

## We don't know where we're going ... but we know the way!

John 14:1-6  
April 24, 2005

What is our name? What is the name of our church? *First Congregational United Church of Christ*. Why do we call ourselves by that name -- *United Church of Christ*? Why not *First Congregational Divided Church of Christ*? Or *First Congregational Factional Church of Christ*? Or *First Congregational Do-It-Your-Own-Way Church of Christ*?

We are a united church ... of Christ. What holds us together? Christ! And what else? Nothing! Nothing else holds us together. Nothing else holds us together! Don't forget it!

*United ...* It's a good word. United Church ... United States ... united we stand. We like the word; we like the idea, the idea of church unity -- both within our own churches and among the churches. We talk about, sing about it, and celebrate it through the adoption of formal agreements like the *Formula of Agreement* which brought the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Reformed Church in America into full communion with each other.

We like the idea of church unity ... but often it is more idea than reality. Our churches are deeply divided ...

- deeply divided by differences over social issues: abortion and gay rights and the use of military power
- deeply divided by differences over cultural issues: the kinds of music and dress and language that are appropriate for worship
- deeply divided by differences over theology: How do we talk about God? How do we view the Bible? What do we expect or not expect from God? What did Jesus' death accomplish? Which is more important -- prayer or action?

Sometimes I wonder if the church will survive, or if it does, if it will look anything like the church as we know it. Sometimes I feel like I'm standing on the crest of a ridge that is growing narrower and narrower, and that one day I will not be able to avoid falling off to one side or the other.

How do we go forward together -- can we go forward together -- when we are so deeply divided in mind and heart? What will become of the church in the next generation, or the generation after that? What will it look like? Will it be able to survive the powerful forces that are threatening to pull it apart and split it into distinct factions? I don't know. We don't know. We don't know where we're going ...

But we know the way! Jesus is the way!

We don't know where we're going ... but we know the way. And we must not forget the way ... because when we do, we get lost!

We get lost when we pursue any ideological agenda, of any stripe! We talk about *red* states and *blue* states, but these days it seems like we have *red* churches and *blue*

churches, too. These are often the churches that are growing, on both sides of the political divide, because people like the comfort of like-mindedness. So what will become of a church like ours, a nice *purple* church -- *red* and *blue* all mixed up together? Well, I said the *red* and *blue* churches are growing ... I didn't say they weren't lost!

Jesus is the way. When we use religion as a tool, when we use faith as a means, to pursue any other aim, we get lost.

- Faith's goal is not success or prosperity or a happy life. Faith's goal is to follow Jesus.
- Faith's goal is not ensuring equality or winning freedom or guaranteeing justice. Faith's goal is to follow Jesus.
- Faith's goal is neither the protection of the not-yet-born nor the protection of the right to choose. Faith's goal is to follow Jesus.
- Faith's goal is not to defend gay rights or to speak against gay rights, not to advocate gay marriage or to decry gay marriage. Faith's goal is to follow Jesus.
- Faith's goal is not spread democracy and promote patriotism, and faith's goal is not to protest war and teach pacifism. Faith's goal is to follow Jesus.
- Faith's goal is not to guard and preserve a tradition. Faith's goal is to follow Jesus.

Do you see where this is going? If you and I are both doing our best, our sincere best, to follow Jesus, then we are on the same path, we are going in the same direction! Do we know where we are going? *No!* But we know the way.

It means we can be, and remain, a united church because we are on the same path. I am not saying that our faith should not address the difficult moral and social and spiritual issues of our day. On the contrary, it should, because Jesus did ... and Jesus is the way! But it does mean that we can walk together and stay together and trust each other and love each other, because we are know that we are united in following Jesus, not in agreeing to any other particular agenda.

So where is Jesus going? And how do we follow?

We do have to be careful. Someone will shout: *There he is!* or *He is over there!* Or someone will say: *Jesus told me to tell you ...* Be very careful of people who claim to speak for Jesus! There are false messiahs and there are false claims about the true messiah.

We do have to be careful, but we can follow. We simply listen, listen for Jesus' own voice, listen together, listen with humility and patience and perseverance.

Listen with humility! Don't imagine that you already have it figured out. None of us are that wise! Admit that you don't know where you're going, admit that you could be wrong about a thing or two, and listen. Listen with open ears and an open mind! Don't merely defend your opinion or your tradition or your conviction. Be willing to listen and to follow Jesus.

Listen with patience! Be able to tolerate uncertainty, don't be afraid to say *I don't know*, or, at least, *I don't know yet!* Be willing to keep listening even when the message seems unclear or even contradictory.

Listen with perseverance! Never stop listening! Never stop following! Believe in God! Believe in Jesus! Believe that Jesus is the way. Never settle for following someone or something else.

And act on what you do hear ... We don't know where we're going, but we know the way. We know the way! Jesus has already told us and showed us ...

*... love your neighbor as you love yourself*

*... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*

*... forgive your brother, not as many as seven times, but seventy-seven times and more!*

*... happy are those who work for peace*

*... be merciful just as God is merciful*

*... love the Lord you God with all your heart and all your strength and all your mind!*

We know the way. We don't know where we're going, but we know the way. Jesus is the way and if we keep on following Jesus, we may not know where we are going, but we will end up where we belong!