

## God is still speaking

Acts 6:8 - 7:60

February 12, 2006

*God is still speaking, and you can still listen at First Congregational United Church of Christ. We have shared God's love for 150 years, and as we celebrate our past we are eager to share our future with you. Together we can explore the frontiers of faith in Jesus.*

*No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here at First Congregational United Church of Christ, where we believe God is still speaking!*

This is the face we will show to the world (or at least to the Cedar Valley!) for the next several months as this TV spot is aired on KWWL and eight cable networks. This is what we will tell people about us.

Is it believable? Is it true? Are we who we say we are? If we are not who we say we are, if the message is not the reality, then this entire media campaign is pointless. What matters is being the church, being the church we say we are! In particular, let me draw your attention to three key phrases in the script: (1) *God is still speaking ...* (2) *exploring the frontiers of faith in Jesus ...* and (3) *you are welcome here.*

*No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here ...*

You've heard that around here a few times! Well, is it true? Do we mean it?

Are people whose lives have been impacted by mental illness welcome here? Are people whose lives have been impacted by the disease of alcoholism welcome here? Apparently, because we invite the Alliance for the Mentally Ill and Alanon and Alateen to meet in our building.

Are crying, whining, messy, silly, needy, beautiful children welcome here? Even if they are not children of church members? Apparently, because we invite a half a hundred children into our building every day of the week.

What about our worship? Are poor people, wealthy people, people of color, people of high regard, people of no regard, gay people, people with disabilities, believers, doubters, traditionalists, radicals, political conservatives, political liberals ... are all these welcome to join us in our worship of God? Apparently, because they have.

What matters is making sure it's true, making sure that every "they" becomes a "you," as in you are welcome here!

*Together we can explore the frontiers of faith in Jesus ...*

That's my favorite phrase from the TV spot, probably because it's mine!

*The frontiers of faith in Jesus ...*

It implies a faith that is adventurous, seeking out the edges, asking questions, exploring new ideas, not a faith that is content to remain where it is "safe," "comfortable," "on familiar ground."

Is it true? Are we adventurous, eager to learn new things about our faith, eager to grow in our faith? Or are we a church that is averse to risk, resistant to change, just wanting to be told again and again what we already know or think we know?

What matters is making sure it is true, that we are bold, curious, open-minded, ready to take risks in following Jesus because we are confident that Jesus leads us and that Jesus goes with us.

*God is still speaking ...*

Is it true? Do we believe it? Do we believe God still has something to say? Do we believe that if we listen, God may speak to us? Do we believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ, the message promising forgiveness and reconciliation and peace and new life, has relevance in the 21st century?

What matters is that we have something to say, that we do believe God has something to say.

*Never place a period where God has placed a comma,*

A comma means there's more to say. God is still speaking, we are part of an ongoing story. That was Stephen's message to those who accused him of speaking against the law of Moses and the Temple: we are part of an ongoing story. God spoke to Abraham, God spoke to Moses, God spoke to David and to Solomon, and God is still speaking to us!

But they didn't want to hear it. As far as they were concerned, the story had already been told, period, end of sentence. Their job was not to listen, but to make sure nobody messed with the story.

It's sad, very sad, because Stephen's opponents are themselves doing the very thing of which they accuse him, subverting their precious sacred institutions. They are protective of the Temple and the Law, but the Temple and the Law point to God, their purpose is to reveal God, and the living God cannot be contained in any Temple or any set of laws.

Solomon, Israel's most successful king and the builder of the first Temple, himself said:

*Not even all of heaven is large enough to hold you, so how can this Temple that I have built be large enough?*

And Moses, Israel's prophet, deliverer, and lawgiver himself said:

*God will send you a prophet, just as he sent me ...*

Solomon points beyond the Temple and Moses points beyond himself ... to the living God, the God who continues to speak to men and women in every age, the God whose story of love and justice and salvation continues to unfold to this very day!

Stephen's opponents imagine they protect the Temple. They imagine they uphold the Law. But in revering the Temple in itself and the Law in itself, they make them into idols that get in the way of listening to God. The Law and the prophets, the Temple and sacred scripture, are all means to an end, paths to intimacy with the living God. God is the end, the goal, the only thing, the only One, deserving our reverence and praise and absolute allegiance.

Stephen understands that. He remembers his ancestor, Abraham, but understands it's not about Abraham, but about God's promise to Abraham and to all those who would come after him.

He remembers Isaac and Jacob and Joseph, but understands it's not about the patriarchs themselves, but about the God who remembers and keeps his promise.

He remembers Moses, but understands it's not about Moses, but about the God who is determined to save people despite their stubbornness.

He understands that all of these stories are not about heroes and laws and sacred institutions, but about the God who was and is and is to come, the God who is still speaking!

The same is true of our heroes and traditions and sacred institutions. John Leavitt listened to God and pointed to God. Charles Jacobs listened to God and pointed to God. Fern Murphy listened to God and pointed to God. We honor them not by trying to reproduce the past, but by listening to the God who is still speaking to us!

Our congregational heritage reminds us of the primary importance of the local church, trying to ensure that institutional allegiances don't get in the way of listening to God, but if we make an idol of the congregational way, we make the very mistake it aims to prevent. We are not guardians of a congregational tradition, but witnesses to a still speaking God.

The church exists for the sake of its witness, its witness to the extraordinary grace of God. We don't celebrate 150 years of telling our own story! We celebrate 150 years of telling God's story, a story that is still being told! God is still speaking, the story isn't finished. Abraham and Moses and Solomon and Stephen and John Leavitt and Fern Murphy and Eileen Dams and Laura Kaliban and you are all part of the story.

They killed Stephen. They have to find some way to silence the voices cut them to the heart, that make them face the truth, that expose their own flaws and call them to repent and to let go and to listen to God. So they tried to silence him, just like they tried to silence John the Baptist and Simon Peter and Martin Luther King and Oscar Romero. Just like they tried to silence Jesus. But we know what happened when they tried to silence Jesus!

God is still speaking, and God's voice will never be silenced. Do we believe it? Do we believe God still has something to say? Do we believe that if we listen, God may speak to us? Do we believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ, the message promising forgiveness and reconciliation and peace and new life, has relevance in the 21st century?

If we do, we must not be silent! What Martin Luther King said of his contemporaries is equally a warning to us: *The greatest tragedy ... [is] not the strident clamor of ... bad people, but the appalling silence of ... good people.*

Will we be silent? Or will we be bold witnesses to the God who is still speaking? Will we explore together the frontiers of faith in Jesus? Or will we be caretakers of fading memories? Will we be a nice, friendly, quite harmless church? Or will we speak the truth in love, exposing the flaws of a world not yet just, calling all to repent and to let go and to listen to the God who is still speaking?