleven apostles and 100 followers of Jesus overwhelmed by the power of the Holy Spirit and swept into a day of bliss and joy which empowered 2,889 others to join in.

When the church was born, we were born on the streets of a city praising God, remembering Jesus and seeking to follow his Way, and being strengthened and led by the Holy Spirit which God had sent to hold us together. There was a simplicity and a splendor about our first day of existence. We had no creeds. We had no buildings. We had no pastors, priests, bishops or hierarchy of any kind. We had no Church Councils or moderators. The only thing we counted was the cost of discipleship. **We were, indeed, Spiritual but not religious.**

Is it any wonder that those who see the church now, question our faith? They have plenty of reasons to question. For that matter, there should be no shock when we question our faith. We have moved from “Motley Crew” to “Massive Religion.” We have gone from Holy Spirit led movement to doctrinal machine.

On this Pentecost Sunday, 1986 years after our first day in existence, I feel like we need to return to our origin story and live

into the words of Peter (quoting Joel). We need to receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In so doing, we need to listen to our sons and daughters when they prophesy to us. We need trust the visions of our young men (and young women). When our old men (and old women) dream dreams, we need to listen and learn. When the poorest and most oppressed among us prophesy, we need to open ourselves to their visions, too.

People will often say to me they don't like organized religion. I respond, "*Then come and join us. We are not very organized.*" It's true. From our first days as a church in September of 1852, we held as our one and only faith statement the following:

We covenant with the Lord Jesus Christ and one another, and bind ourselves in the presence of God to live together in all God's ways as revealed by the Holy Spirit and holy scripture. (here's the kicker...) The church acknowledges that all members have the right of individual interpretation of the principles of the Christian faith and respects them in their honest convictions."

I love this! It is Simple. Clear. Convicted. Freeing. Transparent. Empowering. Honest.

This covenant BREATHEs. It also allows the Holy Spirit to breathe and to guide our hearts and minds. It frees us to trust God to guide us. It calls each of us to have honest convictions. I hope each of you here feels the power of the Spirit alive and well in the freedom of our faith as lived and expressed at First Church! It is real! This is unquestionably a faith worth following.

On the first day of the church's life, while many around them were questioning the faith of the first "Spiritual But Not Religious Ones," the Holy Spirit was gathering together a band of believers for all time. The Spirit called these believers to be prophetic witnesses for God's love and justice in this world. 1986 years later, our band of believers known as First Congregational is still being called out into the world to be witnesses for God's love and justice. May we feel the wind of Spirit blowing on us, blowing through us, and calling us to be free, to be honest in our convictions and to live fully into the faith we have been granted by God. Amen.

Copyright 2019, First Congregational Church, UCC