

## **Leaving jealousy behind**

Romans 13:8-14

September 7, 2014

In seventeen days, on September 24, our church will celebrate its 158th anniversary. Our congregation has a long history in Waterloo, virtually as long as the history of the town itself. It is your church, it is our church, but it is a church we have inherited, with a long-established tradition of worship and ministry and mission in Waterloo and the Cedar Valley.

Do you love it?

None of us have been around for the entire one hundred and fifty-eight years, though some of us -- Ike! -- have been part of this church for more than half of its history, and some of us -- David and Marian! -- have been around for nearly half. But all of us are here now. All of us are part of this congregation now, invested -- some of us more tenuously and for a little while, and some of us more deeply and resolutely and permanently -- but all of us are invested now in some fashion in this church and its traditions.

Do you love it?

Our church has changed over time and is changing, as any living, thriving, growing, developing organism does. We were once First Congregational Church, and now we are First Congregational United Church of Christ, a part of the United Church of Christ. Our style of worship, our ways of thinking about and expressing our faith, our involvement in mission have changed and evolved with changing leadership and a changing membership. Some things have probably been lost along the way and some things gained, but what we are is both an expression of what we have been and what we are becoming. We have a tradition, a style, a way of doing things, a way of being church, that is distinctly ours.

Do you love it?

I love it! I am still here after twenty years because I love it!

I love the freedom, the room for creativity in our worship. We don't always use the same order or feel that we have to. We don't just follow a script, but feel free to explore, to experiment, to search, to discover, as we experience together what it means to know God and be known by God.

We express our praise in a variety of worship styles, drawing on resources from a broad range of cultures and traditions, and we attend to the word of God through a variety of means and mediums -- sermons and dialogue and silent meditation, art and music and drama and video. Our worship is often interactive, not just one-directional or one-dimensional. We are all participants, all “players” in the drama of worship.

I love our welcome, what the UCC likes to call “extravagant welcome.” “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” We mean it. These are not empty words. You ARE welcome here! And I love it, that in our tradition, all are welcome at the table. All are welcome to come and to eat and drink and meet Jesus at his table.

I love our tradition of service: community service, intentional engagement in mission, national and international, and serving each other, one on one. I love it that faith for us is not just an intellectual exercise, not just about cultivating “right thinking,” and that it is not for us just about performing prescribed religious rituals. Faith for us is a process, a process of examining our lives in the light of the gospel, and of living what we come to believe, day by day, out there.

I love our music! We are blessed with a long and rich and continuing tradition of good music. Music is the language of praise, and often the language of prayer. I am sometimes moved to tears by worship, by a glimpse of wondrous beauty or an awareness of inexpressible grace or a moment of tenderness. Sometimes it comes through a spoken word, and sometimes through a visual image, but, often, through music.

And I love our hymnal! I know that even after twenty years, it is still the subject of some debate, but, though imperfect, as every collection of worship music is, it is a wonderfully faithful and eclectic collection of songs and hymns, old and new, familiar and unfamiliar, from our own tradition and from many other traditions. It is a good resource because it allows us to sing what is already in our hearts and because it challenges us to listen too to new voices.

And I love our focus on Jesus. Martin Copenhaver, a UCC pastor and newly-appointed president of Andover-Newton Theological Seminary, once said: “In the United Church of Christ, we have absolutely nothing in common, except the one thing that matters!” We don’t all think alike, pray alike, act alike, or do alike, and we do not come together or stay together because we share a similar social and economic profile.

*The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession.*

Jesus and Jesus alone leads us and binds us together and will bind us together with any who share this same path, even if their way of walking it is entirely different from our own!

Love your neighbor as you love yourself. That's what we intend to do, not merely person to person, but church to church. Our neighbors, people walking the same path with us -- Lutherans and Methodists and Baptists and Roman Catholics -- are our kindred in Christ. They are more than neighbors, they are family, and over the course of the next ten weeks, we want to learn how to better love them, as we love ourselves.

We want to love them as we love ourselves, acknowledging and appreciating and learning to value and learning to love the unique contributions and insights and beauties of their particular traditions, as we value and love our own. We will the path in their way, in their style, for a Sunday, as much as possible tasting and seeing for ourselves another way of being church from the inside.

This is not at all about depreciating the value of our own tradition or about changing our ways. We love who we are and how we are! But we are called, by Jesus, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Loving them, learning from them, will only enlarge us. And loving them will remind us, that as much as we do love our way of being church, it is one way, not THE way, and the most important thing about our way and theirs is where it is taking us -- toward the unity in Christ, toward the oneness of all humanity and all creation, toward the shared intimacy with the living God, that God intends for us.

*Let us conduct ourselves properly, as people who live in the light of day -- no orgies or drunkenness, no immorality or indecency, no fighting or jealousy.*

For some of us, orgies and drunkenness may be an issue, but not for many of us. Some of us do need to put away indecency and immorality, but not many of us. Some of us, maybe even a good number of us, have to stop fighting, but it is jealousy most of us need to leave behind. Together, we need to learn to leave jealousy behind.

Envy is wanting for yourself what somebody else has. When you are envious, you feel inadequate, small, deprived. But jealousy is being protective of what

you do have. When you are jealous, you like what you have and don't want to share it!

We need to leave jealousy behind, to realize that appreciating beauty in another church does in no way diminish our own, to realize that learning to value and love another way of doing worship does not take anything away from our way of doing worship. When you leave jealousy behind, you celebrate beauty and wonder wherever you find it, and you are eager, not to keep it and guard it for yourself, but to let any and all enjoy it too.

That's our plan. That's the journey we will take together for the next ten Sundays. Are you ready? Are you excited? I am!

Now there will be some limits on what we can do. You will be relying in large part on what I or other members of our staff already know about each tradition or can learn through our own research, and, undoubtedly, there is much we will not know, much we will miss in our limited time frame.

And some things we will simply not be able to do or will struggle to do because we lack the resources or the experience or the practice. The style and feel and flow of a tradition is built up over time, long periods of time, and from much shared experience. We will not have that same base of shared experience and we will not have the same ease or comfort with an unfamiliar culture. We often won't know the "rules" or understand the unspoken assumptions or the reasons why things are done the way they are.

Nevertheless, the journey is worth taking, and I believe we will be blessed along the way. But you, as well as us on staff, will have to commit yourselves to the journey! You will need to be patient, curious, open-minded, and open-hearted, ready to love your neighbors, not be jealous!

We begin next week with the Jewish tradition, celebrating next Sunday morning a Shabbat Morning Service, the service that would be shared on a Saturday morning in synagogue. Why start here? Are we walking the same spiritual path as our Jewish neighbors? After all, we are Christians, not Jews.

Is that so? The one whom we follow is a Jew, and our holy book, Old Testament and New Testament, was written almost in entirety by Jews. In fact, if truth be known, we are Jews, spiritual Jews, we are really members of a Jewish sect! As Christians, our faith, our worship, our identity, our hope, our destiny are built squarely on the foundation of Jewish faith, Jewish worship, Jewish identity, Jewish hope, Jewish destiny. When we forget that, as some Christians and some Christian churches have, we forget ourselves and we lose our way.

So this is where we will begin, where we as a people, as God's people, have begun. And we must do it ...

*...for the moment when we will be saved is closer now than it was when we first believed. The night is nearly over, day is almost here.*

We must leave jealousy behind and love our neighbors as we love ourselves, because day is almost here, the day of the Lord, the day when all things will be made new, the day when we and all creation will be made one.