

We Are the Church

Pentecost XIV

Matthew 18:15-20

Let us pray....

Welcome back to the start of a new church year here at the United Christian Church! Can't you just feel the excitement and energy flowing through our church today! We are a church on the go that is buzzing like a beehive of activity. We are a church that comes together to worship God each Sunday through our prayers and music. We are a church that offers Christian education to our children both young and old. We are a church that comes together to serve our community through our soup café and fundraisers for those in need. We are a church that comes together to fellowship during coffee hour, our monthly concert series, flea markets, and of course during our annual strawberry festival.

We are a church that has been blessed with the bounty and presence of God. God has been faithful and in just 4 years we will celebrate our two hundred years gathered here in Lincolnville as the body of Christ.

Last Sunday I asked you to take note of and share with each other how you saw the presence of God during this past week, a moment when you in thanksgiving proclaimed "Yay God." Do I have any volunteers who would like to share their "Yay God" moment with us?

Our cheers of "Yay God" speak to the presence of God in our lives but they also signal a time of new beginnings, new relationships and new hopes.

As I think about this time of new beginnings my memories take me back to the beginning of a new year as a college music student. The university had just hired the principal trumpeter of a famous orchestra to teach its trumpet students. He was a world class trumpeter and my knees shook as I walked into his studio for the first time. But in no time at all he and I developed a relationship that surpassed that of just student –teacher.

During every trumpet lesson he would play for me and gave me an example to emulate. On those days when I would get discouraged with my trumpet playing he would offer encouragement and advice not just about the trumpet but about life. He wasn't just a famous trumpeter and teacher; he became my mentor and friend.

In our Gospel reading this morning we see a similar relationship when Jesus the consummate teacher serves as a mentor to his discouraged disciples as they minister to a community struggling with what it means to be gathered together in a common union, to be the church.

Jesus' gathered group of followers came from many faith backgrounds, socio-economic and geo-cultural locations. They all had their own set of opinions when it came to religious practice and political discourse. And with those opposing opinions came the dynamic of intolerance – the inter-personal dynamic that I am right so you must be wrong – I am righteous so you must be a sinner. Sound familiar?

Jesus teaches the disciples through the example of his own life of inclusivity. Jesus counsels the disciples to be patient and to help people tear down the walls of intolerance and build bridges of communication and dialogue that foster relationships of mutual understanding and love, a church where the presence of God can be found. Tragically, that has not always been the case in the Christian Church over the past centuries and even today.

During my years as a pastor I have invited many people to church. A reply that I hear too often is “Pastor, I’m spiritual, but not religious. I believe in God, I try to live a good life. It’s the people that keep me from feeling the presence of God. That’s why I stopped coming to church.”

Rev. Martin Copenhaver, President of Andover Newton Theological School, speaks to experiencing the presence of God in the church when he writes

“The true wonder is that God can be found inside the church, among quirky, flawed and broken people who may have little in common and yet are bound to one another. What an unlikely setting in which to encounter God. But God seems to like to surprise us by showing up in the most unpromising places, like a Jew from Nazareth and in a motley gathering of people known as church.

God throws us together in the church and says, in essence, "Here is where you get a chance to learn how to live with other people, to forgive, and even come to see God in one another."

The church, like the family, is the place where we learn to live with people we are stuck with. And when we stick with those we are stuck with, it is a living reminder of the God who is stuck with us all.”

I love this about the church — and OUR church. Many of my pastor friends and colleagues serve churches filled with people of one stripe. Not us! We are all over the map; and yet we gather around one table to worship one Lord. We bring our whole selves to worship, including our particular and differing views, and the Holy Spirit makes us ONE body.

To my mind this is the church at its best — a people with diverse and even conflicting views on you-name the-topic, gathering regularly not to have our own positions affirmed, but to discover God's will for us as individuals and as a church, to listen, really listen to each other, and to be changed in the process.

So here we are at the beginning of another church year at the United Christian Church and the question that I ask you is what does church mean to you? What is it you're looking for here? How may we as Christ's church enrich the lives of those in our community?

Is a church just a denomination or a building or a place to gather together for one hour a week?

The song that was sung by our children earlier gives us a good answer to those questions. The verse of the song speaks to us:

“The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple,

The church is not a resting place, the church is a people.

I am the church , you are the church! We are the church together!

All of God's children all around the world, Yes we're the church together.”

Yes, that's it! Church is all of us; me, you, all of us from the children to our brothers and sisters well into their eighth decade. We are the church together!

In our Gospel lesson we see the church come together as the disciples invite people of all stripes into a community, a community of faith, hope and love. We see the church come together as the Good News of the Gospel is proclaimed and lived out. This morning we see our little country church come together because Jesus promises us “whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there with them.” And I’m here this morning to tell you that Christ is in our midst showering us with his loving presence.

As we start this new church year let us come together again as His living church led by the Holy Spirit to proclaim and teach the Good News of the Gospel through our words and service, all the time praising our Lord for his grace and presence in our lives.

I am the church , you are the church! We are the church together!

All of God’s children all around the world, Yes we’re the church together.”

Welcome home. See you at Coffee Hour! Amen.