

NOT A KEYNOTE SPEAKER

It has been years since our church was active in the life of the Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ. We have a standing committee in our by-laws called the Denominational Affairs Committee, but no one has wanted to serve on it for a very long time. In 1974 Jean Aldrich was the Moderator of our Conference. That does not happen unless a person is active and influential for a number of years on a number of Conference boards and committees. But obviously that is water long under the bridge.

When I first became your Minister twenty-one years ago, I did what I had always done: I served on some major boards and committees of our Conference. But after a while I realized that I was spending a lot of time and energy, yet only getting in the way. The Conference had no interest in the spiritual life of its churches. The Conference needed the support of its churches to accomplish its social-action goals in the larger society, but that was not my mission or purpose. It *had been* among my interests twenty-five years earlier. But I had become increasingly convinced that our churches were dying for lack of devotion to Jesus and for lack of obedience to His Holy Spirit. The rift between my purposes and the purposes of our Conference kept growing wider. So I stopped trying to change the life of the Conference, and was happy to spend the extra time and energy on the life of the church I served, which happened to be this one.

Our Conference Annual Meeting was held at Chapman College last week. Kathy Kipp, Jonathan Gamble, and Kip Kipp attended with me, so you can get a more balanced report from them if you wish. From my perspective, our Conference is growing stronger, clearer, and more enthusiastic now than it has been for many years. Felix Villanueva, our Conference Minister, is more encouraged and optimistic than ever before. Our keynote speaker was the Reverend Dr. John Dorhauer, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ. He is the top leader of our denomination, if his title does not make that clear.

John Dorhauer was wonderful: clear, inspiring, charismatic – engaging in every way. Please do not forget that I said that. And I mean it. He sent our delegates and visitors home feeling proud and glad to be members of the United Church of Christ once again. No easy feat in our time. Of course, he is the keynote speaker at many Conference Annual Meetings and other gatherings all across

our country. One can only wonder what the result will be if he can continue to have this impact for a number of years all across the United Church of Christ.

In contrast, no Conference has ever asked me to be their keynote speaker. No Conference ever will. Though I have tried to be a faithful Pastor in our denomination for fifty-eight years, what impact have I had on the United Church of Christ? None that anybody knows or remembers. Those of you who know me know that I do not shed any tears over this. I do shed tears occasionally, but not over this.

We just heard the Apostle Paul, in what he calls a weak moment, running through some of his incredible credentials as a faithful follower of Jesus. Few can match his list. It comes in the second letter to the Corinthians, which means we can add quite a few further events to his amazing list – things that happened to him during the last eight or so years of his life, after he wrote this letter to the Corinthians. (In about 56 A.D.; my best guess is that Paul was executed in about 64 or 65 A.D.)

My list is feeble indeed, though I could add more to it than most people know, if I put my mind to it. Even so, I have served seven churches over the years. Three churches belong to the United Church of Christ because of my leadership: Paxton, Massachusetts; Altadena, California; and Redlands United Church of Christ in California.

I never led a “megachurch”; never tried to. Nevertheless, during the seventies, eighties, and nineties, when most UCC churches were shrinking and dying, the churches I served were thriving. We were not trying to “save the world”; we were just trying to be faithful to Jesus the Christ.

I was, by the way, Conference Moderator in 1973, the year before Jean Aldrich became the Moderator. That inadvertently led to my being called as Pastor of this church – twenty-three years later.

The UCC still brags about the “Coachella 95.” John Dorhauer mentioned it again in one of his addresses at the Annual Meeting. As it happens, I was one of the 95, though my description of how bold and brave we were in support of Caesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers is not at all what is usually claimed.

We have had Associations within the Southern California Conference these past forty-five years. Our church belongs to the Southern Association. These Associations exist primarily due to the

efforts of Ed Montgomery and myself. It took us nearly three years to put it together and pull it off. It's fun for me that forty years later, Jonathan and Kip and countless others are benefiting from this. Associations are particularly helpful to those seeking standing or ordination in the UCC.

I have had the privilege of encouraging a number of people on their way into the ministry: Bud Williams, Jim Meadows, Cindi Donald, Rich Blakely, Devon Allen, Eric Elnes, Peggy Derick, Joshua Crowell, Jeanne Williams, Earl Young – to mention some of them. Each one is a story all its own, of course. But I do not have time to tell them, and you do not have time to listen. At least not at the moment.

What else were we told at the Conference Annual Meeting this year? We were told that Psalm 82 is the most important passage in all the Scriptures. “*Rescue the weak and the needy, and save them from the clutches of the wicked....’ God, arise and judge the earth, for all the nations are yours.*”

That certainly matches the theme and purpose of our Conference, which is “A JUST WORLD FOR ALL.” (A world in which everyone will be loved and safe.) Who could possibly disagree with this being the top mission and purpose of our denomination? Well, I could – and I do.

As usual it seems to me that the liberal church has no real comprehension of the power or persistence of evil. Therefore it has no true awareness of how much we need a Savior. Jesus, by the way, was barely mentioned during our Annual Meeting. There was no awareness I could detect that we need to be transformed, reborn, converted, “saved” in any way. Psalm 82 has superseded our need for Jesus or His Holy Spirit. In fact, we were told point-blank that theology is not important. John Dorhauer, God bless him, did mention the motto of the United Church of Christ, found in John 17:20-23: “*that they may all be one.*” But he instantly applied this (as the liberal church is ever eager to do) to the entire world – thus missing what Jesus *really* said: “*It is not for these alone that I pray, but for those also who through their words put their faith in me, that they may all be one....*” It seems obvious to me that the whole world has not put its faith in Jesus. In fact, Jesus warned us many times that if we followed Him, we would be *at odds* with the world.

Most of the world is not at peace with God; it is not reconciled with God. So if *we* are – guess what? Jesus told us point-blank: “*I did not come to bring peace on earth.*” (Matthew 10:34; Luke 12:51)

Jesus came to create THE CHURCH: the *ecclesia* – the faith community where people really will put their faith in Him. Therefore the followers will always be in tension – in potential conflict – with the world around them. This is not generic pabulum, where it does not matter *if* you pray, *what* you believe, or *where* your trust really is. This is not some “feel good” formula where Jesus is no longer necessary because we are all going to get together and save the world by our own power and prowess. I still know that we need a Savior, that we need to be forgiven ourselves – that we need to awaken spiritually and turn our own wills over to the care and guidance of a Messiah who is wiser and more loving than we are.

Psalm 82 is not the most important passage in the Bible – not even close. We still need to know about Pentecost and Good Friday and Maundy Thursday and even Easter. Paul’s letters are not “old hat” and out-of-date; neither are the Gospels that tell us what Jesus’ ministry on earth was like – what He taught and did and cared about. I know I am in the minority on this. Most liberal Christians in our time know that the core and center of all Christendom is some form of “love your neighbor” – just rescue the weak and needy. But that is not as easy as we think. Especially not when *we* are the weak and needy, at least from the perspective of any *honest* spiritual awareness from the time of Adam and Eve until now.

It feels strange, sad, and wrong to me that the UCC should forget, or at least mute, the part about Jesus saying to each of us individually: FOLLOW ME. That we would no longer remember that He died for us and rose from the dead; that after His resurrection, He began to appear to those who loved and trusted Him enough – and not just a couple of times back then, but He has been doing so ever since.

Now we are “all grown up” and we are going to help others, but we do not need any help ourselves – that is, not *for* ourselves. D.T. Niles used to say that “Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” Does it take us an hour or two to figure out what he was implying?

Why are so many people finding help and New Life up in Mertz Hall, and so few finding New Life here in this sanctuary? Is it because our sanctuary is too beautiful? We talk about the same principles in both places, and those principles come from the same source in both places. Only, up in Mertz Hall, the people who gather around the tables know that they are drunks. They know it is imperative that they never

forget it. They are eager to help others who come there needing to get sober, but they know they are there to get sober together or there is no help for any of them. And they do not just sit around the tables drinking booze and talking about what it might be like if someday a few of them actually decided to work the steps and get sober. (One of my favorite images for the modern church.)

Many Christians in our time do not know that they need Jesus. We can go to the hospital or to the dentist, call a psychiatrist, or borrow money from a relative to tide us over. But Jesus is just an ancient myth – a metaphor. We are the fortunate few, and we should be helping others who really need something: food or medicine or money. Some people really do need things, but does *anybody* still need Jesus – the guidance of His Holy Spirit? Do any of us need to be “born again” – find a new identity we never had before? Do any of us need to discover that we are forgiven for something sick and wrong deep within us?

So our sanctuaries get emptier and emptier because we have nothing to offer except our superiority and our own sincere but occasional generosity. “A JUST WORLD FOR ALL” is ridiculous. It is never going to be real – not in this realm; not in this broken world. Evil is not the pushover we keep pretending it is. But caring about others who are caught in the same snares and traps that we are – and discovering God and God’s Messiah, who truly understand the depths and truly want to help us out of the mire – *that* is what forms true churches.

Not everybody wants out of the mire. I do know that, don’t you? Some humans are still dragging others into the mire on purpose, for various reasons. Christianity is not an easy or automatic fix, no matter how many people are talking like it is or pretending that it is. So it bothers me when we start telling everybody that we are going to fix the world by our own love and caring. Or when we start sounding like we have no notion of our own need and no awareness of where our own salvation really comes from.

If I were not a drunk and a sinner myself, maybe I could fit in better with the ways and purposes of the United Church of Christ. But it feels like weak slop to me, in comparison to the real Gospel – and in comparison to THE ONE who dies and rises again to bring us into THE KINGDOM OF GOD – a KINGDOM, Jesus told us, which is not of this world. (John 18:36)

PRAYER

Senior Recognition

Be with us, Lord.

“Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come.” One of our favorite hymns, Lord. Isn’t that weird? We seldom brag about our lives being easy, even though You often hear us praying that they will be – and assuming that if You really love us, they will be.

I have known quite a few people, over the years, who were grateful – who felt their lives were filled with many blessings. But I never met anyone, of any age or gender, who did not identify with this comment: “Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come.”

And now we are gathered to celebrate and lift up before You these two Seniors: Lauren Oberreiter and Aidan Purdy. They seem wondrous to us – beautiful and full of promise. We hope their lives will move on from present accomplishments to greater and greater achievements, and to more love and adventure and joy – for indeed they are gifted and talented and full of promise.

And some of us are also praying that they will not hit snares or trials or temptations that will take away any of the luster or joy of the life You have set before them. Watch over them; strengthen and guide them – we pray. But there have already been dangers, toils, and snares, whether we know it or not. And they have already come through far more than we know.

So we switch to a better hope: “’tis grace that brought them safe thus far” – perhaps not without wounds that had to be healed, mistakes that required repentance, and new purpose that emerged from what started to look like ashes. So we trust You to go on guiding and healing and leading them home.

Thank You for their lives among us – for their inspiration and caring and courage. And remind us from time to time that You love them even more than we do. So we rejoice. In Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.