

“Unguarded”

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June 23, 2019

62nd Anniversary of UCC, Pastoral Search Committee Affirmation of Ministry

First Congregational Church of Haddam

Higganum Congregational Church

Galatians 3:23-29

23 Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Easter was late this year, and so on this first Sunday after Trinity Sunday the lectionary throws us unexpectedly into the middle of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians without context. A little catch up is in order.

As some of us have explored this spring in our study of the book of Acts, the early church struggled to figure out what it meant that the Holy Spirit promised by the Resurrected and Ascendant Lord was being poured out on Gentiles and not just the people of Israel.

The Jewish people were the Chosen people, those whose ancestor Abraham received the Promise and to whom the Torah had been revealed by Moses at Sinai. Were the Gentile ‘nations,’ traditionally opponents of the Jewish “people of the Book,” to be included on equal footing in the new faith?

And if so, in order to welcome Jesus, the Jewish Messiah and the Son of David, should they be required first to convert to Judaism?

There already were many ‘God-fearing’ Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire who had been attracted to Jewish monotheism and the ethics of the Mosaic Law. A much smaller number had followed through with conversion, though, understandably given the requirement of circumcision in an era long before anesthesia and antibiotics.

Peter had a vision, described in Acts 10, that convinced him- at least temporarily- that fellowship with Gentiles was permitted. A “Council” held in Jerusalem heard his testimony and agreed that Christian Gentiles were not bound to keep the whole of Jewish Law, but only required to live according to the ethical covenant God made with Noah after the flood.

But debate continued. Peter, Paul complains in Galatians 2, backtracked after a while, capitulating to pressure from others not to share in table or house fellowship with Gentile Christians.

This brings us to the situation in the Galatian church. Though Paul had proclaimed to them that the Way of Jesus was open to all who called on Jesus' name, the apostle had been followed there by those scholars today call "Judaizers," who urged the Galatians to return to following the Law. The Epistle to the Galatians is Paul's response to what he saw as a subversion of the Gospel.

In the section we have heard today Paul makes two key, related points.

The Mosaic Law, with its hundreds of commandments, Paul says in Verse 24, was a "tutor," a **paidagógos**. The Roman world including cosmopolitan Jews had commonly adopted the Greek practice of having an older household servant assigned as a kind of 'guard' of the children.

These 'child leaders' as the term literally can be translated, were given charge of children by their fathers at about age 7 when they left the nursery and began to be out a bit more in the world. The job of the **paidagógos** was to keep the children from getting in trouble, from shaming the family honor; they would accompany their charges whenever they left home, and often had a reputation for strict enforcement of rules of conduct, including whatever corporal punishment they deemed necessary.

As you might imagine, and as Paul's readers all would have been aware, this situation carried an inherent internal contradiction. The young men being controlled by these **paidagógos**, after reaching majority, literally would become these servants' masters overnight. The need for the **paidagógos** always was meant to be temporary, a custodial arrangement until the child became an adult.

Likewise the Law, Paul asserts, was a temporary master. With the coming of Christ his followers entered a new status as "children of God," governed not by the caretaker guardian of the Law as proxy, but directly by a loving heavenly Father of All "through faith."

This is Paul's radical second assertion: whether Jew or Gentile, all are included in God's family. In fact, whether male or female, slave or free. Those who were excluded from the Abrahamic covenant by their status now are to be included.

The church has wrestled with making this truth real ever since. And it hasn't always been easy.

June 25th was a Tuesday in 1957, just as it is this week 62 years later. In Cleveland that day, the United Church of Christ was formed as the union of two unions: the Evangelical and Reformed Church founded 23 years prior, and the Congregational Christian Churches three years before that. "United and Uniting," and with the motto "That They May All Be One" from John 17:21, this new ecumenical denomination reflected the hopes of American "Christendom" that what divided believers would pass away in favor of mutual love and a powerful shared witness.

In some ways the enterprise can be seen as a profound failure. The UCC's six decades have been marked by membership decline that matched or exceeded that of other mainline Protestant groups. And though there are bright spots for the ecumenical movement including the UCC's establishment of full communion with the Disciples of Christ in 1989, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1997, the Union of Evangelical Churches in Germany in 1981, and the Uniting Church of Canada in 2015, that original vision of a united American Protestantism

largely has stalled. Ecumenical seminaries like the ones my husband and I attended are struggling.

And yet...

The United Church of Christ stands as a sign of possibility in our nation. To me as a Baptist, accustomed to studying split after split through Baptist history, the idea of those of different traditions and histories coming together, the possibility that denominations do not have to divide but can unite- it is inspiring.

And because of its origins in that ecumenical movement, my sense here in New England at least is that the United Church of Christ has fought way above its weight class in taking the lead in local ecumenical and interfaith partnerships. It could have gone another way: the Congregational Churches here were so numerous that their ministers easily could have adequate mutual support, etc. just keeping to themselves. But instead, working in Norwich and Niantic, West Hartford and North Stonington, it consistently was UCC pastors who reached out to welcome the newly arrived interim pastor in town.

But the best-known gift of the United Church of Christ to the wider church has been its testimony that the Holy Spirit of Jesus continues to speak, represented by the comma and the quote, “Never put a period where God has put a comma.” The UCC has been in the forefront of movements empowering women, anti-racism work, and full inclusion of LGBTQ individuals. Perhaps not a surprise to you here, but sometimes a surprise to outsiders, the UCC actually is composed of a rich mix of individuals who call themselves “Liberals” and “Conservatives,” each seeking to discern the wisdom of God for living and letting live. As the United Church of Christ’s Chicago Theological Seminary puts it this way: “We’re not Radical. We’re just Early!”

The United Church of Christ speaks of being intentional in offering “extravagant welcome,” and never is this better symbolized than my favorite UCC tradition, Synod Cookies. For Synod 29, six years ago, the host Conference baked 3,000 dozen homemade +cookies- yes, 36,000 cookies- for their guests, and likewise in 2015. Sadly, Synod Cookies were curtailed by convention center rules in the last two synod gatherings- sort of our own version of the Judaizers.

Tomorrow at the Synod gathering in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the new Together as One Conference uniting Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island will be voted on by the national delegates. These three historic Conferences are responding to resource realities, seeking to do more while expending less. But they also are seeking in the spirit of the original founding of the UCC to join and thus amplify their voices.

I don’t know if the UCC will make it for another 62 years, but as one of your American Baptist cousins I hope so. I hope so because it will mean that local churches like First Congregational Church of Haddam and Higganum Congregational Church will have found ways to live out the call to welcome all in new ways, just as Paul urged the Galatians so long ago.

We have a treasure to share. May we be as determined as the Apostle to be sure this inheritance we have received is passed along. Amen.