

Sermon: November 14, 2021

“GISS”

By: Rev. Jessica M. Townsley

Scriptures: Hebrews 4:12-16; John 17:20-25

In 2011, when I started at Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, I had a professor called Rev. Dr. Valerie Bridgeman. At the time, I was a married mother of one, Weston, and a soon-to-be military wife (which I was for 6 years). I was also a United Methodist student in care. I was working toward an ordination that, for truths about myself I had yet to accept, would not have been possible for me because of my closeted sexual orientation. My childhood was spent hopping from conservative church to conservative church, many of which took the Bible so literally that, looking back, it's hard to believe I took them seriously. Some of them didn't believe in having a sip of alcohol despite the fact that Jesus definitely drank and served wine. Some even had problems with women as ministers or wearing gold jewelry.

Dr. Bridgeman talked to us a lot about our understanding of scripture and about serious biblical scholarship. She taught us what solid biblical interpretation was and to look for the truth in the scriptures, even when the literal facts could not be verified by those who study the period in which these events are said to have happened. Even if everything in this book wasn't literally, factually true; there was still truth. Even if some of it is meant to be allegory or metaphor, it does not mean truth is not found in that. We find truth in the Psalms even though they are songs and poetry. We find truth in fables, even though they're not history books.

Of all the things I learned that first semester, the most life changing item wasn't on the syllabus. You see, Lancaster Theological Seminary is a UCC seminary, but I was in a room full of future pastors and chaplains from

various faith traditions that were not all UCC. I was a United Methodist. We had anabaptists, Episcopalians, and Unitarian Universalists. I mentioned before that I was about to become a military wife because my then-spouse was enlisting in the Air Force. On the day when I became a single mom because of Basic Military Training, I was understandably emotional. I was entering a world of the unknown and it was scary for many reasons. That night, I went to Dr. Bridgeman's class feeling a bit broken. Toward the end of class, knowing what was happening, Dr. Bridgeman and the other students who knew what was happening, called me forward for prayer—and they all gathered around me, embraced me, and laid hands on me, praying and reminding me that it was all going to be okay. And that, really, was my introduction to the UCC: a room full of people, all of different backgrounds and beliefs, united in the love of one another and the love of God. Embracing, full-hearted, the mercy and hope Christians and people of deep-rooted faith ought to live into.

Six years later, after living abroad in Germany and moving to Arkansas, my children and I found that the home we had once so loved, was no longer a safe place to live. Without getting into details, I'll just say that we left with urgency and came to Maryland two weeks after I had had surgery. As we settled into life here and I went through the most painful time of my life, I once again felt broken and untethered. And it was there, in that liminal space, that I found myself affirmed again by the UCC. Without a home, a life in tatters, I was again taken into a community of people who came from different backgrounds than I did and held different beliefs, but nonetheless embodied that unity in love of God and one another. They, too, embraced full-hearted the mercy and hope by which I had come to know the UCC.

As Christians, we often like to lean into our creeds, priding ourselves on our church attendance, resigning ourselves to all that we read and have been taught to understand about the Bible. And there's not necessarily anything wrong with that. Yet, as we come to the end of this sermon series on the Apostle's Creed, I wanted to spend some time on what we, as a United Church of Christ congregation, must also embrace as we continue to live into the church we are called to be. What we must realize is that the UCC is not a creedal church—despite our roots being partly German Reformed, we are also a part of a tradition that does not believe in creeds. We do not require anyone to learn any specific words as a precondition of membership. The creeds, while important to many of us for our faith development, are not a requirement of our faith. Nowhere in scripture will you find the apostle's creed or a specific sinner's prayer that gets you into heaven. Nowhere in scripture will you find God saying, if you don't believe A, B, C, and D, I will not accept you into the Kingdom of heaven.

What scripture does say, is that God so loved the WORLD, not just that God so loved those who believed in a narrow interpretation of scripture.

What scripture does say is that the same Holy One who created all that is and was and ever will be, also looked at *all of that* creation and called it good.

What scripture does say, is that we should love and welcome the refugee and the foreigner to our land.

What scripture does say is that, as followers of Christ, we should love one another, care for people, show mercy and humility.

What scripture does say is that we all have spiritual gifts, among them faith, hope and love abide; but that the greatest of these is love.

What scripture does say is that we should fight for justice for those who are without and care for the poor, the marginalized, the sick, and others.

What scripture also does say is that our ability to empathize with others is a hallmark of our faith tradition. We see this in our passage from Paul's letter to the Hebrews, where he tells us plainly that our Jesus is not a "high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who in every respect has been tested, as we are." We have a God who loved us so much and thought to highly of humankind and of this world God had created, that he came to be a part of this world, being born of one of us, living as one of us, and dying as one of us. We have a God who did not make the first commandment: believe in X, Y, and Z and recite it verbatim; but, who instead, said, "Love God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength... and love your neighbor as yourself."

We have a God who, on the night before he was to give himself over to arrest and death, ate with and spoke to his disciples telling them that through him, they would have life. We have a God who, on that same night, told his disciples to have courage and then prays for them and for those who, like us, would come to follow him. As we read in our gospel passage today, Jesus prayed that "they may all be one—brought to complete unity." In this passage is where we find the underpinning of the United Church of Christ whose overarching prayer echoes that very sentiment of Jesus: that one day, we may all be one.

So, when we call ourselves The United Church of Christ, it's no mistake. The name is intentional. Each of those components is vital to our call as servants of the Still-Speaking God, united in Christ, united with those who seek to *be the Church* in the world. A community of faith rooted and grounded in the love of God and one another. A community embracing, full-hearted, the mercy and hope Christians and people of deep-rooted faith ought to live into. A community who believes not that God stopped speaking when the scriptures were lived, or written, or canonized, but one who believes that we should never put a period where God has merely placed a comma. One who embraces the statement signified by the GISS acronym. One who truly believes that "God really is Still Speaking."

Four years after I left Arkansas a broken woman, painfully closeted lesbian, and single mother of two, I found myself interviewing with a church who told me that they wanted a pastor who would meet their congregation where they are, who would love them as they loved one another, and who would help them live into their vision of a vibrant, diverse community. In that interview, I found myself in a room of people who gave me another glimpse of what the UCC, at its best, truly is. And here, I stand before you today, 7 months after those interviews, as your pastor, as part of a community who seeks to embrace that full-hearted mercy and hope that Christians, at their best, live into. I am so proud to have found my way out of the closet, to have found my way to the UCC, and *so very, very proud to be your pastor*. The pastor in a church who honors its past, who cares about tradition, but who is not paralyzed by or stuck in it—who is not afraid of walking boldly into the future God has planned for it.

As I end this sermon, rather than read the Apostle's Creed, I thought, as a UCC church, we ought to read the UCC Statement of faith, said in the form of a doxology. Keep in mind that this is not a creed. Not an expectation of what all who call themselves members of the UCC must ascribe to, but a statement on which our foundations are built.

I want you to hear these words and digest them for a few moments after the amen and before the music starts playing.

Think about what is said here. Let those who have ears listen:

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify:

You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.

You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust your forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you.

Amen.