

“Coming Home”
July 29, 2007

Colossians 2:6-10
Luke 1:1-13

I'm not positive, but I *think* we have at last completed the full set of our “firsts” together. We've celebrated our first Advent and Christmas, our first Lent and Easter. Chey and I have had our first Camp Caz experience, and I've led our first silent retreat. I've officiated at my first Sonoma baptisms, weddings, and memorial services. We've celebrated our first anniversary together as minister and congregation. You've sent me to my first United Church of Christ General Synod, and, God willing, we will soon have completed our first sprucing up of Burlingame Hall together. And, now, we have officially gotten through my first summer vacation.

Of course, all these firsts have been spread throughout our first year plus together, but a disproportionate number of them have come in just the last three months. As rich and nourishing and grace-filled as these last three months have been, they've also been downright discombobulating. Since the first of May, I've been here and then not here. Many of you have been here and then not here. For me, it was one Sunday at the Wellspring Renewal Center, a (very) quick trip to Georgia, the next Sunday at Annual Meeting in Asilomar. Then, after four whole weeks in a row here, in the same place, I was in Connecticut for General Synod, back here for one Sunday, and then gone again – on the road and in New Mexico – for the next three Sundays. And, literally in the middle of all this, Chey and I rented a new home and moved ... again.

So over the last few days, as I tried to gather myself – my thoughts and feelings and experiences – and return more fully to my life and our life in Sonoma, I've had the disorienting experience of, on the one hand, being aware (and very grateful) that, through God's grace, we've laid a good foundation with one another over the last year, while, at the same time, feeling as though we've barely gotten started. I *do* have the sense that we truly are settling in as minister and congregation, but I also have the sense that all of this – being an ordained minister in the UCC, being *your* ordained minister, being in Sonoma – is still brand new.

And that renewed feeling of brand-newness has given me a minor case of jitters this morning. You've had a weeks-long taste of congregational life without me; I've had a taste of Chey and Nancy life without you. And with those tastes lingering in our metaphorical mouths, my “minor” case of jitters is prompting a few questions. After our first year and especially after the last three months, do we – you and I – still believe that it is the grace of God that brought us together? After being reminded that congregational and personal life will indeed go on whether we are together or not, do we – you and I – still hear the whisper of the Holy Spirit, calling us to come together here, in this place, to be a community of love, service, and witness? Or ... has our time apart left any of us wondering if we were wrong in believing we are meant to be here as congregation and minister, a beautiful and broken people longing for God's peace in our hearts and our world?

Well ... this is *my* case of the jitters, after all, so the only thing I can offer is *my* answers to those jittery questions. Yes, I do believe, in my heart, mind, and soul, that it

was the grace of God that brought us together and it is the grace of God that is shaping us, leading us, and blessing us into a future we cannot yet see. Yes, I do still hear the whisper of the Holy Spirit, calling me to join you in work, prayer, play, and discernment, so that we might become a church that more fully embodies the abundance of God's grace and the extravagant welcome of God's love. And, no, I don't wonder if I was wrong to believe that God was calling me (and Chey ... and Buster and Winnie) to leave Massachusetts and come here to join this particular gathered people of God. ... That doesn't mean I don't wonder about a whole lot of other things. (To tell you the truth, my prayers often include enough questions to make my law school professors proud.) But there are some things I do not doubt, and there are some of my questions that have been answered, quite clearly. You are the people I have been called to love, to serve, and to lead ... for as long as the Spirit wills.

As my jitters and my questions were rumbling around in my head and finding their way onto my computer screen the last few days, I started wondering about Jesus' first disciples, his earliest followers, one of whom, seemingly out of the blue, asks Jesus in this morning's reading to teach them all how to pray. I started wondering how often they got the jitters. I tried to imagine how often they questioned whether it was God at work in Jesus of Nazareth and whether it was God who had called them to follow Jesus in all his comings and goings. With all the strange and surprising things they saw and heard, with the hostility that Jesus aroused among many people in many places, and with the often incomprehensible parables Jesus loved to tell, I think the first disciples must have wondered, on a regular basis, whether following Jesus was truly the right thing to do.

That's the wondering, the uncertainty, the *fear* I hear behind that unnamed disciple's request, "Lord, teach us to pray." "Teacher, Rabbi, beloved friend Jesus," the disciple asks, "teach us how to speak and listen with our God, our Creator, the very source of life and love." This disciple doesn't ask Jesus to reassure them. He or she doesn't ask Jesus to give them courage to allay their fears. Instead, this disciple, who has encountered the presence of God in and through Jesus, asks Jesus to teach the disciples how to pray. She or he asks Jesus to teach them how they can enter into their own intimate, transformative relationships God. This disciple asks him to teach them how they, too, can be in communion with the Holy One of heaven and earth.

Jesus' response, as it's been handed down in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew –and as it's been discussed and argued over and interpreted for hundreds of years – became what Protestants know as the "Lord's Prayer." And, as the Lord's Prayer, it is something we have come to repeat so often that it may have lost all meaning for many, if not most, of us here this morning.

I hope and plan that, over time, we'll explore the words we pray together each week, so that they might become words that resonate in our hearts instead of being words we simply we mumble with our lips. That short prayer offers some precious gifts, but it also loaded down with a lot of baggage. Unpacking all those bags may take awhile, so, for now, I want to concentrate on only two lines.

"Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come."

To a disciple eager – and probably anxious – to learn how to pray, to learn how to be joined with God in prayer, Jesus suggests using these words: "Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come."

Hallowed by your name.

The Holy One we address and seek in prayer, the divine center of the cosmos, the sacred source of life that many people address as “God” is so holy, so sacred, so glorious beyond description that even its name is sacred, holy, *hallowed*. Jesus is urging the disciples to begin with the acknowledgement that the God to whom, with whom, and in whom we pray is holy and hallowed beyond our ability to describe or comprehend. Jesus urges us to step into that holiness and pause.

Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.

Jesus instructs the disciples to pray with the words, “Your kingdom come.” He is telling them and us to pray for God’s commonwealth, God’s vision, God’s hope for this world. Not my idea or your idea of what our lives and the world should be. Not even our hopes and dreams for ourselves and for all of creation. We’re urged not to pray for our own hopes and dreams to come true, because those dreams are forever limited by the finiteness of our love, our vision, and our imaginations. Jesus urges us instead to turn to God and say, “Your kingdom, your commonwealth come.” Jesus urges us to focus our prayers on God’s vision for creation, so that the things we may not be able even to imagine – the end of hate, the end of war, the end of hunger – will become flesh and blood realities.

Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.

With these seven words, Jesus is teaching his disciples to turn ourselves, in prayer and in every moment of our lives, toward the holy center of creation, toward the One whose very name is holy, the One who sees the possibilities for true peace and *Shalom* that lie beyond our ability to envision. Jesus is teaching his disciples to surrender to the holy love and vision of God, even though many of the ways of God remain mysterious and unknowable, at least in this life.

And what, you may ask, does any of this have to do with us? What does it have to do with our lives and our questions as individuals and as a congregation? My answer this morning is this: Two years ago, I couldn’t have imagined that I would be in Sonoma and that I’d be here in this pulpit and you’d be there in those pews. Two years ago, you couldn’t have imagined me here, either. And yet in our own ways and our own words, we turned to God, whispered (or shouted), “OK, you’re the Holy One. You’re God; we’re not. We need you to help us out here. Let it be your guidance we follow; let it be your vision we embrace. Let it be your kingdom that comes in and through our decisions.”

This is where those whispered and shouted prayers brought us, and it is those whispered and shouted prayers that we need to continue. In a world driven far too often by selfishness and cynicism, believing that there is a holy God at work in all things, believing that there is abundant life beyond our own narrow self- and national-interests, can seem like the height of naïveté. Maybe it *is* naïve, but it’s also highly subversive ... and profoundly faithful.

When your questions come – questions about your life, your family, your future – or questions about our life, this congregation, our future – try starting where Jesus suggests that we start. Turn in need and in prayer to God, find a way to remember the height and depth and breadth of the holiness of life, open your heart to God’s vision for you and for the world, and then dare to embrace that vision.

Jesus' life and death remind us that the road toward that vision is not always easy, but it is always blessed with love and grace. The road is not always easy, but we share it with companions both young and old, living and dead, who join us in embracing God's vision of doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with one another and with God.

It is a fine road. May we always walk it in joy, faith, and love.
Amen.

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First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
July 29, 2007