

The Ways of Life and Death
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Date: June 9, 2013

16:45

On May 20th the United Church of Christ lost one of our great theologians you may have never heard of, though you have certainly read his work. Reverend Roger Shinn was a long-time UCC minister and professor at Union Seminary and Columbia, and was the main author of our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith.[1] Let's look at it for a moment, get out your New Century Hymnal—turn to 885 in the back on the bottom of the page, and let's read it together.

So what's the deal with our UCC Statement of Faith? When our denomination was formed in 1957, there were four denominations that had become two that were now becoming one united and uniting church. There were questions about how to be united, and form some common theological language, how to make meaning in this new denomination that would honor our historical heritages but also look to the future and create language to express this new church with an old soul.

The Evangelical and Reformed Church cherished the confessions of the Reformation, especially the Heidelberg Catechism. The Congregational Christian churches cherished the documents of English Puritanism and the covenants and doctrinal statements of American Congregationalism, like the Salem Covenant. Having a Constitution and Bylaws were important, figuring out the legal ramifications for this merger was essential and both took some time. But these were Christian denominations coming together, not secular businesses. The founders of the UCC realized that it was imperative that they come up with theological language that would bind us together.

As Roger Shinn wrote, "All Christian faith arises out of two stories, the Great Story and a lesser story." The Great Story is about God, human history, human hope, the creation of the world; it's "told in the Bible, partly as narrative of the past, partly as ever present encounter with God in the midst of life, partly as imaginative depiction of a future." [2] The lesser story is the "immediate story of one or another Christian community, that in particular times and places, tries to understand, declare, and enact its faith." [3]

Writing and adopting a Statement of Faith was a way for the UCC to have its own unique and specific story, while pointing to the Great Story of God in human history. It was a way to take four denominations that had become two and make them one, united around a common vision and testimony for how God was still speaking.

Sixteen theologians, eight from the Congregational Christian tradition and eight from the Evangelical and Reformed tradition were chosen to study basic Christian doctrines and the theological traditions of the ancient ecumenical church and present their findings. Some of those theologians stayed on to be part of a thirty member commission that drafted the Statement beginning with all thirty of them writing their own individual statements—it took four years in all to write our Statement of Faith. The UCC adopted it at General Synod in 1959, a year before we even had a Constitution. It was that important to make this our testimony, not our test, of faith, even before we figured out how we were going to govern and structure this new denomination.[4] Supposedly that drove many Congregational ministers crazy since Bylaws are sometimes second place in holiness only to the Bible itself!

So why the UCC history lesson this morning? Because what we see in Luke today is Jesus dramatically confronted with the ways of life and death as expressed in the Statement of Faith.

We just recited, "You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death." [5]

What we just heard Chris read points to Jesus confronted with death, and choosing life. He and his disciples are entering the town of Nain when they see a dead man being carried out, with his grieving mother and a large crowd following behind. Jesus has his crowd of followers, the widow and the mourners are another crowd—all are heading toward the town gate. Jesus could have easily stepped aside and let this funeral procession pass, but Jesus has compassion for this grieving mother, saying, "Do not weep." [6] He takes it a step further, comes forward, and touches the coffin, saying, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" [7] Jesus chooses to get involved in their story, Jesus chooses life.

This story echoes the actions of the prophet Elijah who once raised a widow's son back to life in 1 Kings. In that story, Elijah stretched himself over the child three times and said, "O Lord, my God, let this child's life come into him again." [8] And God revives the child. Quaker leader Ruth Ann Tippin says it like this, "Elijah calls out to God for the life of the boy and is not afraid to touch death in order that life might come. And, indeed, life came. Jesus took hold of death, literally stopping it in its tracks, and called out, as God in Christ, for life. And life came." [9] Elijah and Jesus both chose life.

So what do we do with this? I'm probably not the only one here struggling with these miracles and the claim that Elijah and Jesus can raise young men from death itself. But I think we go back to our UCC Statement of Faith and figure out what it really means that God "sets before each one the ways of life and death?" in light of these stories.

We can't be Elijah or Jesus, and I don't think God wants us to be. Truthfully, as human beings we have freedom, and we can make decisions for good or ill. As human beings we are meant to create, but we also have the power to destroy. Look at little kids building sand castles at the beach and see how devastated that child may be if someone or even a wave comes along and destroys their creation. It takes a lot of time to build that castle up, a lot of energy and labor and creativity. Tearing it down is easy, one swipe of your arm may be all that it takes.

My sister delighted in tearing down my sand castles when we were little because I loved building them and would get so mad when she destroyed my beautiful creation. It would always be the moment where I would run down to get water for the moat. I would come back to see her in the act of destroying my towers, smashing my drawbridge, and she would laugh hysterically to see me so dejected and mad that she sacked my castle. But, unlike my sister, we don't always consciously choose to destroy, sometimes temptation is subtle. Sometimes our own arrogance or fear or distrust or resentment or anger blinds us to the good we can and should choose.

Now I love Pixar movies and there are parts of those movies that are much more geared toward adults than children. One of my favorite Pixar movies is Ratatouille, about a rat who has a highly developed sense of taste and smell and ends up working as a chef in a famous restaurant. It's a long story, but in the end there's a food critic who comes to eat at the restaurant named Anton Ego and the chefs have to come clean about who is the real genius behind the new and innovative food—a rat named Remy.

One of the last scenes of the movie is Ego writing his critique, and here's what he says, "In many ways, the work of a critic is easy. We risk very little, yet enjoy a position over those who offer up their work and their selves to our judgment. We thrive on negative criticism, which is fun to write and to read. But the bitter truth we critics must face is that in the grand scheme of things, the average piece of junk is probably more meaningful than our criticism designating it so. But there are times when a critic truly risks something, and that is in the discovery and

defense of the new. The world is often unkind to new talent, new creations. The new needs friends." [10]

I love this! The discovery and defense of the new is a way that we choose life. We have the option of being the critic thriving on negative judgment and using our words to wound and tear down or embracing and defending the new and using our words to lift people up. When you think about it, sin is described in Paul Tillich's words as separation—separation from God, from one another, and from our best selves we long to be. Choosing life means choosing connection and unity, not acting in ways that cause disunity, distress, or separation from our best selves, or one another, or God. We are meant to create, but we have the power to destroy. Which will we choose?

Choosing life means getting involved, being part of the story. Jesus (and Elijah before him) chose to respond with compassion to the needs of these two widows and their sons facing death. Jesus could have decided to not engage the suffering, to just allow the funeral procession to head out of Nain. In fact by touching the coffin, Jesus makes himself unclean—he violates purity laws. But he does it anyway, he gets in the game because he is moved to act in the face of death and the economic ruin that would result from this widow having no husband and no son in a society where that meant she also had no legal inheritance.

Almost every day we have set before us the power to create and to destroy, to build up or to tear down. We have set before us the ways of life and death . . . and we know, in the words of our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith that God promises "to all who trust you, forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in your realm which has no end. Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen." [11]

[1] Anthony Moujaes, "UCC mourns death of minister who wrote Statement of Faith" May 20, 2013. <http://www.ucc.org/news/roger-shinn-05202013.html>.

[2] Roger L. Shinn, *Confessing Our Faith: An Interpretation of the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ*, 3.

[3] Shinn, *Confessing Our Faith*, 3.

[4] Shinn, *Confessing Our Faith*, 21-22.

[5] United Church of Christ Statement of Faith.

[6] Luke 7:13.

[7] Luke 7:14.

[8] 1 Kings 17:21.

[9] Ruth Ann Tippin, *Analysis of 1 Kings 17:17-24 and Luke 7:11-17 in Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions*, 2013, 195.

[10] Ratatouille, 2007.