

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2009

Text: Psalm 111; Romans 10:5-17 Title: "No Distinction"

Rev. Bridget Hughes and Rev. Dan Schroeder

Dan: The words of Paul seem so simple, don't they? "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Yet does everyone mean everyone? Does everyone mean all people that are like us and share our lifestyles, opinions and attitudes, or does everyone mean people who are distinctively unlike us as well? This has been the struggle and challenge of the people of God throughout the ages and especially of the United Church of Christ since its inception and before. And the ancestors of our faith have come down pretty solidly and regularly on the side of everyone meaning everyone, people very much like us and people who are not much like us at all. This is and always has been the blessing and the challenge of the Christian faith in General and the United Church of Christ in particular.

In the Romans passage, Paul's chief concern was the Gentiles, who had never heard the good news of Christ. Our chief concern is with those who may have even been brought up in the Christian faith, but who have been told that the good news does not belong to them because of who they are or the lives that they live. The UCC has been on the cutting edge of church attitudes toward those who have been socially and religiously estranged from its inception as a denomination, as have its denominational roots.

Bridget: The tradition from which we were born as a congregation is one, which has always been willing to question the status quo. Its challenge has been to live into its ideals and vision. We have done this slowly and imperfectly. Since the days of the early church, Christians have struggled toward creating communities that follow Jesus' command to love one another.

This willingness to engage the blessings and challenges all began with our religious ancestors the Separatists, who desired to follow what they called "the Congregational Way," as they sought to believe and worship in their own way, putting Christ, not the king or queen, as the head of the church. Persecution and a desire to retain their English heritage made them leave the shores of Europe for the New World. As 102 Pilgrims boarded the Mayflower, their pastor, John Robinson, urged them to seek God's new word, "the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word." Robinson was admonishing the Pilgrims that they ought not be swayed by orthodox Lutheran or Calvinist dogma. And that is still a part of our identity 400

years later. We have historically interpreted scripture with an ear for how God is acting in our midst.

In the 1820s America experienced the Second Great Awakening, which inspired the early reforms that led to abolitionism, as well as temperance, pacifism and women's rights. This movement stemmed from the belief that God bestowed on all people the ability to come to Christ.

In 1839, when the Spanish slave ship, the *Amistad*, became grounded on Montauk Point, the slaves mutinied, killed the ship's captain and many crew, and attempted to sail back to Africa. During the trial held in New Haven, the men, women and children being held captive became the focus of the argument over whether they were salvage, meaning cargo, or human beings. Congregationalists such as Lewis Tappan championed their cause and worked to set them free. Tappan and our Congregational ancestors believed in the full humanity and emancipation of all slaves.

Dan: The question of which people are valued as full human beings, entitled to God's love and a full and purposeful life is one I encountered while researching the roots of the German Evangelical background of the UCC. During my study, I came across an amazing community within the city limits of Bielefeld, Germany. The Bethel community was founded in 1867 by the Evangelical Church as a haven and treatment center for epileptics. At that time much of Europe thought epileptics to be possessed by demons; an understanding that they backed with scripture. In the Bethel community care givers and clients lived together, neighbors living as equals.

During WWII Hitler ordered clients of Bethel and similar communities deported to camps and killed because they were an embarrassment to the Reich. The caregivers protested and resisted. It is said that when Hitler ordered a Luftwaffe captain to bomb the community the captain, knowing the community, refused and was executed. Today the Bethel community of nearly 20,000 clients and over 13,000 caregivers continues to live as one people in a massive complex of hospitals and care facilities, group homes and apartments, houses and schools, shops and training centers with a wide variety of emotional, mental and physical challenges addressed in a faith centered environment. In the Bethel community there is no distinction.

Bridget: And so following in this way of making no distinction in God's eyes, the Congregationalists ordained the first African American minister, Lemuel Haynes, in 1785,

in Torrington, Connecticut. He was much respected as a theologian and pioneered what has become a long legacy of black congregational, Christian, and UCC clergy.

Antoinette Brown, a theology student at Oberlin College, was never fully accepted along with the male students as a candidate for its degree. A major aspect of the problem was the centuries-long conviction that the Apostle Paul prohibited women from speaking in church and, therefore, banned their entrance into ministry. Oberlin denied her a degree, but three years after leaving she was called to be the pastor of the First Congregational Church of Butler and Savannah, New York, in 1853. Following Congregational practice, the local church ordained her. The text preached at her ordination service was Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

In 1972, William Johnson, an openly gay man, was ordained to ministry by the Golden Gate Association of the UCC. At the close of his ecclesiastical council, Johnson said, "I celebrate that today you have given me the opportunity to do the work that I know I do best."

In 1985, the Fifteenth General Synod resolved to call on all UCC congregations to declare themselves Open and Affirming, encouraging a policy of non-discrimination in employment, volunteer service and membership policies..."

However, even though the General Synod often speaks on behalf of lesbian and gay people, the constitutional reality is that the General Synod does not speak for the denomination and it can only recommend actions to the local church. Thirty-seven years after the ordination of William Johnson and 24 years after the 1985 Resolution it is still a challenge for openly gay or lesbian clergy to find a call to ministry in the UCC.

Dan: Since that time, UCC Churches throughout the nation have wrestled with what ONA meant. A few embraced the resolution as a declaration not only of the equality of those of various sexual orientations but of people of any minority, proclaiming boldly a welcome as well for people of every race and ethnicity, as well as those challenged physically, mentally and emotionally. In the social atmosphere of the eighties and nineties many churches made statements similar to the resolution without formally declaring themselves ONA.

In the late nineties Rev. Peter Meister challenged this congregation to create a vision statement. The work that resulted (front of your bulletin) has been the core of our congregational attitude toward inclusiveness ever since. Many believe that Peter Meister saw this as a seed, the

first step toward this congregation becoming open and affirming and more than a few thought that the vision statement declared us to be ONA.

Friends, the open and affirming process is a journey of stages. Much has changed since 1985, both within this congregation and in the world of which we are a part that have moved us along the path. After the passing of legislation allowing same gender civil unions in the state of Connecticut in the spring of 2005 our church deacons began formal conversations around attitudes toward homosexuality and the rights of homosexuals, bisexuals and transgender persons. The survey taken by the Love Task force in 2007 gave us a clearer understanding of the mind of the congregation and prompted a vote in 2008 to allow us to perform same gender civil unions in the sanctuary. Of course all this was trumped again by the state as the Connecticut Supreme Court ruled in favor of same gender marriages this past fall. Together with the members of the ONA task force, we feel that it is now time to formalize, once and for all, the process.

Bridget: The process of discerning God's word to us as a congregation is always challenging work. The ONA Task Force, which was created after the LOVE Task Force completed its work with the civil union vote, has worked tirelessly to keep this process open and fair. Finding the right timeline for our church and knowing when their work is done have challenged the task force. We know that some of you are tired of talking about whether or not we should become an Open and Affirming congregation. Some believe we have already answered this question when we explored and voted on whether to perform civil unions in our sanctuary. Others are anxious about how this will affect us financially.

We know already that a few have elected to withhold their pledge and yet we continue to have a balanced budget despite hard economic times. There is concern that people have already left and more will leave if we become Open and Affirming. We know some will leave if we don't. The average church that becomes Open and Affirming loses about six families. They also gain new members, gay and straight who are looking for a church in the area that has taken a clear stand on the matter.

The question of change and what would change about our church is an important one. In talking to ONA churches, we've discovered that indeed change does happen in the congregation. In every case, the loss and hurt are balanced with new energy and gifts that comes with new members. Being an ONA church should only be one part of a church identity. First Church

would be no different! Those of you, who have been here since the 1980's, think back to when First Church called the first woman minister and the positive changes that have enriched this congregation since that time.

From the beginning there has been a concern about how a vote may divide us. This congregation has demonstrated time and again that we can come to the table and talk about difficult issues, including this one. Yet some have remained hesitant to discuss the subject. Dan and I believe that it may stem from an uncertainty about the authority and role of the Bible regarding homosexuality. We understand why this is so. The Bible is a bit daunting, to say the least! Throughout our history our denomination has had a distinctive way of reading and interpreting scripture. It is not, nor has it ever been literalistic. It has been said, "You can take the whole Bible literally, or you can take the whole Bible seriously. You just can't do both at the same time." If there really is "more light" yet to come from God's word, then we have to be receptive to it with open ears, eyes, hearts, and minds. We need to allow our tradition, our reason, and our experience to inform our reading and interpretation of scripture.

Dan: What would we declare if we proclaimed ourselves an ONA congregation? We would declare that our doors and our arms open and welcoming to all people, including those of any variety of sexual orientations. We would affirm that all people should be afforded equal rights and justice and the validity of loving relationships, whether they be same gender or opposite gender. Being an ONA church would hopefully open our eyes to inclusiveness in every direction. We would engage ourselves in a continuous process to open our programs and our facilities to people of every type and need. And we would affirm the validity and the rightful presence of people of every type in all aspects of our lives together here.

So who is the Apostle Paul really talking about when he writes in his letter to the Romans "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved"? Who are we talking about when we say that "we seek to meet the spiritual and human need of people of all ages and all backgrounds"? The Psalmist says that the works of the Lord are great, full of honor and majesty. Every human being on the face of the earth is a wondrous creation of God, just as everything else in all creation is God's wondrous work. In this sense, we believe that Paul's everyone meant everyone and that, in its finest intention, our vision statement's "all" means all; every race, every ethnicity and nationality, every social and economic status, every orientation. All people are

God's people which makes every person sister and brother to you and to me and, as sisters and brothers, welcome here. Amen.