

## ***Who Is God Anyway?***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

January 12, 2025 – A Sermon for Sunday morning

Text: Isaiah 43:1-7 & Luke 3:15-17; 21-23

I've known about my call to ministry since I was a small child, perhaps age 5 or 6. But it wasn't a conventional call in that I initially never thought of my invitation from Jesus to be a partner in his work as a call to preach. No, I aspired to be a professional Sunday School teacher. I just assumed these ladies in the church where I grew up were professional teachers like my teachers in school during the week. After all their work was so important! At least it seemed that way to me. It still does. Also, one must remember that when I was a little girl in the 1960's there were no women ministers available to look up to as role models. Even as I was preparing to graduate from college *Summa Cum Laude* with a degree in Religious Studies and talked with my advisor about going on for graduate studies, he told me I could certainly handle the classwork, but he really questioned what kind of career I could have as a woman. You won't be surprised to know I found this discouraging, but I soon didn't care because Peter and I decided to get married and figure out together where life – and God – would take us.

I didn't know then that even as I was not pursuing graduate studies in theology or ministry, many other women were – undeterred by all those who tried to discourage them. Diana Butler Bass, Carol Fontaine, Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, Mary Daly and so many, many more refused to take no for an answer and changed the face of theological studies and ministry forever in the process. So too all the women who have gone before me in the United Church of Christ – women like the Rev. Ginnie King, the Rev. Elizabeth King, the Rev. Dr. Patricia Liberty, the Rev. Dr. Leslie Simonson, the Rev. Rebecca Spencer, the Rev. Dr. Laurene Bowers, the Rev. Jennifer Geary and so

many more who forged a trail which so many of us followed that there are now more women than men in ordained ministry in the United Church of Christ. How amazing is that!

I think we forget how recent the progress women have made in ministry and so many other professional fields is because now most people don't think twice about women in all sorts of professions. We forget that in just our lifetimes – those of us of a certain age anyway – the nonexistent became the norm. That is a lot of change in a short period of time. It is no surprise then that there is currently so much pushback to so many areas of life that have changed radically in just 60 years. Women in ministry is just one of the areas targeted by some ultra right-wing Christian churches and pastors who will point you right away to St. Paul's words in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy and 1 Corinthians saying women should keep their heads covered and their mouths shut when in church. But in other places Paul writes in praise of women and their contributions to the church. This, like so many other so-called “culture wars” topics including how we are to treat the LGBTQ+ community and immigrants, as well as environmental and climate issues, and the raising of children become weapons of attack used against those of us who consider ourselves to be progressive Christians. And, lest you are curious what I mean, by “progressive” I mean living our lives as Jesus taught us to. We are to love God with all that we are and all that we have; and we are to love the other as much we love ourselves. That's it. And that, dear ones, is where I want us to begin on this year's journey of learning and self-discovery. We are going back to the basics of our faith – the Christian faith – as framed, practiced and lived out each day according to what we believe as members of the United Church of Christ.

So we will begin at the beginning with our own Statement of Faith. This document IS what we believe and who we are. Work on it was begun by delegates to the First General Synod representing the Evangelical and Reformed Churches and the Congregational Christian

Churches and it was then adopted at the Second General Synod in 1959. The different Christian traditions which became the United Church of Christ literally came together first based on what they believed about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit and their call to us to the work of formulating the God's kingdom here on earth. In other words, we started as a denomination only sure of one thing – what we believed. The rest – how to organize, structure and administrate a denomination – was left to God to guide and direct. Our predecessors literally trusted that if they were clear on what they knew to be true about God, then God would help them figure out everything else.<sup>1</sup>

This action of the founders of our denomination is why I want us to explore our Statement of Faith first. I would also like to point out that our church – this church – the United Congregational Church of Westerly – signed on as a congregation of this new denomination just a few short years after this key vote at the General Synod in 1959. Conversations between our parent churches – Broad Street Christian and Pawcatuck Congregational – began in the early 1960's as they decided they would embody the exciting vision of this new denomination by becoming one new congregation together. Neither church was struggling for members or with finances. They came together because they wanted to be a new congregation within this new denomination. That dear ones is amazing! It leaves us with a unique legacy and responsibility.

Hopefully a copy of the UCC Statement of Faith is attached to your order of worship. I'd like us to begin by reading the entire Statement of Faith together now. (*Read.*) So often when we read these words on a Communion Sunday or when we are receiving new members, we just read the words by rote, not really paying attention to what they say and what they are attempting to describe. They are just ink on a page. But, dear ones, they are so much more than that.

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<sup>1</sup> [History - United Church of Christ](#)

They are the life blood of who we are and what we believe God is asking of us as followers of the Risen Christ.

Today we will begin with just that first section, the first three lines: *We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify.* So what are the key words in these lines? (*God – Eternal Spirit – Savior – Jesus Christ – our God – your deeds – testify.*) These words are the building blocks of everything else that follows in the Statement of Faith. It will come as no surprise that there are dozens and dozens of texts in the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament which I could have used as one of our scriptures for our “Who is God” theme this morning. I ended up choosing this one from Isaiah because it’s one of the Lectionary texts for today and because I think it describe how we as Christians think of God. Isaiah tells us in these verses that God is our Creator; That God knows who we are; and God does not want us to be afraid ever. God knows us so well that God knows everything we are going through, every time we are happy or sad or afraid or confused. God is God as the Holy One of Israel who has persevered with the people even though they have turned their backs on God time and time again. And not only does God love us God also loves our children and our children’s children because God’s love is eternal. God formed and made us to be who God always intended us to be. To God we are, each one of us, special and unique, honored by God just as we are. This is a fundamental piece of the UCC understanding of God and who God is, as well as who God is calling us to be. This is why the United Church of Christ is a church which holds sacred and practices the belief that all persons have inherent worth and dignity. As such we are the church of radical hospitality. Everyone is welcome in our churches. That is not the case in so many other churches, several just down the road from us in either direction. The challenge of offering this radical hospitality has proven easier to say than to actually do, but the UCC generally and our church particularly in our community has

led the way in trying to be fully welcoming of all people, trusting that God created them to be themselves.

Our New Testament text from Luke is also the Lectionary passage for this Sunday and it provides us with the Christian understanding of who God is as manifested in the person of Jesus. It's a description of Jesus' baptism by his cousin John at the beginning of his ministry. This story of Jesus' baptism appears in all four Gospels with Luke's version being a little more low key than the others. Luke emphasizes that John, who had already been out on the road preaching and teaching and baptizing folks, was adamant that he was not the promised Messiah. John says in this text that "one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie his sandals." John had been on his own out in the wilderness sometime before Jesus came to him to be baptized. Luke does not go into details on Jesus' baptism making it sound as though Jesus was just part of the crowd of folks coming to be baptized on that particular day. But then John, and presumably the lingering crowd, witnessed the Holy Spirit coming down on Jesus in the form of a dove and the voice of God proclaiming "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This text in particular is recalled in the Statement of Faith which clearly states that in addition to being our God, God is also the God of Jesus Christ. This refers to what is often seen as the "mystery" of the Trinity or one divine being in three forms – Father, Christ and Holy Spirit. This trinitarian formula keeps reappearing throughout the Statement of Faith and it is foundational to the Christian faith. The UCC works at keeping all three "persons" in tension with each other even though the "Christian" in Christianity clearly places our primary focus on Jesus. This gets confusing at times when the Bible speaks as though Jesus and God are interacting as two separate beings. This has always been the dilemma of the Trinitarian formula and the part where the "mystery" card is often played meaning it's not something to be understood in a human way. It's just an "is."

The last phrase of this section of the Statement is one we often don't think about, or practice, at all – “And to your deeds we testify.” This phrase is clearly intended as an introduction to the sections of the Statement to follow which is a list of the deeds we attribute to God as well as God's expectations of us. But I believe this phrase is also an invitation to us as individual members of the United Church of Christ to remember that one of the most important things we can do to live our faith is to testify to it. Now that, for most of us, is a terrifying prospect. Testify? To my faith in God? In Jesus? I can't do that. I don't want people to think I'm *that* kind of Christian! I'm not going to sit in the stands at sporting events with a John 3:16 sign!!! I'm not going to ask strangers if they've been saved! Dear ones, no one is asking you to do that. That's not who we are in the UCC, well not exactly.

We testify to our faith in God, our love of God and Jesus, through what we do in God's name: like welcoming everybody. Like giving Operation Fresh Start a home base for its operations at no charge. Like modeling the stewardship of Creation through our pollinator gardens. Like special offerings for disaster relief efforts and donation drives for folks in need in our community. Like praying and caring for each other in times of need, just like the earliest Christian communities did. All these are acts of testimony and we do them with all our hearts. And people notice. They really do. Think back to all our visitors at the Bazaars this year. How many of them mentioned how “special” and “loving” our church felt? How many of them noticed right away that our church, our Bazaar, was “so different” from so many others they visited? Quite a few as I recall. And that, dear ones, is our testimony. That is us living our faith out in ways too visible to overlook or discount. We're not flashy or pushy in testifying to our faith. We just live it. And, as we delve more deeply into our Statement of Faith in the weeks ahead, we will discover that is precisely what God expects us to do.

I hope you are excited about the weeks ahead as we dive headlong into the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ. Truthfully, I am hopeful you are excited about learning more about your faith, our faith, this year. Understanding our faith in a foundational way is critical especially in these times which are so emotionally fraught in so many ways. Some in our country want to push back on so many things, so many achievements, believing that there was some magical earlier time in the life of our country when things were simpler and people lived their faith in the “right way” which is the way they think faith should be practiced. On the other hand there are others in the Christian community who want to push us forward often at a speed that is difficult to keep up with or even understand. In either case, dear ones, you need to know what we believe so that you will see the truth and the falsehoods both sides of these vitally important conversations are pushing. You need to know what we believe about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. You need to know what we think about sin and salvation and redemption. You need to know how it is that we see the Bible as a building block of faith yet not infallible. You need to know how we understand prayer and worship and music and art as central to the practice of our faith.

Dear Ones, I assure you this is vitally important work for us to do because there are lots of other people who will want to tell you what you should believe, how you should pray, how you should view other people. The only way to decide for sure for yourself about all these things is to build a firm foundation of faith for yourself. This is our task for the weeks and months ahead. I am so very excited, and I hope you are too! Amen.