

“It’s Not Your Chicken Coop”
January 26, 2025

I Corinthians 12:14-27
John 14:15-21

You’ve probably heard the saying: “When the going gets tough... Congregationalists call for a meeting.”

O.K Maybe not.

Certainly, the going *is* getting tough for liberal Christians who recognize the intrinsic worth of each individual, in whom we see the image of God; who honor and seek to protect human dignity; who seek to create a culture of tolerance, solidarity, and the equal enjoyment of individual rights in our city, state, and nation.

We watched this past week as one Christian leader in a position of some power spoke truth to political leaders to whom the people of our nation have given much greater power. Episcopalian bishop, The Right Reverend Mariann Budde, echoed the words of the prophet Micah, who told us that God desires mercy, not sacrifice.

That didn’t go well.

Or, perhaps it did, as it is a good thing anytime unarmed truth is spoken.

The going *is* getting tough for many people. As Congregationalists, therefore, we are holding the annual meeting of our congregation this morning. Of course, like most preachers, at some point, I’m exaggerating a little for effect. The date for this meeting was set long before the current tough going,

The reality—and the *truth*—is that we’re always living in times that challenge our faith and our hope and our love. In our worship last Sunday, we used the prayer of Martin Luther King, Jr. that spoke of “these turbulent days when fear and doubt are mounting high”—words well over a half-century old that could have been written this past week. This morning, we prayed for the “Church, which is set today amid the perplexities of a changing order, and face to face with new tasks”—words of Walter Rauschenbusch that are over a century old and yet as fresh as the sunrise this morning.

We could despair over this, thinking that nothing ever changes.

Or we can find in these prayers the hope that comes to our souls when we realize that we are not the first people of faith to live in difficult times. We can open ourselves to the words of the Psalmist: “Be strong, and let your heart take courage,” knowing that we are not the first to need such encouragement. We can get over our fear and our anger and our despair and get on with our calling in these days.

And, because the going *is* getting tough, we can call and attend our annual meeting. Indeed, we *should* call and attend our annual meeting.

This meeting is one of the hallmarks of our tradition—one of those activities that was brought into the river of the United Church of Christ through the Congregational stream. The meeting of

the congregation has long been central to Congregational identity. In UCC congregations throughout New England to this day, the sense of the importance of coming together is so strong that for many congregations their main building is not a sanctuary but a *meetinghouse*. And even here we use our sanctuary for dual purposes. We meet here to worship. We meet here to consider our life together.

And both are sacred activities.

At a meeting of our congregation, we might talk about money—we will today—but this is much more than a mere “business meeting.” It is, in a very real sense, the acting out of the demands put upon us by God: the demands of the Word read and proclaimed and the meal shared at the table. The demand for mercy, not sacrifice. The “business” of the meeting of the congregation is done prayerfully, out of love for one another and out of love for God.

Paul gives us the image of the church as the body of Christ—and this image of a human community as a body had been around long before Paul wrote to that disordered mess of a body that was the church in Corinth. But Paul turns this image on its head. It was generally used to reinforce the hierarchy of the times, suggesting that those at the bottom of the heap should be obedient to those who are their “natural” superiors. After all, the reasoning went, in the body, the brain makes crucial decisions and is more critical than the lowly organs that sustain routine daily functioning. Even today, many would tend to agree.

Paul throws aside this notion of privilege and instead uses the image of the body to lift up the importance of diversity and interdependence. The importance of everyone is recognized, because the well-being of a congregation—or any organization—depends on the healthy contributions of all involved.¹

Our annual meeting is the work of the *body of Christ*—and one of the great benefits of the technology that we have put in place over the past five years is that those who are unable to be here in person this morning—for any number of reasons—can still join this meeting as a part of the body.

We come to meetings of our congregation with our spirits open to the action of the Spirit of God in us and among us as we meet and talk together. The important thing is our attitude as we gather:

the attitude of expectancy;

the attitude of openness—of having eyes to see and ears to hear;

the attitude of accepting one another—of loving each one of the people here as a child of God, of believing the Spirit can speak in this meeting through any one of us, and of being sincerely ready to hear what is said;

the attitude of coming to the meeting in order to, as we affirm in our church covenant, follow in the ways of Jesus Christ, made known and to be made known to us.

We do this together.

We do this remembering those words of Jesus as he shares a final meal with his followers.

The concern of Jesus in those hours is not what will happen to him. Facing betrayal and arrest, crucifixion and death, the concern of Jesus is the *community* of women and men who follow him.

Jesus speaks to us as a group, not simply as individuals. This is somewhat obscured in English translations by the word “you.” As he often does, Jesus here is using the second person plural—“you, the whole lot of you.” His concern is with how *all of us together* will behave toward one another and how we will live in the larger world.

“If you love me,” Jesus says, “you will keep my commandments.” If *all of you* love me, *all of you* will keep my commandments. There is no place here for some warm, fuzzy, individual “love of Jesus” apart from our love of one another. There is no place here for the ill-will that characterizes so many congregations (ask your friends). There is no place here for the exclusivity that favors some over others.

Jesus calls us to respect one another, to seek the good the community of faith, to—simply put—do to others as we would have done to us. As a congregation we can’t rely on a few people to do this. We are—all of us—called to love. We are—all of us together—called to keep Jesus’ commandments. And we are—all of us—needed when we are called to a meeting as much as when we are called to worship.

I recently read about the Danish concept of “arbejdsfællesskab.” (and please excuse my poor Danish). This could be translated as “work community.” In *The Art of Danish Living*, Meik Wiking, chief executive of the Happiness Research Institute in Copenhagen, says that describes friends or neighbors who rally around a project that would be less fun if done alone.

His friend, for example, gathered a few families to build a chicken coop; not only were they spending time together, but they were also driven by a collaborative purpose. He said: “I think that sense of accomplishment, even though it’s not *your* chicken coop, is also useful.”ⁱⁱ

And that, good friends, both tells why we meet as we do and describes our congregation. It’s more fun we do things together. And this is not *our* chicken coop—neither this building nor this spiritual body. The building is a gift that we have received from others and that we in turn will pass on to new people, many of whom will never know us. And this church, this gathering of the flawed faithful that we are, is not ours either—it is the *body of Christ*.

Our Congregational tradition is not as “freewheeling” as we often think it is. To be a Congregationalist takes some discipline so that in what we do we might *all* keep the commandments of Jesus. It is a great calling and a high challenge that you took on in covenanting to be a member of this congregation.

Keeping Jesus’ commandment to love one another does not come easily. We need each other to help us all keep the commandment.

As Congregationalists, we need this reminder. We often emphasize the responsibility each individual has before God. And that is an important part of our tradition. It makes faith a personal commitment. It is one of the deepest roots of democracy in our nation.

But as important—and in the light of this morning’s lessons, perhaps *more* important—is our behavior as a community. Our Congregational tradition is not about isolated “believers” but the whole people of God assembled in a particular place and time. And love for one another is required of the whole community.

From the start of Christianity, individual congregations have been our great strength. Yes, they have also been places of strife, contention, and, well, sin. But by God's grace congregations are also the places in which we fulfill the law of Christ by loving one another as we have been loved. They are communities of mutual support in which we are known by one another in a way that is different from what we experience at work, school, in our neighborhoods or civic organizations.

Of course, there is more involved than just this congregation in this place.

It seems a paradox, but even as we meet today to consider the life of our congregation, our *real concern* is not this congregation, but the larger world. We seek the strength of this body not for our own sake, but for the well-being of the larger world—this community, our nation—and, really, the good of all humanity.

While we seek to love and respect one another in this congregation, we know that our real calling is not so sectarian and limited. As far as we are able, we work for the good of all: the homeless on the Ped Mall, the hungry begging on our streets, victims of natural disasters, victims of human hatred and discrimination. As far as possible, with faith, hope, and love, we seek to be those who make the grace and mercy of God real in this world.

So we both come to this day and live our lives with a certain humility. We are called to be, not so much a *solution* to the hurts of the world as a *sign* to a hurting world—individuals and a community that point toward what God is still doing. And we meet today to make sure once more that the sign that is this congregation is in good repair and pointing in the right direction.

ⁱ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

ⁱⁱ Holly Burns, “For a

Happier New Year, Focus on Your Loved Ones,” NYT 12/26/24.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/26/style/new-years-resolutions-relationships-loved-ones.html>