

Our Common Lot

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

January 26, 2025 – A Sermon for Sunday morning

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:4-14

Welcome once again to Annual Meeting Sunday! As I have been known to say, Annual Meeting Sunday is the time when our congregationalism is on full display. It is also the perfect time to remember – and experience – what makes us congregational. Simply put, as a congregational church, we believe that all authority for decision making about how this congregation functions is totally under our control. We do not have a denominational hierarchy telling us what we can and cannot do. We own our own property outright and are responsible for the careful stewardship of it. We control our own money and investments, and we decide, through the Board of Trustees and the mechanism of the Annual Meeting, how that money is spent. Through our Board of Deacons we decide what worship will be and are free to sing from any hymnal we choose. We are independent.

We are a part of a larger denomination, yes, but our membership in the United Church of Christ is covenantal meaning we enter into a sort of ministry partnership with them based on mutual promises we make to each other. One of those covenantal pieces is our acceptance of the Statement of Faith which we are currently engaged in studying in more depth. We also rely on denominational connections and structures for things like setting and maintaining standards for authorized ministers needed to serve in local churches. The denomination sets those standards and, for churches which work within the UCC search and call system, the denomination also carefully screens candidates for ministry to ensure their fitness to serve. The

denominational structures also provide that same level of support to congregations who are struggling with everything from pastoral and congregational misconduct issues to financial viability for the future and everything in between. That is one important way in which we as a local congregation of the United Church of Christ acknowledge that we are in partnership with the UCC structures and other local churches as we share “our common lot” in ministry together.

My plan for our study of the Statement of Faith just worked out so that this particular stanza, the one which talks about “our common lot,” falls on Annuua Meeting Sunday. I honestly did not plan this. But then again, I am very used to God reminding me all the time that the Divine Scheduler is always paying attention even if I’m not. So, let’s begin by taking a closer look at this next stanza of the Statement of Faith which will be our focus today. It appears at the end of the worship resource for your ready reference, but let’s take a look at it now:

“You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles. In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.”

Whew! That’s a mouthful! What exactly is this word salad trying to say to us? Allow me to attempt to explain this in slightly different words:

- God judges people as individuals based solely on what they do, whether they are kind or selfish, whether they love the other and love God with all that they are and all that they have.
- God also judges nations, which are made up of individual people, by the same standards as individual people. No hiding from God in a crowd!

- The standards for God’s judgement are clearly visible in the teachings shared with the people by prophets – like Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, Elisha, and so on – as well as the apostles who were Jesus’ closest followers while he was in the earthly part of his ministry. In other words, yes, God judges but according to principles clearly explained time and time again over thousands of years.
- Jesus Christ, was a man – fully human and yet somehow divine which was revealed in his rising from the dead.
- Jesus came to us, sent by God, so God could more fully understand the human experience, sharing completely in “our common lot.”
- It was as a man – not a divine being – that Jesus conquered sin and death, through the power of God. In this one act of sacrifice of himself through the human experience of death, Jesus made us all part of God’s miraculous kingdom of love that knows no end.

A little clearer I hope? I fully appreciate the word salad aspect of our Statement of Faith but, we, the people it is intended to guide, need to remember that the careful formulation of these words took years as each word, each comma, each capital and lower case letter was carefully evaluated for its meaning by those who first drafted the Statement. The words here reveal much more than just the ink on paper they appear to be.

The two key pieces of this particular stanza of the Statement have to do with God’s judgment and Jesus as a man who was judged by humans, found lacking by human standards and was then crucified and died. He was returned to life by God through some mysterious means that cannot be explained, and thus conquered death through God’s intervention in the natural order.

How this act of resurrection by the hand of God also reveals that Jesus has conquered sin is less clear and that is by intention. It is important to note that this one point has been the subject of countless theological debates in all of Christendom going back thousands of years. It is no exaggeration to say it has led to warfare and death on a scale that I am confident appalled both Jesus and God. All because we can't really define/understand/process how it is that Jesus conquered sin through his resurrection. It gets at all sorts of complicated questions like what is the nature of sin and are humans just by virtue of being born inherently sinful? These, dear ones, are very big questions, and ones we will explore in much more detail as our "back to basics" year of learning and exploration continues. But for our purposes in this conversation today, I think that what Jesus' conquering of sin as referenced in this phrase is referring to is the simple fact that all humans fall short of God's visions and hopes for us to live lives where love and kindness are our only focus; where everyone has enough and no one has too much. All humans are flawed and incapable of the perfection of love that is God's dream for us to fulfill. Thus, in the act of being human, Jesus takes on the flawed character all human beings have in common.

Part of being human is realizing we are imperfect beings incapable of perfection on our own, no matter what we might want to think or believe. It is this deeply flawed nature that all humanity shares which Jesus accepted as the Christ – God's savior in our midst. In Jesus, God is revealing to us that God knows we are imperfect, knows we are sinful, and that God wants more than that for us. Put another way, God knows we are capable of so much more than we reveal through our actions toward ourselves and each other every day. Jesus was God's answer to that dilemma, a human who lived in such a way as to

make God tangible – real, alive -- to us. Jesus showed us that we are capable of moving closer to perfection in the living of lives each day. In doing this, Jesus reconciles us with God by making clear the path to moving forward into the dreams God has for us. In Jesus, God shows us over and over again that all things are possible with God as the central fulcrum to our lives.

Another way for us to understand this whole relationship between Jesus and us is provided for us in the Statement through the phrase “shared out common lot.” Our common lot. In other words, in becoming human God, through Jesus incarnate, experienced what it means to be human fully. And if you think about Jesus’ life, that was true in so many ways. Jesus was born as a vulnerable infant, grew up and was educated like any other Jewish boy his age. He knew what it was to fall down and get hurt as a child. He also knew what it was to be disappointed by people he trusted who ultimately betrayed him. He experienced firsthand what it meant to be brutalized by the forces of empire and ultimately die at the hands of strangers even though the Roman Governor Pilate knew he was being framed by the religious authorities who were afraid of what Jesus’ teachings about God and God’s accessibility to everyone would mean for the religious practices which provided them a livelihood. Jesus knew what it was like to be loved unconditionally by parents, what it was like to be poor and hungry, what it was like to have to walk everywhere on hot dusty roads. Jesus knew what it was like to know God had something very important for you to do and you had no real idea of what it was or how to do it. So, Jesus just put one foot in front of the other each day, following the path God put in front of him. He found good friends and supporters. He discovered his own gifts and talents and used them to the fullest. He transformed lives of every kind in every possible way. He

made a real difference in the way most of us hope to do but never really come close. Dear ones, Jesus did share our common lot as fragile, scared and vulnerable human beings – and he changed the world in the process.

Our text from 1 Corinthians 12 is Paul's attempt to describe exactly what this notion of "common lot" meant in the earliest Christian communities. The people at the church in Corinth had been arguing about whose "gifts" were real and who their leaders should be. In other words, they were arguing over what exactly it meant to be a true follower of Jesus, to be a part of that common lot of Jesus' followers. Paul explains in his letter to them that being a part of the Christian community was not a competition between various people with different talents and abilities. No, he explained that everyone's gifts and talents were equally valuable. He told them, "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Then he goes on to list some of those gifts like teaching and preaching and healing and the working of miracles and several more. His point was that God made everyone unique and special with unique and special gifts, all of which come together to create the community of God's people. It is that community coming together and sharing those gifts with each other and with the wider community that matters. It is the entire community – one body with many members – which works together to accomplish whatever it is God needs for God's people to do.

Dear ones, in a very real way, this is what we in the congregational church – our church – are trying to figure out how to do every week. How is it that God needs us to come together, pooling our resources and our gifts and talents to accomplish something amazing, something transformative for ourselves and others in our community? What is God asking of us as we learn

together on this Annual Meeting Sunday what it means in real time to share our common lot? This is our task assigned by God, embodied by Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is our legacy from our forefathers and mothers in this church and throughout congregational history. We in our church dare to embody this whole idea of sharing our common lot together so that we can accomplish something that matters to God and for the people in our community. This task assigned to us by God is more important now than it has ever been, certainly in my lifetime, as we figure out how to be that beacon of hope in our community when so many are vulnerable and afraid, judged by others to be “less than” for reasons that have no basis in God, no matter how much they try to convince themselves and us that it does.

Yes, dear ones, we are living in a truly historic time in the life of our country, when the concept of sharing “our common lot” is being turned on its head by a few. God has so much for us to do in offering unconditional kindness and love to friend and stranger many of whom are feeling vulnerable and afraid. We must also engage in the impossibly difficult work of refusing the temptation to judge others with whom we strongly disagree. We, in our common lot, are called to do better than that. We are called to live our lives transformed by our faith and trusting God alone with judgement. That, dear ones, is especially hard to do but, do it we must, if our society, our world, is ever to move behind the hate and division everywhere visible. May God be with us as we make our way forward together, one day at a time. Amen.