

**Sunday, March 3, 2013**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “We Believe”**

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How many people were raised in traditions other than the Congregational or United Church of Christ?

I ask this to demonstrate two things.

First, our church is one that welcomes people from all different backgrounds.

Second, many of us were not raised in this church so we might be unfamiliar with the structure, protocol and history.

Today, I want to take some time to be in the role of ‘teacher.’

I want to provide a lesson about the Congregational Church; the United Church of Christ; and what it is that we believe.

Perhaps this will be review for some of you, perhaps for some it will be new, but I think it always important that we know who we are.

This will be a much abbreviated history – but I hope it will spark an interest for you to learn more.

After Jesus died and was resurrected his followers worked hard to establish a church honoring his teachings.

Remember that Jesus was a Jew and his ministry was focused on calling the religious leaders to be mindful of the biblical truths, the commandments, honoring God.

Jesus’ early followers struggled with all sorts of persecution under Roman rule.

That all changed in 313 when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity issued the Edict of Milan proclaiming tolerance of all religions throughout the empire.

The Romans continued for centuries as the major force in the church led by the pope.

Popes were seen as the primary authority in the church – deriving their power directly from the first pope, Peter.

In 1054 when the church split with the Eastern Orthodox Church establishing its center at Constantinople (Istanbul), and the Roman Catholic Church at Rome.

In 1517 a catholic priest, Martin Luther, began a protest movement calling on the church to return to the authority of scripture.

He argued that the church had lost its way and had turned away from God.

Martin Luther's motto was *Sola Scriptura* –only scripture.

Paramount was the message of Paul that persons are justified by the grace of God through faith alone.

Such faith did not lead to rank individualism or moral indifference, but to good works out of love for God.

Luther's protests became known as the Protestant Movement.

It's many followers took different paths for reclaiming the centrality of the bible in their Christian worship.

Today, we have many Protestant Denominations.

Our church was originally a Congregational Church and in 1957 we entered into covenant with three other denominations, Evangelical, Reformed, and Christian, to be come the United Church of Christ.

Our unifying call, taken from John 17, is Jesus' prayer, "that they may all be one."

We are a united and a uniting church.

I want to share some of our beliefs, outlined in our founding documents:

**We believe** in the triune God: God the Creator;

resurrected Christ, the sole Head of the church,

and the Holy Spirit, who guides and brings about the creative and redemptive work of God in the world.

**We believe** that each person is unique and valuable.

It is the will of God that every person belong to a family of faith where they have a strong sense of being valued and loved.

**We believe** that each person is on a spiritual journey and that each of us is at a different stage of that journey.

**We believe** that the persistent search for God produces an authentic relationship with God, engendering love, strengthening faith, dissolving guilt, and giving life purpose and direction.

**We believe** that all of the baptized 'belong body and soul to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.'

No matter who – no matter what – no matter where we are on life's journey – notwithstanding race, gender, sexual orientation, class or creed – we all belong to God and to one worldwide community of faith.

All persons baptized – past, present and future – are connected to each other and to God through the sacrament of baptism.

We baptize during worship when the community is present because baptism includes the community's promise of 'love, support and care' for the baptized – and we promise that we won't take it back – no matter where your journey leads you.

**We believe** that all people of faith are invited to join Christ at Christ's table for the sacrament of Communion.

Just as many grains of wheat are gathered to make one loaf of bread and many grapes are gathered to make one cup of wine, we, the many people of God, are made one in the body of Christ, the church.

The breaking of bread and the pouring of wine reminds us of the costliness of Christ's sacrifice and the discipleship to which we are all called.

In the breaking of bread, we remember and celebrate Christ's presence among us along with a 'cloud of witnesses' – our ancestors, family and friends who have gone before us.

It is a great mystery; we claim it by faith.

We believe "In essentials–unity, in nonessentials–diversity, in all things–charity."

The UCC has no rigid formulation of doctrine or attachment to creeds or structures.

Its overarching creed is love.

Love and unity in the midst of our diversity are our greatest assets.

**We believe** that God calls us to be servants in the service of others and to be good stewards of the earth's resources.

'To believe is to care; to care is to do.'

**We believe** that the UCC is called to be a prophetic church.

As in the tradition of the prophets and apostles, God calls the church to speak truth to power, liberate the oppressed, care for the poor and comfort the afflicted.

**We believe** in the power of peace, and work for nonviolent solutions to local, national, and international problems.

We are a people of possibility.

In the United Church of Christ, members, congregations and structures have the breathing room to explore and to hear, to decide for themselves what it means to be Christian.

Today's readings provide a rich reflection on our Christian beliefs.

Isaiah conveys God's deep commitment to be in covenant with us.

*I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love...*

God's covenant with us is the model that we use to be in covenant with the other churches and settings of the UCC.

We are in relationship – not beholden to or subject to the authority of – we are in covenant.

We honor one another, we support each other, we pray together.

Isaiah reminds us to pay attention to what it is we hunger for.

Perhaps the point of Lent is for us to adjust our sights so that we at least understand what it is we should hunger for,

or in fact what we do hunger and thirst for, in our deepest being: justice, mercy, peace, healing, acceptance, love.

And not just for ourselves, but for all of God's children.

Jesus' message today reminds us that each of us is capable of producing these fruits, but perhaps in different ways and at different times.

We are a community of honor, a community of trust, a community of love.

We believe in the heart of the biblical message and our lives are directed by the Word.

After worship today you will have an opportunity to learn about the work of the various committees that carry out the work of our church.

Everything that happens in the name of the church is through the work of these committees.

Each of you, in covenant with one another and with the church, is asked to commit time each year to the church.

Again, every person and every life is different, however, everyone has something to offer.

Please take some time, after worship, to talk with the committee representatives to determine where your gifts and talents might best serve the church.

Then, let the nominating committee know what you might be interested in doing.

One of the greatest joys of being a part of a congregational church is that we have complete autonomy – we are in charge of ourselves.

However, with that blessing comes responsibility.

I saw a great visual this week that compared the “Consumer Church” and the “Missional Church.”

The consumer church is when the church is seen as a dispenser of religious goods and services. People come to church to be ‘fed’, to have their needs met through quality programs, and to have the professionals teach their children about God. People identify themselves by saying “I go to church.”

The missional church is a body of people sent on mission who gather in community for worship, community encouragement and teaching from the Word in addition to what they are self-feeding themselves throughout the week. People identify themselves by saying, “I am the church.”

I believe that my covenant with you includes the responsibility to lead you on the journey to become a missional church.

We are the church.

Please join me in praying together the words of our Statement of Faith on the back cover of your hymnal.

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify.

You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.

You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through the 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.

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil,

to share in Christ’s baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you.

Amen.

