

Community, Covenant and Congregational
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
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Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

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Some of you know that this semester I'm teaching a class on the UCC - you'll hear that theme in this sermon. But this is also about Pilgrim - and about the gospel reading today.

We've covered a lot of territory in Matthew's Gospel in the last few weeks. From salt and light to the brilliance of the transfiguration.

From the call of the disciples - come, follow me - to walking up the mountain together, following Jesus.

Matthew is telling the story of Jesus but also the story of the beginning of the Christ's church, and the church has its earliest moments on the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee with four people, to the hillside with many people, and up the mountain - four friends hiking together. Here's a them: *the first disciples were not alone*. Generally speaking I can't think of Jesus' followers ever following Jesus solo. 12, 70, sent out in pairs, gathered in 4,000 and 5,000 - but rarely alone, when following the way.

Jesus heals individuals, debates individuals, but generally he doesn't send individuals. He sends them at least with a partner, two by two (Mark 6:7).

Jesus followers work together. Mary the mother of James and Mary Magdalene and Salome. Joanna and Susanna.

You get the idea.

People follow Jesus in *community*. It was that way from the lakeside to the hillside and up the mountain and through his ministry in Galilee and to the upper room in Jerusalem - and it stayed that way after Easter, and all the way to today. Christianity is rarely a faith of individuals. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them. (Mt. 18:20) We study together, we worship together, we have mountain top experiences together as well as walking through valleys together; we serve together, we take care of each other. We are changed - transfigured, even - together. And thus, the good news is that we, church, are not alone.

This is why we as Pilgrim Church exist. We exist to support each other, to serve the wider community, to discern together, to welcome, and to transform the world.

(Say it with me if you've got it memorized.)

We are

“A welcoming home to all spiritual seekers
Making a difference in our world,
By fusing our Christian faith with everyday life and
Serving God by serving others.” (Our mission statement)

This is our mission - and as the wider church has said, “that mission refuses to accept reality as it is...its purpose is to transform reality.”¹

Pilgrim Church is a particular kind of community. We’re a community that is based in covenant and that operates Congregationally.

In covenant, we make promises to each other about how we will be together in community.

Pilgrim’s by-laws start off the faith and covenant section with a remember of the 500 year old Salem (MA) covenant: “The faith and covenant of this Church shall be that of the Holy Bible and the following:

We covenant with the Lord and with one another, and do bind ourselves in the presence of God to walk together in all His ways, according as He is pleased to reveal Himself unto us in His Blessed Word of Truth.

-Salem Church Covenant (1629) “

A promise to walk together in God’s ways.

And in our membership ceremony we ask folks to covenant to follow Christ, and “to participate in the life and mission of this family of God's people, sharing regularly in the worship of God and enlisting in the work of this local church as it serves this community and the world?”

I was talking with one of you this week about how Pilgrim relates to our wider UCC. We are not alone within the UCC, but we are also not subject to a hierarchy. We’re in covenant.

¹ Report of the General Synod COmmittee on Structure, 1993, as quoted in Mary Susan Gast, *That We May (Finally) All Be One*, page 95.

We are deeply Congregational in our way of being church. In the national church, one of the very first principles of the United Church of Christ is that local church autonomy is guaranteed: “The autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action.” (UCC Constitution) Local churches make our own decisions, and Pilgrim Church sure has done that. From being an early Open and Affirming Congregation to making careful budget and property decisions, we are Congregational through and through. No one tells us what to do.

But we do make promises beyond this local congregation, promises that rise to the level of Covenants. Our church covenants with our Association of churches and we feel the connection when we go to Association events and when our Area Conference Minister comes to us. They bring Pilgrim’s love and connectionality to the next church they visit and so forth. And this covenantal way of being extends to the conference, to our general synod, and back again to us.

From the national constitution of the UCC:

36 ARTICLE III. COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIPS

37 6 Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in

38 a covenantal manner. Each expression of the Church has responsibilities and rights in relation to

39 the others, to the end that the whole Church will seek God’s will and be faithful to God’s mission.

40 Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As

41 members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the Church is called to honor and respect the

42 work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the Church listens, hears, and carefully

43 considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of

44 the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways.

I love this idea that we are a United Church through our covenantal connections. We're not bound by creed - even at the local community level each person discerns their own beliefs rather than passing a test of faith. We're not bound by hierarchy - there are very few decisions that impact Pilgrim Church that are imposed by outside authorities. We are bound to one another within this congregation, and as a congregation we are bound to other congregations, by covenant.

I also have a grand unifying theory of everything religious in the 21st century. (I'm sure I'm not the first one to say this.) I think all members of faith communities in 2026 are, essentially, Congregational. Even in credal traditions folks pick and choose which doctrinal statements they agree with. Even in hierarchical traditions, where bishops or presiding elders make decisions which are distributed through local communities - it is increasingly true that members make local decisions about how much to follow.

But as Congregationalists in the UCC, we *choose* not to be alone. We *choose* to be in covenant. There's a wider church to consult with, support, and wrestle with.

I think Pilgrim doesn't do enough of this. Our volunteers don't go to association or conference meetings or ecclesiastical council. Very rarely from the pulpit do I call us out, but today I'll do that, gently. If you have time and energy to go to the occasional wider church gathering it would bless the other churches in our association and conference - it would help Pilgrim live out our covenant - and it would bless us at Pilgrim by bringing back best practices and encouraging words.

On the other hand, there are specific and important ways we are living out our covenant with the wider church. Our congregation is what's called a five for five church which means every time the UCC asks us to live out our covenant with financial resources, Pilgrim does so generously. We do so

not just because it's expected - but because we know we can do more together with our covenant partners and with our denomination that we could possibly do as one congregation. And we as individuals join a congregation to do more good together than we can on our own. We know we can be transformed and changed in covenant relationship with other Christians. We know we can follow Christ's call much better in community than we can on our own.

Mary Susan Gast, writing about the UCC, says "I wanted to begin our consideration of local churches by stirring up memories of times when we have gone to church and heard things that we know we could not hear anywhere else. When we have gone to church and found an oasis where we can reveal our pain and express our failures in a cultural desert of obsession with success. When we have gone to church and stumbled across the transfiguration, permutation...of the heavenly into the earthly, of the spirit into flesh, of cosmic love into intimate compassion...You go to church. You know what it means to be part of an improbable community, connected in life and beyond death. You know about the welcome table, and the unlikely group that gathers there."²

It's been this way for 2000 years. From the lakeside, to the hillside and up the mountain, and on to Jerusalem - and through the years and on to Lexington. Through Christ, and through Christ's church, we are connected, changed, and transfigured.

Amen.

² Mary Susan Gast, *That We May All (Finally) Be One*. pages 26-27, 66.