

**“We Are the Church Together”**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

12 September 2021

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Psalm 133

Ephesians 4:1-3

“How very good and pleasant it is  
when kindred live together in unity!”

- Psalm 133:1

**Prayer**

**God-with-us,**

**We are grateful to be gathered in your Presence.**

**Let the words of my mouth**

**And the meditations of all hearts**

**Bring us closer to you and to one another. Amen.**

I have not seen this many people in the pews since March 8<sup>th</sup> of 2020! This morning feels almost like Easter Sunday!

Friends, it is good to see all of you here today. It is wonderful to be able to look to my right and see our Senior Choir back in the sanctuary. It is good to know that our children are enjoying a safe in-person Sunday school gathering outside. I am also thankful that we continue to livestream our services so that those of you who are unable or still hesitant to join us in person can be part of this Sunday as we embark together on a new church program year.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to our whole church staff for the hard work they did to make sure that we were prepared to welcome all of you back safely. It's hard to believe that some of you have not gathered in our sanctuary for almost 2 years! It has been a long time since we have been able to be a community in real life. But, thanks be to God, here we are gathered for worship once again. I invite you to take a minute to look around. Look at this sacred space where we come together to worship God, sing, pray, to celebrate the gift of faith and life, to bid farewell to loved ones and to encourage each other to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and give thanks that we can stand on this holy ground once again.

As your pastor, I am profoundly grateful that we gather today knowing that almost every single adult and eligible youth in our congregation is fully vaccinated and that we all continue to wear face masks and observe the mitigating guidelines to avoid spreading the Delta variant in our church and in our communities. The words of instruction written to the first-century-Jesus-followers in Ephesus sound more truthful in a congregation where each one of us is making every effort to bear with one another in

love and maintain the bond of peace through the pandemic. Thank you for taking the vaccines and thank you for wearing your face masks this morning. This is definitely how we make God's love visible, tangible and palpable in the world!

When I was planning my sermon for today, I remembered a silly church joke that a friend of mine said to a group of preachers. A newly called pastor decided that he would impress his congregation with his erudition and theological knowledge on his first day at the pulpit. He delivered a masterfully written, well-researched and very long sermon. At the end of the service, when people were filing out of the building, an older woman greeted the pastor and said, *"Reverend, today your sermon reminded me of the peace and love of God!"* The pastor was thrilled. *"No-one has ever said anything like that about my preaching before. Tell me why."* *"Well,"* the woman replied, *"it reminded me of the peace of God because it passed all understanding and the love of God because it endured forever!"*

On our first morning back from the summer, especially on a Sunday that is the first Sunday back to in-person worship for so many of you, I decided that this is not a day for a lot of words from the pulpit or for a sermon that might rattle our brains. In fact, when I began to think about what to say to our people gathered both virtually and in-person on our "Welcoming-Back" Sunday, what came to mind first were the simple lyrics of a children's hymn that speaks beautifully about the Church as a gathering of human beings. Many of you probably know and may have sung this hymn, which is very appropriately named *"We Are The Church."* Here are the words:

***"I am the church!  
You are the church!  
We are the church together!  
All who follow Jesus,  
All around the world!  
Yes, we're the church together!"***

***The church is not a building,  
The church is not a steeple,  
The church is not a resting place,  
The church is a people."***<sup>1</sup>

Yes! Together, you and I are the Church! Behind the simple lyrics of this children's song there is a profound Christian, biblical and universal understanding of the nature of the Church. In fact, for almost 2,000 years this has been the consistent message that Christians across theological perspectives, congregational polities, denominational lines and confessional enclaves have taught, preached, proclaimed and, quite surprisingly, on which Christians have found common ground. We, the people gathered, are the church and while we love our building, our stained-glass windows, our organ, and this sanctuary what keeps us connected to this place is the effort you and I make together to follow Christ, to care for one another, to practice the teachings to of

Jesus of Nazareth and to become the evidence in the world of the power of God to reform and transform human hearts and minds. In its essence, the Church is about the bond of faith, love and peace that creates this very human gathering of Christian believers. As religious scholar and author Diana Butler Bass said so eloquently, ***“Christianity did not begin with a confession. It began with an invitation into friendship, into creating a new community, into forming relationships based on love and service.”***<sup>2</sup>

There is a lot of ecclesiological truth in the conversation that takes place between Celie and Shug Avery in Alice Walker’s novel *“The Color Purple.”* Celie, the poor, battered and abused African American woman begins to doubt God’s love. She gives up on writing letters to God and wonders if God has ever even listened to her. Shug Avery, a colorful and flamboyant Blues singer, who is also the estranged daughter of the local pastor, asks Celie: ***“Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in Church?”*** And then Shug makes a powerful theological statement, ***“I never did... Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not to find God.”***<sup>3</sup>

If you look carefully through the pages of the New Testament you quickly realize that what made so many people in the ancient world want to join the Church and follow in the way of Christ was the quality of life that Early Christians created together. Despite all their disagreements and internal quarrels, Early Christians valued the gift of life in community. They ate together. They prayed together daily. They cared about each other, and they stunned the Greco-Roman world by also caring about orphans, widows, about the sick and the poor outside the Church. They worked very hard together to bridge the gaps of race, culture, gender, language, social status and beliefs that divided people in their world. The Church in our Scriptures is not a building or an institution, but a community made up of human beings, with all their gifts and their flaws, that invite other human beings who are as flawed, broken and gifted to experience the love and grace of God through human relationships.

The pandemic has already shown us that it will not be easy to bring people back to the pews of the Church. Most people I know are not interested in coming to Church to be asked to make a public statement of faith or serve on a committee or sing in the choir or volunteer as a youth advisor. Especially after living through a year when we all realized how precious and relevant our time with those we love is, people are choosing to invest their time, skills and resources in life-giving activities and relationships. Sadly, there are many who are slowly finding out that our churches have not offered them the kind of connection with others that might make it worthwhile to make the effort to return. And yet, the greatest gift the Church offers is not that it puts us in touch with God, but that the Christian community puts us in touch with one another in a meaningful and life-giving way. Tertullian, a second century theologian from North Africa, noted in his writings that when non-Christians saw the way Christians lived in community and worshipped together they often said with surprise, ***“See... how they love one another.”***<sup>4</sup>

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Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

I wonder what people around here say when they talk about our church...

***“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”*** In the Message - a contemporary translation of the Bible - the first verse of Psalm 133 has a more intimate and personal dimension, ***“How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along!”***

When the psalmist wrote these inspiring words and idealistic vision of life in community, he was not saying that unity is something that happens easily and without any intentionality. The psalmist knew then as we know now that unity is rare and precious. The psalmist also understood very well that God’s vision for the Church has a social dimension rooted in human love and friendship that reveals something of God’s own love in human history. Unity in this psalm does not mean that everyone has to agree all the time on everything and dissenting voices are silenced; unity here is an invitation to cultivate life-giving friendships in the Church that give us the desire to be together in community when it would be so much easier to take the paths of isolation, individualism, polarization and fragmentation that continue divide our country and our world.

A couple of weeks ago, I was talking to a friend who serves a Presbyterian Church in Brazil about the challenges the Church faces to survive at a time when people are afraid, reluctant, hesitant and anxious to be together in community. He said something that inspired me. ***“I don’t want the church to just survive this pandemic.”*** He told me, ***“I hope we will stick together and will show the world what being one in love, in friendship and in spirit means and how this community of followers of Christ can be a blessing to humankind.”***

Psalm 133 invites and provokes us to imagine our religious gathering as the kind of sacred space where our dreams of unity and our effort to love one another drench the whole Church in God’s blessings. And the blessing that we receive when we strive to dwell together as friends and in solidarity with one another is something we all long for – abundant life, full life, a life of quality. ***“For that is where [God] bestows the blessing,”*** the psalmist declared, ***“life that never ends.”***<sup>5</sup>

Like my friend in Brazil, I do not want our church to just survive this pandemic, I hope and pray that we will dare to let our imagination run wild with dreams of unity so we can experience the blessing of a full life together. I hope that rather than coming to this sanctuary to find God, we will gather to share God’s love with each other. I hope that during these unusual days when people are fighting and remain bitterly divided over face masks and the vaccines, we will seek to bridge the gaps in our culture that drive people apart and will be the kind of Christian community where our togetherness is based on mutual respect and genuine care for one another. As we begin another church program year still worried about the pandemic, I hope that we will create opportunities to be together either safely in person or virtually. I hope that we will make every effort to

bear with one another in love so that the people outside our church may be drawn to this congregation not because of our building or programs only, but because of the quality of our life together, because of our joy in being with one another, because of our desire to gather to worship God and because of the bonds of love and peace that hold our church together. On this Sunday when many of you return to in-person worship for the first time since 2020 and many others worship with us on Facebook, I hope that you and I will never forget that the Church is made out of people like us who are committed to leading a life worthy of our calling to follow Christ and to live in the unity of God's love.

May the simple words of that Children's hymn never cease to inspire us to be the Church together:

***"The church is not a building,  
The church is not a steeple,  
The church is not a resting place,  
The church is a people.***

***Sometimes the church is marching,  
Sometimes it's bravely burning,  
Sometimes it's riding,  
Sometimes hiding,  
Always it's learning.***

***I am the church!  
You are the church!  
We are the church together!  
All who follow Jesus,  
All around the world!  
Yes, we're the church together!"***

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> "We Are The Church," words and music by Richard K. Avery and Donald S. Marsh (1972).

<sup>2</sup> Diana Butler Bass in Christianity After Religion, p. 205 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>3</sup> Alice Walker. "*The Color Purple*," p. 165.

<sup>4</sup> Edited by the Rev. Alexander Roberts, DD, and James Donaldson, LLD. "*Translations of the Writings of the Fathers: Apologeticus*," p. 119.

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 133:3 – the Inclusive Bible.