

“Fools and Prophets”

May 27, 2007

Covenant, First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC

Acts 2:1-21

It’s really good to see you! I know it’s only been four whole weeks since I was last up here while you all were out there, and in the sweep of human history, four weeks ain’t much. But, still, I’ve missed being here with you.

But don’t get me wrong. It *was* good for me – very good – to take a break from the pulpit and have the chance to experience church in different ways – first, three weeks ago, in that mostly silent retreat with other members of this congregation, then during a quick trip to Georgia after that, and finally, last week, in the very NOT silent Annual Meeting of the Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ.

I’m grateful for all the gifts of the silent retreat and Annual Meeting and my week off, but I’m also very grateful to be back here with you. So I urge you to keep in mind how glad I am to see you and be with you this morning when I ask the questions I’m about to ask you. I’ve come back from these different experiences of church and the chances they gave me to reflect on my first year in Sonoma with a couple of questions on my mind, and both questions might seem a little rude. So, once again, I urge you to remember how glad I am to be with you this morning when I ask, “Why are you here? And do you have any idea what’s coming down the road we’re walking on?” Or, more accurately, “Do you have any idea what we’re going to encounter as we travel this road together?”

I confess – these questions may have just a little bit to do with my own wrestling with God. You all know that I’m now one year into my new vocation as an ordained minister, and, as any sane human being would in the same circumstances, I wonder from time to time, “What have I done with my life? And what, dear God in heaven, are you going to do to me next?!?”

But my questions to you this morning are more than reflections of my own faith journey. They’re reflections of where we are in the church’s yearly journey of faith, because today is Pentecost. On Pentecost, we celebrate what the Christian tradition considers the birth of the church. We retell the story of the apostles being touched and transformed by the Holy Spirit. And so, on Pentecost, we’re *all* invited into the questions, “Why church? What is church? And what’s God up to, anyway?”

In this morning’s opening words, William Willimon suggests a simple answer to the why of church. Willimon says that God called and continues to call the church into being ... to change the world, period. That’s all; just to change the world. It’s a tall order.

If that’s the “why” of church, what’s the “what” of church? What *is* church? Willimon gives us an equally direct, and none-too-flattering, answer to that question. Church, as a community of Jesus’ followers, is made up of “a rather ordinary group of inexperienced, not overly talented folk.” And, I hate to break this to you, folks, but he’s not just talking about the first disciples. He’s talking about us, you and me. Ordinary, inexperienced, not overly talented. Not a very complimentary description, is it? Maybe

we'll get some answers to my questions that we might like a little better if we turn to the Book of Acts.

But, of course, the Book of Acts doesn't really answer questions; it simply tells stories. And, so, to explain the why's and wherefore's of church, Acts gives us the story of Pentecost. In this story, the Holy Spirit descends on the gathered disciples, and, miraculously, their limited abilities are transformed. They are able to make themselves understood by people from different lands and different cultures. Suddenly, due to the noisy, miraculous actions of the Holy Spirit, there is a chance for people who could not communicate with one another to hear and be heard, to understand and be understood.

And listen to what Peter says in response to the scoffers and those who are confused by these amazing events. Pay careful attention to his explanation. He tells the crowd that this is the day that the prophet Joel said would come. This is the day when God's Spirit has been poured out on *all* people, not just on the recognized leaders or the chosen few. This is the day when the Spirit has empowered sons and daughters to prophesy, has enabled young and old to see visions and dream dreams, and has emboldened male and female slaves to prophesy and proclaim God's dream for all of creation.

As the Book of Acts understands it, and as Willimon and many others understand it, this, then, is church. It is a gathering of ordinary people – neither greater nor less than any other people – who bring a mix of attitudes, languages, beliefs, and experiences. And in the midst of this gathering, God pours out a Spirit of love and truth and challenge on our ordinariness, all for the purpose of changing the world. Anyone can receive this gift of the Spirit, and no one is considered too insignificant or unimportant to bear the words and promises of God to a world in great need of them. *This* is God's intention for this funny creation called "church."

What about this particular church, so many miles and years removed from that early church? In some ways, we're very different from that long ago church, and in other ways we're not so different after all. We are a mix of people, just as they were, people who are not bound together by force or fear or by a single understanding of God, Jesus, or, probably, anything else. We are not bound together by similarity of experiences or political persuasions or tastes in food, clothing, or music. But, my beloved friends, we *are* bound together. We are bound together in a covenant of love and respect, faith and hope, support and challenge, a covenant that we reaffirmed earlier this morning. And, whether we like it or not, God has brought us together to live in covenant with one another *in order to change the world*.

In our day and in this place, there will be those who mock the very idea that God could ever change the world through the likes of us and our sisters and brothers in faith. As the Book of Acts describes it, the events of that Pentecost long ago prompted some people to laugh and say the disciples were "filled with new wine," that they were, in other words, drunken fools.

Perhaps no one would call us drunken fools, but, again in the words of William Willimon, our friends, our families, and maybe even our neighbor in the pews this morning might tell us, politely or not, that God would never try to change the world through such a "hopelessly ineffective, unrealistic, and impossible" method. We are, after all, a rather small church. There are other churches and other denominations that are much larger, that seem to have far more political and social influence, that seem as

though they can make much more of a difference in the world, for better or for worse, than we can here at the First Congregational Church and within the United Church of Christ.

But we have been gathered here by the God who spoke to the world and loved the world through someone who taught that the last shall be first and that the greatest is the one who serves. We have been gathered by the God who moved and continues to move through the world, not as a conquering hero, but as a boundary-breaking healer who had and continues to have a fairly ragtag, motley group of followers.

Like those early Christians, we are called to open ourselves to God's surprising Spirit and to be willing to be mistaken for fools, drunken or otherwise. We are called to gather here, to listen for the whispers of the Spirit in our own hearts, and to risk becoming prophets who will speak the words we hear.

As we enter our second year together, as we honor our covenant with God and with one another, and as we celebrate communion, let us all be willing to be God's holy fools and prophets. Let us discover and walk this road of faith together, trusting that the surprising God who has woven us into a community with one another is at work among us and in us, loving and healing the world.

Let us also remember that what we do and say as God's fools and prophets may seem ridiculous – to ourselves, to other people gathered in this church, and to the larger world.

What we do and say as God's fools and prophets may not be convenient in its timing or in what we find ourselves called to do.

What we do and say as God's fools and prophets will most definitely *not* confirm any of our long-held individual or collective prejudices.

But there is something that what we do and say as God's fools and prophets *will* do: it will make room for a miracle. It will make room for the miracle of some fascinating mix of human beings gathering around a table where, at last, everyone will be truly welcome. *Everyone* – Anglo and Latino, gay and straight, young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican and Independent, and everyone else on God's earth.

God asks us all to be the fools and prophets who make room for the miracle of a table where we share the simplest of meals and, in sharing it, discover that it is the very hands of God that are feeding us with love and blessing.

Let us welcome and celebrate all of God's creation around this morning's table of communion. Let us then take what we receive here and make new tables of communion with friends and strangers, here in Sonoma and around the world.

Amen.

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