

Welcome and Sermon: June 26, 2022

Welcome

This is the day our God has made we will rejoice and be glad in it! From the rising of the sun to the setting of the same, our God is worthy to be praised!

Welcome to Trinity United Church of Christ in Manchester, Maryland.

Whether you are here in person, or watching on Facebook live stream, you are welcome here, and we pray that the service will bless you

On June 25, 1957 the Evangelical and Reformed denomination merged with the General Council of the Congregational Christian Church to become The United Church of Christ.

Covenant is an important part of the UCC. We at Trinity, recently experienced a service of worship in God's presence. We made a covenant with our congregation, our Pastor Jessica Ashcroft Townsley, and the Catocin Association of the Central Atlantic Conference. We made covenant promises with one another and asked God to bless and help us to keep our covenant.

Throughout history we have had to change our minds about previously held beliefs like the ordination of African American men and later women, the abolition of slavery, and 50 years ago On June 25, 1972, the United Church of Christ made history when William R. Johnson became the first openly gay man ordained to ministry in an historic Christian church. Bill's ordination, by the Golden Gate Association in the Northern California/Nevada Conference, opened doors for a new generation of openly LGBTQ leaders in our church. Ten years later, on April 25, 1982, Anne Holmes became the first openly lesbian minister ordained in the UCC.

National ONA Sunday today is an opportunity to give thanks in public worship for Bill and Anne, and for all the LGBT clergy whose gifts have enriched and strengthened the United Church of Christ. (ONA Coalition)

Sermon: No Turning Back

There is an urgency in the gospel lesson today. It is an urgent message not only for the original followers of Jesus, but it is also an urgent message for all of us who follow Jesus today.

The scripture begins by saying, "Jesus gathered up his courage and steeled himself to head to Jerusalem." Another translation puts it, "He set his face towards Jerusalem."

As the journey to Jerusalem begins, Jesus sends messengers ahead. The messengers come to a Samaritan Village, to arrange for their hospitality, but when the Samaritans learn they are headed for Jerusalem they refuse. This is not a surprise.

The Samaritans believe the true worship of God is at Mt. Gerizim, the place Moses chose for worship and possibly where Abraham was about to sacrifice his son Isaac.

Jews believe the temple in Jerusalem is the sacred place where God commanded them to worship.

When James and John learned of it, they offered to call for fire to fall from the sky, a lightning bolt to strike the Samaritan village and destroy them the way the great prophet Elijah had done in his day.

Jesus rebukes them. He said "Absolutely not!" He was on the way to Jerusalem and he does not have time for a history lesson or theological debates. He could not turn back. He knew he had to keep moving forward and so do we.

Another person along the way said he would follow Jesus wherever he went. Jesus' reply was quite harsh.

"If you follow me, you are going to have to give up a lot of comfort that you now enjoy. You will not know where you're going to sleep at night, and you will not know when your next meal will be. There is a cost to being my disciple." There were others on that road to Jerusalem.

They said they would follow Jesus as soon as they said good bye to their family or prepared their father's funeral.

Jesus could not be distracted by necessary delays, family obligations required by law. His message of God's unconditional love and peace was achieved by loving, in the face of the Roman Empire's plan to bring peace by violence and bloodshed.

The end was near now and Jesus was not going backwards.

The United Church of Christ's motto, "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here," is a way of reflecting God's Extravagant welcome.

In 2001 I took a group of youth and adult advocates from the Central Atlantic Conference to the UCC General Synod in Kansas City Missouri. The young people experience the diversity of the United Church of Christ they join the youth choir directed by the incomparable Jeffrey Radford, may he rest in peace from Trinity UCC in Chicago. They were invited guests to the Powwow in sponsored by the Council for American Indian Ministries, and they had meals sponsored by the United Black Christians, the Pacific Asian American ministries, the Coordinating Center for Women, the United Church of Christ Youth luncheon, and the UCC Open and Affirming banquet. That is why it was a shock when we had to walk through a gauntlet of hate from our hotel to evening worship at the convention center. Members of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka Kansas were picketing with signs like "God Hates F---" "God hates Jews" "Thank God for AIDS" and "Thank for Dead Soldiers," We had cautioned the young people not to engage or look directly at the picketers because they often became violent. When we came into worship we were blessed by the ONA Coalition choir singing, "We will keep on moving forward, no turning back. No turning back,"

That evening in our personal devotions, the young people discussed how they felt being the target of hateful people. They were particularly disgusted that the adults had brought small children and had them holding signs.

Getting through that gauntlet of hate was dangerous and frightening. It made us realize what many LGBT people have felt throughout history when there was no safe place.

I am grateful to my friends Bill Johnson, and Anne Holmes, who dared to answer God's call to ministry which opened doors for faith filled, gifted LGBTQ pastors and leaders who enrich and strengthen our churches with their ministries.

I have expressed my hope that our church will join the 1700 ONA churches and other ministries by beginning the ONA process of study, prayer, discussions, and hearing the stories of churches in our area who have gone through the ONA process of discernment.

Ten years ago, four of us at St. Paul's in Westminster, an ONA church, opened a First Fridays. Paul's, a safe space for LGBTQ Youth and Straight Allies. Thirty youth and adult advocates came out each month.

We learned that our LGBTQ youth still suffer bullying, being rejected by their families, the threat of violence, often leading them to self-medicate with alcohol and other drugs often taking their own lives.

I recently attended the prom for everyone on the tenth anniversary of First Fridays, it was packed with all ages, all colors, all sizes all styles. It was just like Gods vision for everyone.

There is an urgency in these times because many rights and protections especially for those in the margins of our society are in danger. We know just this week, a woman's right to privacy and choice about control of her own body has been reversed after 50 years. Other rights and protections are in danger of reversal as well.

We who follow Jesus know there is a price to being his disciple.

The original disciples continued to be followers of Jesus even after they witnessed the cost he paid.

They started a movement proclaiming God's unconditional love to everyone. They had to change their mind about Gentiles who were considered unclean and they changed their mind about eating foods that were considered an abomination in their holy scripture. They gave their lives for the gospel and the movement they started spread all over the world with the name Christian.

We who are disciples of Jesus, who bear his name, "Christian" cannot turn back from the cost of discipleship as we move forward As Paul says in Romans 15:7,

"Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." Amen.