

“Why Do We Stay in the Church? – To Exercise Our Hearts”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

26 February 2023

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Matthew 6:19-21

Matthew 4:1-11

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

~ Matthew 6:21

Prayer

Holy God,

May the words of my mouth

And this sacred time of intentional listening

Open our hearts to your Word for the whole Church

Gathered in Christ’s name. Amen.

Last December, before the interment of my mother-in-law’s ashes, David, my brother-in-law who is a Lutheran minister in Arizona, introduced me to the retired pastor from his congregation that officiated at the committal service. I am embarrassed to say that I do not recall the name of the amiable Lutheran officiant, but I won’t forget the good-natured joke he made when David told him that I am a UCC minister. **“Well,”** he said with a big smile on his face, **“you are one of the Utterly Confused Christians!”**

I had heard other humorous jabs taken at our denomination’s acronym, the most common being that UCC stands for *“Unitarians Considering Christ,”* but this iteration of the joke was new to me. And while I never gave much thought to the one-liner about the United Church of Christ’s flirtation with Unitarianism, the idea that we are utterly confused Christians stuck with me. As a matter of fact, “utterly confused” may be the most honest theological language there is to describe, not only the UCC, but the state of the Church in America as we begin to assess the attendance and financial damage the pandemic has caused and adapt to ongoing sociocultural changes that are rapidly reshaping the societal landscape in which churches existed somewhat successfully until 2020.

The Strategic Planning Initiative that Pam Lowe announced at the beginning of today’s service is our congregation’s own intentional effort to begin to figure out how ACC will navigate this still changing, challenging and confusing post-COVID world while remaining faithful to our call to follow Christ, love God and humankind, and encourage one another to live lives worthy of the Gospel we proclaim. I am deeply grateful for our Church Council’s desire to forge a path that will prepare our church to be not just a gathering community of faith, but also a sacred place where we come together to be transformed by the Holy Spirit and are empowered to be Christians in here as well as out there on the other side of these walls where there is a lot of confusion about what the Church stands for

and whether Christianity is a force for good in our society. The job of the task force that will develop the strategic plan for our congregation will require that they look at relevant metrics such as giving trends and shifts in church membership and answer practical questions about how our organizational structure and current programs either help or hinder the carrying out of our vision, but underpinning their work will be a question that all of us have to wrestle with: are we willing and ready to do what it takes to be the church in this new world of disenchantment with American Christianity and the institutional Church?

A couple of weeks ago, I pulled a thin book off the shelf that, to be honest, I didn't expect to read again. Published in 2006, the book, written by Kelly Fryer, who at the time was a Lutheran minister and a seminary professor, Fryer has since left the ministry, has a catchy title, *"Reclaiming the 'C' Word, Daring to Be Church Again."* In her book, Fryer makes the bold assertion that we have to give up our tendency to think of the Church as a noun and begin to talk about it as a verb. She wrote, ***"To be 'one holy catholic and apostolic' church – in the words of the Nicene Creed – is to be a church at work in the world bringing people together (one); helping people experience the forgiving saving presence of God (holy); building a bridge between God and God's creation (catholic); and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with all the world (apostolic). [To be the church] is, in other words, to be a verb – to be in action – for the sake of God's mission in the world."***¹ Seventeen years ago, Kelly Fryer acknowledged already that Christians were not doing a very good job of being the Church and living as agents of God's mission to love, bless and save the world. She went as far as to say that we made an idol of our church buildings, budgets, music, programs, and history. And we have been so hell-bent in pouring all our energy, time and resources into keeping the church going as a noun, a destination, an organization, an idol that we have little left for the real action of being church in the world.² Fryer suggests that to dare to be the Church again, we have to nurture a whole new mindset within our congregations. Our purpose has to be equipping each other to act as followers of Christ at home, in our workplaces, in our neighborhoods and in the streets and our focus has to be on sending our congregations out into the world to be Christ's eyes, hands, feet and heart.³

Friends, this is the time for us to dare to be the church together. This is the time for us to begin to create a new mindset at ACC. This is the time for us to be resolute and courageous about acting and living as the Church even though people around us are rightly pointing to and questioning the gap between Jesus' message of compassion and forgiveness and the anti-Semitic, patriarchal, racist, violent and morally compromised history of the institutional Church, between the Gospel of self-giving love and Christianity's untrammled pursuit of worldly power and wealth, between the beautiful and expansive faith of the early followers of Christ and the theology and doctrines of the Church that constrict the wideness of God's love, between the Apostle Paul's vision of a church without barriers of gender, race, class, and nationality and the Christian religion of white nationalism, draped in the flag and infected with the deadly viruses of white supremacy, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia and misogyny.

John Pavlovitz, a Christian activist who left the ministry when he could no longer reconcile what he believes the Church ought to be with the reality of what the Church is, noted that people are either walking away from organized Christianity or avoiding it altogether because they are seeing the damage the Church has done in God's name and they are refusing to be associated with American Christianity.⁴ In his book *"Do I Stay Christian?"*, Brian McLaren admits that it was the attitude of other Christians who promoted versions of Christianity that horrified him and made him want to run for his life in the opposite direction that led him to question whether he could stay in the Church or even hold on to his identity as a Christian.⁵ Since 2020, a few of my own clergy friends have made the choice to retire early or take on jobs with not-for-profit agencies or resign from their churches with no clear employment alternative because their sermons called on the people in the pews to be the Church, to take action, to live out the Gospel and they were pressured to soften their language to preserve the peace and pledges or found themselves in the crossfire of angry churchgoers who were intent on making their lives miserable. And there is a growing number of people in the pews and worshipping online who are finding it harder and harder to fit into the Church. Many are still involved in their faith communities, but they are hanging on to their church membership by their fingernail with one foot already out of the door. Their faith has outgrown the dogmas, heavily guarded traditions, tiny-hearted understanding of the Gospel and old concepts of a god that is vengeful, judgmental and angry but rarely loving, forgiving, and compassionate. They are hanging out in a spiritual wilderness, refusing to settle for a church that has become a chaplain to a political and economic system that opposes the teachings of Christ and holding on to the hope that messengers of God will find them and will nourish their faith back to health so they may have the strength to dare to be the Church again. Not the same institutional Church that has wounded and disillusioned so many, but the Church that is changing, that is rising out of the tomb of toxic theologies, getting out of the vestments of death we inherited from the past and is growing out of the distortions of our history to be the holy, catholic and apostolic Church where Christ is Lord, everyone is welcome and accepted, God's love transforms lives and people are excited to gather to worship, serve and give because they believe the Church still has a life-saving message to share with humankind.

During this season of Lent, while the Strategic Planning task force begins to work on a plan for ACC's future, the Lenten sermon series will invite all of us to be honest before God and one another as we ask ourselves why we have stayed in the Church when so many have given up and left. This may be an utterly confusing time to be Christian, to be part of the Church, but as Brian McLaren wrote in his book, it would be wrong to leave now, to throw out the good of the Church along with all that is bad, to walk away when there are signs that at least in some segments of the Church people are taking seriously the call to act out the teachings of Jesus and many who were once excluded – like women and LGBTQAI+ Christians – are being embraced and are taking leadership roles in many denominations. If caring, decent, intelligent and loving people of faith abandon the Church now, McLaren points out, the company of churchmen who, unlike Jesus, have often given into the temptation of power and popularity, and are easily enticed by the shimmering lure of privilege, and relentlessly seek to have their own way regardless of the cost will keep

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.

the Church from walking out of the tomb into the light of the resurrection. This is exactly not the time to give up on the Church. It's the time to keep our skin in the game and⁶ to have ***“faith that the good seed will burst out of the old husk and rise after being buried, that the essence, the pearl, the treasure and spark will resurrect on the third day.”***⁷ Lent is the right time for us to prepare our hearts not only for the journey with our church through the wilderness of the many planned and surprising changes ahead of us but also to make our hearts ready for new life.

I love the Hasidic story about a student who asks the rabbi, ***“Rebbe, why does the Torah tell us to ‘place these words upon our hearts?’ Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our hearts?”*** The rabbi answered, ***“It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, our hearts break and the words fall in.”***

The Church in action, the Church as a verb, is a sacred place where we practice the discipline of heartbreak. Here our hearts break open often to the holy words of Scriptures, the Gospel and to the still small voice of God's Holy Spirit. And when our hearts break open to God, the Church becomes a community where we deepen our relationship with God and with one another. When our hearts break open to Christ, we learn to resist the temptation to focus only on ourselves and we develop a greater capacity to love people and value life. Jesus taught that when our hearts are centered on finite things like power, prestige, wealth and our individual needs, our hearts get hardened and when they do break, they break apart into tiny pieces and are incapable of holding God's promise of new life. But here in the Church, our hearts get the spiritual exercise that makes them supple and allows us to hold the tension between the Church's failures to live up to its calling and the teachings of Jesus without losing hope for the Church's renewal, transformation, resurrection and new life.

The pressing question for us this morning is whether our hearts are open to believe as Brian McLaren does that the Church is still redeemable despite its ugly history and what has been desecrated by harmful human choices and behavior can be made holy again. McLaren urges us to remember that ***“Beneath the obvious flaws [of the Church] there are still treasures, treasures we would be fools to discard.”***⁸ And, on the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciples that ***“where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”***

My prayer is that our hearts may be supple enough here at ACC to give us the courage to dare to re-consecrate our past, hold on to the treasures of our faith and work together to make the future of our church more hopeful by being an action-oriented congregation today.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Kelly A. Fryer in Reclaiming the 'C' Word, Daring to Be Church Again, p. 16.

² Ibid, p. 5.

³ Ibid, p. 44.

⁴ TheoEd Talks in John Pavlovitz: "Exit Interview: The Pastor I Wish I'd Been", aired on 14 February 2023 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDyl2rAtK-I>].

⁵ Brian D. McLaren in Do I Stay Christian?, p. 5 [Kindle edition].

⁶ Ibid, see chapter 11, "Because Leaving Hurts Allies (And Helps Their Opponents).

⁷ Ibid, p. 90.

⁸ Ibid, p. 197.