

“How to Get Things Done”
May 5, 2024

John 15:1-5

I had a conversation with a relatively new member after worship last Sunday. We were standing among all the people who had gathered in Rockwood Hall after our glorious worship service for our spring brunch—which was a delightful event in and of itself.

This member said: “I’m really thankful that I am a part of this church.” Of course, that’s the kind of thing I like to hear, so I smiled. And before I could respond, he added: “And *you* should be thankful that you are a part of this church as well.”

I am, of course. I’m thankful every day—for enough reasons to fill another sermon.

As I started to say this, he continued—telling me about several churches he knew of that, once flourishing, had been greatly diminished—with perhaps 30 people in attendance on a Sunday morning.

We agreed that something different is happening here at Congregational UCC. I’ve been thinking about just what that is and why that is for some time now—and after that conversation, I was thinking about all of this especially in the past week.

The pandemic, of course, has had a devastating effect on many congregations. Along with the member I spoke with, I know churches in Iowa, across the nation, and, actually, around the world that are struggling today in ways they weren’t five years ago.

Some saw this decline and struggle coming even before the pandemic. I read recently of the minister at a United Church of Christ congregation that once boasted of having “the second largest Sunday School in the nation.” That was a *big* congregation.

It now has less than 70 members. The minister there said: “I don’t know that Covid changed anything for Second UCC, but it accelerated everything.”

So, no, it’s not the pandemic alone that led to this situation—although it did speed things up.

A quarter of a century ago, one church consultant warned about a “financial meltdown in the mainline.” Trouble was on the horizon for many churches.

The problem for Mainline Protestant churches is more than financial, however. Our United Church of Christ is in its seventh decade of decline in the number of congregations and in the number of members. Between 1987 and 2021, membership in our denomination declined by 52%.

Something different is happening here on this corner—and that is due, in part, to the way in which we live out the genius of Congregationalism. The Congregational tradition in the United Church of Christ focuses our attention more on what we’re doing here at the Jefferson and Clinton than on what others are doing at the national church office, or across town, or across the country.

Yes, we are bound in a covenant with other congregations and with our denomination. We know that, as Paul wrote, “If one suffers, all suffer together; if one is honored, all rejoice together.”

And, as an aside, I would mention that UCC congregations in Minden and Harlan, Iowa are seeking assistance as they respond to the damage from the recent tornadoes in their communities. In the coming weeks you will be hearing more of how we might help.

“If one is honored, all rejoice together.” When individual congregations are healthy and thriving, the collected congregations of our associations and conferences and our denomination will be healthy and thriving as well.

I readily admit, then, that this Congregational bias has guided my ministry here. I seek to provide leadership through good times and bad times that would lead first of all to the health and thriving of this congregation. As I said, I’m grateful to be here and want to do all that I can—in the face of all of my very apparent limits and failings—to maintain and increase the well-being of this congregation.

At the same time, I will be the first to say that something else is going on here—something beyond the vital leadership from the members of our congregation and my own pastoral work.

This past week I read again those words of Jesus as he eats with his followers before his arrest and crucifixion.

“I am the vine,” Jesus says. “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

How do we get things done here? How do we flourish?

In short, by abiding in Christ.

We “dwell in Christ” as individuals and as a congregation, each one of us bearing her or his own fruit, the unique produce of a relationship with the divine—even as we share that fruit with one another.

This is a living relationship.

And it helps here to think theologically, because theology can help us see who we are; theology can help us understand what we are.

Human beings belong to the *created* order.

We didn't bring ourselves into being.

We *are* dependent—dependent for our very existence

on God's willing and creating
 on human volition and creativity

And we have freedom—or *independence*—created and given by God
 to act, to invent, to fulfill God's purposes
 to enter into relationships with others that seek justice, love, peace

In this freedom we can *choose* to actively continue God's purposes of life and love in the human sphere. And it is much more possible to make such a choice as we live together in this common life of worship and service that is a congregation.

Sin—which is still one of the best words we have.

Sin—being cut off from God,
 and all the big and little things we do to keep it that way,
 being separated from other human beings,
 being separated even from the best in ourselves

Sin deprives us of our independence
 makes us *dependent* on all kinds of impairments

The paradox is this:

Being cut off—separated from God and others—leads to *a lack of freedom* rather than the freedom that so many people expect to find once they've ditched God at the last corner and set out on their own.

In our separation, Christ makes contact with us
 makes a relationship possible again
 gives the renewed gift of freedom
 strengthens and enables our human capacity to act and create.

And in this way, our *dependence* upon God
gives birth to a strong and capable human *independence*.

It's like a vine and its branches. It is a living relationship.

This is a life-giving relationship:

Branches are tended by the living God.

Branches are pruned, cut back so that they might flourish and produce.

I imagine you know about that:

times in which it seemed like the very knife of God had been put to your life

Being pruned must feel an awful lot like being entirely cut away to a branch.

There are various phrases to describe it:

the dark night of the soul,

a time in the wilderness,

carrying a cross.

This is not pointless suffering. It bears fruit.

Bruce Epperly, a UCC minister and theologian, reflected on the words of Jesus and said: “God prunes us with challenging possibilities intended for our growth, not diminishment or punishment.” In this way, God “seeks creative responsible, and lively responsiveness and freedom.”

I think that *this* is as good a description as any of what has been happening here and why.

We have been faced with challenging possibilities over the past four years—a pruning of sorts—and we have responded to those challenges by drawing closer to God and closer to one another—not in a “circling the wagons” way but as a way to both accept and gain strength for meeting the challenges that we have faced.

We have—to use the imagery of Jesus—we have abided as branches in the vine of God’s life-giving energy. Apart from that we would have withered long ago. As a result, we find ourselves—sometimes to our great surprise—bearing abundant fruit, which is both God’s great desire for us and individuals and as a congregation, and our own deep long for ourselves.

Let me be clear that in saying this, I in no way seek to disparage congregations that are struggling in these days. I am simply trying to understand what's happening here and to encourage us as we move forward.

Jesus promises a great deal in these few sentences. He speaks of the possibility of being people who flourish, people who are truly alive.

These are Easter words, for they speak to us of resurrection.

The tell us

that death gives way to life

that the God who tends the vine is the one who spoke through Isaiah:

"I have no wrath

let them make peace with me,

let them make peace with me."

These are Easter words.

Branches are tended by the living God

and pruned to bear fruit.

This, we need to remember, is God's work, not ours.

It is not our task to cut others back, cut them down, cut them off.

It is not our calling to accept the pruning, the cutting of others.

Healthy branches bear fruit

as a natural outcome of being attached to the vine.

To say Christ is risen, then, is to say something about God

that God raised Jesus from death;

that through that death and resurrection God has started something new;

that God wants us to be a part of that new creation.

But to say Christ is risen is also to say
that Jesus is not simply a good teacher
nor an inspiration
nor a holy figure from ancient times.

He is the resurrection and the life
the way, the truth and the life
Christ is the vine in which all branches find health and sustenance
Christ is the vine from which all branches shoot forth and produce.

Abide in Christ and we will bear much fruit. Let us stay connected and discover all that we might do.