

You call us into your church

Mark 1:14-20

January 25, 2009

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit,
God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God,
and to your deeds we testify:

You call the worlds into being,
create persons in your own image,
and set before each one the ways of life and death.

You seek in holy love to save all people from
aimlessness and sin.

You judge people and nations by your righteous will
declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified
and risen Savior,
you have come to us
and shared our common lot
conquering sin and death
and reconciling the world to yourself.

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit,
creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages,
tongues, and races.

You call us into your church ...

That last phrase -- "You call us into your church" -- marks a turning point in the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith. Up to this point, the statement has focussed on what God does: God creates and seeks, judges and comes, shares our common lot, conquers sin and death, reconciles, binds.

But now the focus shifts, to what God calls us to do as members of God's church. And at this important transition point, there is an echo of the statement's beginning: "You call the worlds into being" ... "You call us into your church." These are the only two instances in the statement of faith where those words are used: "You call."

"You call the worlds into being." The material world, this universe, is called into being. It is summoned. It has purpose. It has intention. It is wanted, valued, even loved.

Because the worlds are called into being by God, everything that is in some way reflects God's glory in its own glory, and everything that is in itself a living expression, a sign, an embodiment, an incarnation of God's love. As believers we look out and in and around at the universe about us and we say, "Glory to God!"

"You call us into your church." The community of God's people, this church, is called into being. It is summoned. It has purpose. It has intention. It is wanted, valued, even loved.

Because the church is called into being by God's invitation, what we do together -- our mercy, our compassion, our service -- in some way reflects God's glory, and everything we are together as the church is in itself a living expression, a sign, an embodiment, an incarnation of God's love. As believers we look out and in and around at the church called into being by God and we say ...

Can we say, "Glory to God?" Sometimes the glory of God in our midst is hidden or obscured. Sometimes, oftentimes, we really mess things up! Sometimes God looks bad, because of us! Of course, I am not just talking about this one church, but about the long and mixed history of the church of Jesus Christ on this earth.

Nevertheless, this one crucial fact remains: we do not make the church; we are invited in. We are invited by God, and invited by those whom God calls to be inviters, those whom God calls to be messengers of good news, those whom God calls to fish for human beings (not luring them out of life, but inviting them into life!), people like Simon and Andrew, people like James and John, people like ... you!

"You call us into your church." In the weeks to come, we will talk more particularly about what God calls us into the church to do, but today I want simply to make two general comments about the church into which God calls us.

First comment: the church exists where it exists. Now isn't that profound? The church exists where it exists!

Some of you may know folks, some of you may be folks, who are restless and impatient with the church as it is. Such folks have a clear idea, a clear ideal, of what the church is meant to be and do, and they keep looking for it and they keep not finding it! They may hop from church to church, changing membership as they become dissatisfied with the faults and imperfections of the churches of which they have been part, or they may appear and disappear from worship as they happen to be encouraged or discouraged by what they see and hear. They may even band together with like-minded folks to start a new church when no church they can find seems to hit the mark. That may be the most simple explanation for the myriad of different Christian churches and denominations populating our world today!

But the church exists where it exists! This is it! This is where church happens! As real and as imperfect and as yet unfinished as it is! Church happens when we baptize an infant (or an adult), when we bury a dear brother or a dear sister entrusting them to God's everlasting care, when we eat the bread and drink the wine of the Lord's Supper with whomever happens to join us in the sanctuary that day, when we work alongside each other to serve a meal in Waterloo or paint a house in New Orleans or deliver a shoebox to Chinandega.

Church happens when we work at working together, when we work at listening to each other and loving each other in spite of our differences. The church reflects God's glory, not because it is filled with beautiful people, but because it is beautifully filled with all kinds of people!

To put it another way, we are not called into the idea of church, but into the church as it is. We are not called to be members of a "virtual" church, but the church that is real. We are called into the church to love our neighbors ... and who are our neighbors? Well, look around!

I'm telling you: it's a lot easier to profess love for the suffering child on the television screen, than do something tangible to help the suffering child across town.

It's a lot easier to march for peace, than to make peace with a cantankerous neighbor.

It's a lot easier to think of yourself as a generally loving person, than to love that obnoxious person who sits in the pew behind you.

It's a lot easier to dream about the church as it might be, than to live as a dedicated member of the church as it is.

Church happens, the church exists, when we do ... what we do! When you or I pray for a sick friend, when you or I visit a lonely widow, when you or I welcome a stranger with affection, when you or I provide a coat or a pair of shoes to someone who comes asking. Didn't Jesus say something like that?

Second comment: the church that exists, wherever it exists, isn't ours.

"You call us into your church." The church that exists, wherever it exists, belongs to God. This church belongs to God. So we honor the God who calls us into the church, we fulfill our true destiny, when our aims and our passions and our hopes and our actions, even our style and our character, are what God intends for the church, not just what we prefer. When all these are what God intends for "The Church," His Church, not just this church!

This is where it happens, in the real church as it is, but not just here! The boundaries of God's church never end at our doors, or the doors of any one church. The church into which we are called, the church into which you are called, is always bigger, broader, more surprising than we could ever imagine.

When we sing, we lift our voices as part of a choir of tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of voices around this globe!

When we welcome a stranger into our church family, we act on God's behalf, welcoming him, welcoming her, into a family of an endless number of brothers and sisters of every age, language, and race.

When we add a new member, we invite him we invite her, into covenant, not just with us at First Congregational United Church of Christ, but with all God's people wherever they are gathered.

When we share communion, we do not merely celebrate our oneness with each other, with the men and women and children of this church body, but our oneness with the women and children and men of Christ's body in all its manifestations.

And when we work, we work not for the sake of furthering the mission of this church, but for the sake of doing God's will, for the sake of the coming kingdom. "May your kingdom come! May your will be done!"

We go, not where we choose to aim, not toward where our dreams for this church would take us, but where Jesus leads. "Come with me!," Jesus says ... and we do. You call us into your church, a church on the way, a church on the way with Jesus.

So today, as we gather in this sanctuary for worship, and as we go downstairs to share a meal and conduct our business, let us give thanks to God for the church, the church into which God calls us, the church which is God's gift to us, the church into which God invites each of us, the church that is larger than any of us and all of us, but that wouldn't be the same without any one of us!