

## LET THE LIGHT SHINE

**A sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman**  
**On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UCC**  
**June 17, 2007**

Our text today is from Galatians 3:23-29:

Now before faith came, we were confined by the law. Kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons and daughters of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are offspring of Abraham and Sarah, heirs according to promise.

*(Note: The following sermon is written out from the tape of the service, since this sermon was not written in manuscript form.)*

One Sunday morning a congregation had gathered, much as we have here today. I don't know if it was Easter or Christmas, or some other day, but every pew seemed to be full. It was time for the service to begin, and somebody opened the front door and began to come in. It was somebody who was there for the first time. Now, the custom of that congregation was that you dressed up nice for worship. The people had on their coats and ties, their dresses and skirts, and their Sunday best shoes. They obviously had not been here to worship! They hadn't learned to be casual. But into this walked this visitor, this young man. He walked in and he could see that it was going to be very hard to find a place to sit. He walked in, and he kept walking down the aisle – and nobody made room for him to sit down. You see, he had on a kind of ragged pair of blue jeans, and a dirty torn t-shirt, his hair was a little ruffled, and he was barefoot.

He walked on in, and he walked down the aisle – and he got all the way to the front and could not find a free, vacant seat. But he saw that there was room on the floor, and so he sat down in the floor between the first pew and the pulpit.

Well everybody in the congregation was paying attention – a lot more attention than they normally would be paying when the service was beginning. Everybody was wondering who this was, but even more than that, they were wondering who is going to do something about this – and what are they going to do. The organist began to play the voluntary, but nobody was really listening. The people on the back row were kind of leaning up in their seats looking down front to see what was going on. Everybody was wondering – what's going to happen next.

After a few minutes, an older man from the church slowly made his way down the aisle. Everybody knew what he was going to do. Somebody had to do something, and he was going to be the one who did it. He walked down the aisle and he came up to the young man, who was now sitting quietly on the floor. The old man bent down, and about half the congregation leaned up to see what was happening. And when he bent down, he said: "I just want to say how good it is to have you here." And this man, who was about 80 years old, turned around and sat down beside the young visitor. He offered him a bulletin, and offered to share his hymnal. And they sat together, and they worshiped.

In this text from Galatians, it says that in Christ there are no divisions. There is not Jew nor Greek, not male nor female, not slave nor free. We are all united, we are one in Christ. When you walk out there in the world there are all kinds of distinctions that separate us, different camps and categories, but when we are together in Christ we are united as one. The United Church of Christ, using the prayer of Jesus from John 17, has from the very beginning since 1957, has prayed the prayer that all may be one. It is a hard thing to live up to. And it is one thing for two people to sit in worship together, knowing they come from two very different worlds, and quite another thing for us to gather together in a community and to be able to make that work.

It's hard to do!

The United Church of Christ, since 1957, has been on a journey to try and help us learn how to be one in Christ. Has tried to create a welcoming table where everyone is welcome in the same way. No insiders or outsiders, but all of us had an equal voice and our story needed to be heard as much as whomever else was sitting at the table. But it is hard to do.

When I went to graduate school in 1982, I went to a small school that only had two programs in Christian Education and Church Music. I had been in the church all my life. I thought I knew something about church. I thought I had a lot of wisdom to offer in our conversation. But I happened to go to a school that was multi-cultural, multi-racial, and open and affirming. It was the first time in my life as a white, heterosexual male that I was in the minority.

I would speak up in class, and would realize that my comments did not seem to be connecting well. They certainly didn't seem to have the impact I thought they might. And several times people challenged the words that I said, and would suggest that maybe I was speaking out of an assumption that I needed to check out a little further. I was sitting around the table with a variety of people, including Mutombo who was from an African village in Zaire. She brought the experience of her stories and her people to our conversation. I was sitting around the table with Janet, who, although she was born in the United States, had spent most of her life growing up in Japan. She brought that experience with her to the table. I was sitting there with a guy named Ronnie from Papua, New Guinea, and Ronnie told the story of the missionaries coming there and taking away, calling evil, the indigenous practices of their faith and tradition. He had come to learn so

that he could go back and apologize to his people for the damage the missionaries had done.

We were sitting around the table and there were women, and people who were gay and lesbian, and they all had a story to tell, and they all had a perspective, and it was a little different than mine. So I learned that instead of talking so much, I needed to listen more. So I would sit, and I would listen, and I would take it in, and I would try to figure out how somebody could come to the table and could understand things so differently than the way I had come to know. It isn't easy to come to this welcome table, where Christ is at the center, and where all of us are equal – where there's not somebody who is the majority and somebody else who is the minority. Where there isn't gay and lesbian and straight. Where there isn't rich and poor. Where there isn't housed and those with out a house. Where there isn't immigrant and citizen. When we gather around the table, when we come to be the community of Jesus, we are united as one – whoever we are, whatever our experience, whatever our voice. And then we have to learn how to talk to each other. How to be community. How to worship together. And it isn't easy.

The United Church of Christ offers what we call an extravagant welcome to whoever wants to walk in our doors. And yet the difficult part is not saying hello, the difficult part is in engaging in the conversation and in building the community.

Hector Lopez, who Jim just gave voice to us, carries with him the sting of being the first Hispanic to be ordained and later to be elected a conference minister in the United Church of Christ. Something that some of us would think – well, you should be proud of that. But he knows the story of so many other people who were never invited to sit at the table.

We as the United Church of Christ have come a very long way in 50 years. We have lived through experiences in the world that we never imagined we would live through. And yet, we haven't gotten quite as far as we would like to be. We still struggle with what it means that everybody's voice matters. Some of us want to say – but it doesn't really matter. Because it is uncomfortable for me to listen to someone else challenge what I think. But it is the task of the United Church of Christ as we stand at 50 years in history, and as we look back and see who we have been, and as we look ahead and say – who can we become.

We have come a very long way. And there is still a very long way yet to go. Yvonne Delk, who Noel gave voice to a minute ago, she says this: “I grew up in a society where I knew I could not count on white America to move in the interest of me or my family, where I could not envision a white person ever sitting at my table. But the gospel of Jesus Christ says the community is never complete until all of us are there. I had to figure out how to step toward that community in a way that wasn't based on the pain of the past of the deep wounds that I feel. It had to be based on something that would let me stay.

“The gospel’s call to a new community is not based on whether or not you honor me. If it is based only on that, then I’m eventually going to walk away. The staying power comes from my belief that I’m called to be in relationship. I can’t be wishy-washy about it. I can’t let picking up the newspaper and seeing that black people have once again been slaughtered someplace like Jasper, Texas, deter me from my goal. It has got to be a binding covenant relationship.” (from a Sojourners article, May-June 1999, written by Rose Marie Berger.)

We are all invited to join the feast, but it is not just the feast that we come for. We are now invited to let the presence of Christ in our midst transform us to go out and share the good news in the way that we live. By welcoming the story and the voice and the experience of all those who share in kind our love for Christ and one another and justice.

The United Church of Christ has done some apologizing over the years. Paul Sherry, the president of the UCC before our current President, apologized on behalf of all of us to the native people of Hawaii, for the way in which we went in as a part of the colonization of that state, the way in which we helped to destroy their indigenous religious practices. We have apologized.

Robert Moss, the 2<sup>nd</sup> president of the UCC, when he was installed, he wore instead of a cloth stole, a stole of chains that had once bound slaves together. He reminded us how easy it is to fall again into times of oppression and slavery. And he called for us at the end of his term as he was dying of cancer, he called for us to take that statement of faith that is such a marvelous statement, but to turn it into inclusive language – because he had sat at the table with those who felt hurt by the words that we had used. We have a marvelous hymnal that has taught us wonderful new hymns – and we’re getting ready to sing one in a minute. We have curriculum that has challenged our images of God and our metaphors of faith, sharing that with people all around the world from various cultures.

We are the United Church of Christ. The light is shining, and God is still speaking, and we are called to continue to live into that promise as we now begin to move into the next 50 years of being a church that wants everyone to genuinely be welcomed.

It’s a lot of work. Will you help us do it? Amen.