

What's next?

1 Peter 1:1-9

April 27, 2014

But what comes next?

It was an exhilarating, exhausting, excruciating, and euphoric week. Not this week, but the preceding week, the week that began on Palm Sunday and ended on Easter Sunday. If you paid close attention, if you followed Jesus every step of the way, if you opened your eyes and your ears to the horrors of what was done to him and the wonders of what was done by him, you were surely left limp, physically spent, emotionally drained. If you were there, if you were present, not just on Easter Sunday, but on Palm Sunday, too, on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, too, you experienced the full gamut of human emotion.

You saw what they did to him. You saw what we did to him, because the guilt and the shame are ours. We denied him. We betrayed him. We abandoned him. We rejected him. And we still do. He walked the path of obedience all the way to death for our sake, and we walk ... whatever way we please.

If you paid close attention, if you followed Jesus into the dark places, the darkest places, of human frailty and pride and resentment and fear, you saw and felt with him the devastating effects of human sinfulness and its consequences. We are lost. We are utterly lost. God came to us in Jesus, loving us, forgiving us, healing us, teaching us, and we despised him, we rejected him.

But, wonder of wonders! We come Sunday morning to mourn the dead, and he is alive! Jesus is alive! God did it. This is God's answer to what we did. God raised Jesus from death and changed everything. Death has lost its sting and all things are made new. Love is stronger than death. Hope is stronger than despair. Peace is stronger than the mightiest army. Joy is. Oh, my!

Oh, my! But what's next? Because here we are, a week later. Lent is past. Easter is past. The emotional intensity has subsided. The celebration is completed. And? Life goes on.

And? How does the world look? How does your life look? Jesus is alive, but life goes on. We go on. And now, after the celebration, after the fasting and the feasting, we will see what it really means. Now comes the real business, the really important business, of getting on with it.

The power that raised Jesus Christ from death is now at work, in us. God has changed everything, and now God is changing us. We are being transformed, from death into life, one by one by one, and all together. Jesus is alive, but we do not now see him. But as we love him, without seeing him, as we believe in him, without seeing him, his life grows in us and is lived through us, and he brings to us, and to the world, the fullness of the joy he intends for us.

That's what Peter wanted the Christians in Pontus and Galatia and Cappadocia and Bithynia to understand. Their lives were difficult. They were believers, but their lives were full of trials and tribulations, toil and turmoil and trouble. Some of it came to them because toil and trouble come to all of us in this life as it is, but much of it came to them, too, because they were believers, because they were Christians.

Peter calls them "refugees." They may have been literal refugees, at least some of them, Jewish expatriates living in scattered places throughout the Roman Empire. But, more significantly, they are refugees in the figurative sense, people out of place, not at home, not at home because they think and feel and desire and do in a way entirely different from the way of those among whom they live. They live "against the grain" of the prevailing culture, valuing other things, loving other things, living for the sake of other things, and so they are "other," like strangers in a strange land, suffering the suspicion and distrust and discrimination and abuse all strangers do.

They are like refugees, strangers in a strange land, disjoined from the world in which they live, but, let's be clear! As Peter tells it, this is a disjunction, not of space, but of time. It's not that they do not belong in this world, but that they don't fit into this world ... as it is.

The contrast Peter makes is not between here and there, between this world and another world, a heaven, to which they really belong, but between now and then, a difficult and painful now in which they must love and believe and endure without seeing, and a joyful then -- joyful beyond words! -- when their salvation and the salvation of this world will be complete, when they will be with God and God will be with them.

In the meantime, this is their job, this is what's next: to love and believe and endure, and to live the new life that God has given them by raising Jesus Christ from death. Their job is to be, to be God's holy people, to be God's chosen people, to obey Jesus, to follow Jesus, to walk with Jesus, here and now.

And that's our job, too. This is what comes next: following Jesus, obeying Jesus, living as God's people, being God's people, being the church.

Because, you know, the church is not something we go to, it is something we are. And, you know, the church is not first of all a building or an institution, but a community, a community of faith, a faithful community.

Our church, the United Church of Christ, has recently drafted a Vision Plan, a statement that includes a “Core Purpose,” three “Core Values,” and four “Bold, Inspirational Goals,” mapping out for us a course of action for being church, for being God’s people together, here and now. I was introduced to this “Vision Plan” at a retreat I attended several weeks ago in Newton with other UCC pastors from churches throughout Iowa, with two of our conference ministers, Rich Pleva and Brigit Stevens, and with Ben Guess, Executive Minister of Local Church Ministries, one of the four national officers of the United Church of Christ.

I am very excited about this “Vision Plan.” It is called “The Vision Plan of the National Setting of the United Church of Christ,” but it does provide, too, a apt blueprint for the understanding of our mission as a local UCC church. We’re going to spend some time with this “Plan,” taking eight Sundays to look more closely at each of its parts, beginning today with “Core Purpose.”

Read the “Core Purpose” with me:

Drawn together by the Holy Spirit, we are a distinct and diverse community of Christians that come together as one church, joining faith and action. In covenant with the church in all of its settings, we serve God in the co-creation of a just and sustainable world as made manifest in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

At the Newton retreat, Ben Guess assured us that every word of this purpose statement was chosen very carefully, so I want to give us the opportunity today to listen just as carefully, thinking about its meaning for us phrase by phrase.

drawn together by the Holy Spirit ...

It is God’s doing. We are God’s doing. God has brought us together. God has brought us together for a reason. Isn’t it true?

we are a distinct and diverse community of Christians ...

We are a community of Christians, people identifying ourselves by Christ’s name. That name defines who we are. That name defines whose we are.

We are a distinct community. As members of the United Church of Christ, we are not the whole church. We are only one particular part of it, but within that larger whole, we have a distinct role, a distinct voice. In the United Church of Christ, we don't always speak or act like the rest of the church, but the rest of the church needs us, needs what we have to tell them, needs what we have to show them.

We are a diverse community. This is both descriptive and proscriptive. The United Church of Christ is a church made up of diverse parts -- in heritage, ethnicity, worship style, and even theology -- but, at the same time, we also understand diversity to be an essential and critical component of our way of being church. In the United Church of Christ, we believe that if we are too homogenous -- racially, socially, economically -- then there is something amiss, something missing.

that come together as one church ...

It's our motto: "That they may be one." We got it from Jesus! Unity, oneness, is our most powerful witness. If we can be together and stay together and work together, not because we look alike or think alike or act alike, but because we are joined by Christ's love for us and by our love for each other, then we will have something to make the world sit up and take notice.

joining faith and action ...

Faith and action. Not just faith. Faith without action is meaningless, purposeless, empty. And not just action. Action without faith is misguided, misdirected, lacking substance, lacking power, lacking lasting effect.

in covenant with the church in all of its settings, we serve God ...

Meaning that we work in concert on all levels in the United Church of Christ, locally and regionally and nationally, serving God with a common purpose, not ignoring or dismissing each other. But this also means, I think, that we work in concert with the "Church" in all its settings and manifestations, serving God together, not ignoring or dismissing other Christians not like us.

we serve God in the co-creation of a just and sustainable world as made manifest in the Gospel of Jesus Christ ...

The gospel of Jesus Christ sets our agenda. We don't vote on it or make it up. We don't have to discuss or wonder what we should be doing. Jesus points the way.

And that agenda is about this world, this world here and now. We serve God in the co-creation of a just and sustainable world -- a just world: a world where God's justice prevails, where God's will is done; a sustainable world: a world that is tended and cared for so that it will provide an abundant life for all creatures now living and all yet to live.

And we are called the co-creators of this just and sustainable world. Does that give us too much credit? There is only one God, only one creator and sustainer and savior of all that is and all that will be. And yet, we are made in the image of God. We are made to reflect God. We are made to be like God, and we do possess power, power to create or power to destroy. And the one God from whom we come and on whom we depend calls us into partnership in making, in re-making, the world as God intends it -- just and sustainable, bountiful and beautiful, glorious and good.

This is what's next: being the church. Being the church by loving and believing and enduring. Being the church by following Jesus, living as one, living with hope, fulfilling our purpose, here and now.

And there is joy in it! There is joy in it because we already know the outcome. The world that God intends shall be. God's kingdom is coming. And there is joy in it because we are privileged to have a meaningful part in bringing it into being, because we are co-creators of the world that will be.

We do rejoice with a great and glorious joy which words cannot express because we are receiving, not merely the salvation of our souls, but the salvation of our lives, because a life with real purpose, a life with real direction, a life with real impact, a life that is our own but not merely our own, a life lived in union with God and with each other ... that is salvation, isn't it?