

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Phil Hart at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 9, 2012, Pentecost 15.*

# **“A Very Good Story”**

**James 2:1-10, 14-17;  
Mark 7:24-37**

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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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It is good to be with you all, and I bring you greetings from your brothers and sisters in the United Church of Christ in the Northern California Nevada Conference of our church. There are about 130 churches out there, and in just a few hours when they start their worship services, they'll be speaking in over nine languages. It's probably the most diverse congregations and conferences that we have. But it's good to come home, and my home church is this church. No matter where I am, I proudly let people know about that.

You know, just a couple of weeks after I got to California, I drove out there with one car load; that was my goal, a car load and that was it. I did it so that I could see out of the windows, but it was really packed. When I got to California, I had to buy a pillow because I couldn't fit a pillow into my car. But when I set out, it was on a journey that I was excited about, and I left from here, and I left my home. Today I'm truly honored and I think you are too, to have in your midst, my mother, who about 20 years ago wrote me a letter and explained something to me that I didn't know. She said

that when I was born, like Hannah did with her son Samuel, she gave me to God. Thank you.

Two weeks after I got out to California, I went to a church that was no more than an hour away from San Francisco, and they were trying to decide if they were going to become open and affirming. They had struggled over it, and years before, they had tried to do it and it almost tore the church apart. Now, this is out in California, not very far from San Francisco. So, these kinds of decisions that we make in churches aren't little things.

So they asked me to come out and to preach and to talk to a Sunday school class and then to talk to the group afterwards. So, we started talking, and a group of them said they were nervous about doing it, because they were afraid about what it would mean. They asked questions, like "Well, is that going to mean that the Conference or the Church will try to tell us how to vote?" Oh my gosh, you know the UCC! There's no use in us even trying to do that! They said, "Well, are we going to have to hang up a gay pride flag in our sanctuary, or outside on the church building?" I said, "No . . . (Not a big one) . . .No, you don't have to do that!"

So they started talking, and I saw something kind of disturbing happen during that conversation. I saw a group of them beginning to try to convince the others that it really wasn't a big deal. Things aren't really going to change; things aren't really going to happen different, if you become open and affirming. I sat there, and I watched that, and I became disturbed.

One guy stood up and he said, "I don't know then, why we need to do it. You know, the gays know that we are friendly." He said "gays" like people down the street, like next door to the Johnsons: "The gays know. And we even have some gay people in our church; I don't know why we need to do it." He looked at me, and said, "Why should we do it?"

I thought about it for a moment and I knew that I took a risk, and I knew it made the pastor nervous, but I said, "You should become open and affirming because it will change you. And it will

change your story. It will change the story that you tell yourselves and it will change the story that you tell the world."

You see, becoming open and affirming does change your story. Ten years ago, when we voted to become O and A, we signed on to a different kind of story. There are about a thousand churches in the UCC that are now O and A, out of our 5,000. Quite honestly, when we think about all of the churches in the world, probably 95 or more percent disagree with us. We are a very small minority of people that has said, "We understand that God is telling us something different."

We believe that God is still speaking, and if God is still speaking, then wouldn't it make sense that God has something to tell us? If all that God had to say has already been said, then God wouldn't still be speaking. So we believe that we should be listening, and we believe that this is where we stand. And it is going to change our story.

Over the years, I've been thinking about the whole concept of story; it's fascinating to me. And so, when I moved out to California, I did something kind of cliché; I started taking a screen writing class! Yes, I'm writing a movie. And those of you that laugh be careful, because you might not get invited to the grand opening of the movie, when the stars – I think Matt Damon, I'm not sure, and I'll have to think that through!

But it was interesting to sit in that class with all these people, and they were writing all sorts of different stories. In a movie script, there's certain things that have to happen at certain times, and by page 20 usually this could happen, and that should happen, and all that. But overall, no matter how and what kind of movie you write, it has to be a good story, or else people aren't going to be interested in it. And it's not going to be worth the time.

Do you know what makes a good story? There are classes and books and people have been talking about that forever. But here is what a good story has. Someone, or some people, want something, and they have to fight through opposition and struggles to get it.

That's it. That's the formula for a good story. Groups have to want something, or a person has to want something, they have to fight through opposition in order to get it.

Now, there are a couple elements there. You have to want something. And you have to want something strong enough that you will fight through opposition to get it. Now, if you sit down with your friends or maybe your kids, to say, "Well, here's how I met my partner. One day I saw him or her, and I went up, and we started talking and we fell in love and three weeks later we got married." Okay. That's nice; it's sweet. But if you told the story this way, "I met this person, and they hated me. They hated me, they didn't like what I had just said, and so I fell in love instantaneously, so I had to fight for months and years. I would send notes and they would just brush me off. Finally one day I heard that they were going to meet with their ex on a plane, and so I just felt like I had to take a risk. So I went to the airport, and somehow I got onto the tarmac and I stopped the jet and I climbed on board and I sang them a song, and then they fell in love with me!" Now that's a story! You have to want something enough to really do something big and fight through something to get it!

You also have to fight through things. If you were to say to me, "Last week I had the munchies, so I walked upstairs to the kitchen and opened the cabinet and got a bag of Fritos, and ate some." That's not a very good story, is it? But if you were to say, "Last week I was on a flight going to Brazil and there were four of us, and our plane went down. We had to wait, and we thought they would come and rescue us, but hours turned into days and nobody showed up. We found some water but we needed food, and we couldn't find anything to eat. So one night we heard this giant noise and this ruckus, and we went over and this leopard had just killed this deer. So a couple of us took this club and fought this leopard off and we had to eat the deer raw, but it saved us!" Now, that's a good story, right? That's different than Fritos, right?

So a good story says you have to want something big, and you have to be willing to fight through the opposition in order to get it. Well, my friends, I suggest to you that 10 years ago when we voted

to become O and A, we signed on to something big. I suggest to you that today as we join together to recommit to this cause, that we are signing on to something that is even going to be bigger. I think over the next 10 years, we are going to see the world become even more divided, and we are going to see fundamentalism rise even more, and people are going to need the kind of church we say we are going to be. We have an opportunity today to recommit to a story, to rewrite our story if we want, and that is an amazing thing.

I met with a church group that had sold their property. They had several million dollars, and there were about 10 of them and they wanted to decide what kind of church they would make themselves into. What a fascinating opportunity! And so I went to the meeting; we were at this older lady's house, she was about 94 or 95 years old, and they were sitting around and people were saying, "Well, we think the name ought to be this, and we think we ought to do this, and we think we ought to believe this." The lady sat there, and she was a very dignified lady. Her apparent dignity didn't show the fact, but I knew that she had been such a radical supporter of people. She was on the FBI list for a while, to be watched, because she was so radically supportive of the African American movement for equal rights.

Now, in the UCC, that's a hero, right? You're on the FBI list because you have been radically supportive, and you're being watched by the FBI, well, that's a good thing in my book!

So finally, she set down her tea cakes and her coffee, and everybody paused because they knew she wanted to speak, and it was her house, and she said, "Well, frankly, I don't care what we call ourselves. I don't care what name we give, and excuse my language, I don't give a damn what we do. I want to be the kind of church where someone can drag a dead cat down the middle of the aisle and everyone is concerned about what happened to that cat."

Think about that for a moment. I probably haven't heard a better description of what the church should be. I know, because I have now been the Conference Minister of over 800 churches. I don't tell you that to impress you, but I guess you probably should

be – just kidding! I've been into a lot of churches, and I know that if someone dragged a dead cat down the middle of the aisle, it would cause a ruckus. But I think, in a lot of places people would be upset about the carpet, or about the germs, or about the flies. I don't know many churches that as a community would instantly think about what happened to that poor cat. See, my friend, that's a good story. That's something good to go after.

Jesus is out in the middle of No Man's Land, out in an area that the Jews had kind of rejected as the heathen's area. This group of people come and bring this man who apparently, as best as we can tell, had been able to hear and speak in the past, but something had happened, illness or an accident, and he wasn't able to hear or speak now. And back in that day, the idea was that something physical that had happened to you was a punishment from God; you had done something to cause that to happen. And so, here was this person who was once a part of the community but then when this happened and people found out about it, they pushed him out.

Does that sound familiar? They must have thought that he had done something, or he was born wrong, or he was thinking something different, and so he shouldn't be part of the community. The story says that Jesus took him aside and did some odd things, put his fingers in his ears, and then, which is odd for us to hear, spit and touched his tongue. Now that is, quite honestly, for two people's spit to touch, you should really know each other in a special way! That is not something you introduce yourself to someone and do, usually, or that you should do!

But that whole thing, what does that mean, what was that all about? Well, this man couldn't hear Jesus saying things, and so Jesus did things. It's not just enough to be able to say the right things, but to do the right things and make sure that the people will know that you're there with them. And then, the story goes, the man wouldn't stay quiet. Why? He had just witnessed and been part of a good story.

My friends, all of us have an opportunity to decide what kind of story our lives are going to tell. And we have an opportunity in this community to decide, when people talk about us, what kind of story they are going to tell. I suggest we think of something big. I suggest that we set our sights to be the biggest and best and brightest and loudest progressive voice in the city or the county or the state. I believe that we should let it be known all around that when people hear the word "church" and often think of something completely different, that we become the alternative to the definition that they have often heard. I suggest that we think of ways to make sure we open up space so that people can come and experience God in forms that will meet their needs. I suggest that we look at trying to make our story one that has a grand and wonderful history. I suggest that today we decide to choose something big that will be opposed by many but will be the Word of God.

It's an amazing thing to tell people in San Francisco you are a minister. You can tell them you are gay, and it's just like you told them you got a haircut, not a big deal. When you say you are a minister, their countenance falls, and they look at you with such sadness because they think you're that kind of person, or you are around those kinds of people. Well, I say let's make sure our story is loud enough so that people have an option, and know that the story can be different, a story that is filled with people coming to us because they weren't comfortable anywhere else, maybe because they were kicked out.

You know, when I got kicked out of the Methodist Church, right before I went to the trial, I called the UCC Association Minister and said, "You said you would take me in if I transferred; will you take me if I get kicked out?" And he said, "Phil, we would consider that an honor." So I said I would be right back, I'd go get kicked out, then I'd be right back.

Well my friends, I want you to know that 10 years ago, shortly after I joined the UCC, you started on this open and affirming process, and I can tell you with full honesty, had it not gone the way that it went, I wouldn't be here, and I wouldn't be in the church. You were an instrumental part in my story, and in the

story of so many people. Today, I ask you to recommit to the story again, realizing with eyes wide open that your family and your friends and your co-workers might not agree with you.

But I say, choose the story anyway, because it is how God is calling us and we feel that, and we're responding the way God is calling us.

I say choose the kind of story where people can feel included for completely who they are, rather than excluded.

I say, choose the story where people can come and realize that they don't have to hide or deceive, that they can be fully who they are and know that they are loved.

I say choose the story that calls us to commit ourselves to the uncomfortable place of being different but being family.

I say choose the story that involves tea cakes and kitty cats.

I say choose the story that will make it so that when people look back on our lives and look back upon this church, because no church will last forever, people will say "You know what? That was a very good story!"

That's what I want to be part of. That's what I want my friends and loved ones to be part of. I thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for living that story and letting me be part of it.

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