

New Member sermon, First United Church of Christ, Northfield, MN  
Romans 12: 9 – 21  
May 17, 2020  
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May God still speak through these words of scripture and sermon.

Today is a happy occasion in the life of a congregation when people decide to join the church. In our day and age it is a miracle that eleven people decided to commit themselves to a faith community. Our society has shifted away from joining types of action. All kinds of institutions, the church included, have suffered from the downright shunning of membership in anything. Lost with the fading concept of membership are actions like commitment, fidelity, and loyalty.

To be fair, blind devotion to a community is not life-giving. There is power in consciously staking a claim in a people. And we rejoice in the pinning of this community as a place of belonging, becoming and beginning that these eleven beloveds have chosen this day.

And how fitting that we are still sitting with this scripture from Romans on a joining day. This text from Romans holds a special place in my heart as it was read at my own wedding so the marriage/joining metaphor is ringing in my ears. This time is akin to marriage because there is promise-making, covenant-lifting and commitment-swearing too.

At a wedding at my home church, First Church in Cambridge, my former Pastor Mary Luti was officiating. In the homily Mary shared a conversation she had with a fellow clergy person at a seminar. Somehow their conversation turned to the fact that Mary would be returning home from the seminar to do a wedding for a couple in her congregation. They exchanged humorous wedding stories, which in our line of work, and as America's Funniest Videos can attest, we see quite often.

But then this colleague made a confession to Mary. He noted that despite the extravagance of the wedding industry and beyond the trappings of wedding dress, ring bearers, and bubbles there is always a moment where he must stop himself. Witnessing couple after couple making vows and saying "I do" he found it took all his energy to keep from exclaiming "YOU DO?"

Think about what an awesome thing it is to witness two people making a lifetime commitment to one another. Think about what an extraordinary act it is in our "flit here and there" world to say "I do." Think about how remarkable it is to say "I do" in our ADHD society that can barely give attention to a 30 second commercial much less a twenty minute sermon anymore. Think about saying "I do" in a country where barely 50% of marriages survive till death do us part. It is a miracle!

On this joining day we might ask, what makes it possible for these eleven bright shiny new members to say "I do" to this ministry. We know the life patterned after Jesus is a demanding one. Since each of these beloveds have answered "I do" we might exclaim "YOU DO?"

The lesson from Romans is a prime example of the challenge of "I do." Mary Hinkle Shore from Luther Seminary points out that there are, depending on the English translation one is using, upwards of 30 imperatives in this reading. The exhortations speak to any community patterning its life after that of the crucified and risen Christ.

It is also important to note that all of the verbal forms are plural. The words are a window on what life in Christ looks like in community – not for an individual! Furthermore, this group of people is gathered and empowered by the spirit of the one they follow. As God shapes the shared life of the saints, that life is characterized by genuine love.

That call to love is at the heart of all our “I do” saying and covenant-making today. We can say “I do” because God first said “I do” to us. We can make the commitments we make because God made a commitment first to us which echoes all the way back to the “Let there be life” command of God at creation. There is the witness of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we can count on and backs up the commitments we make – God will never fail us. And because God will never fail us – we can be brave!

The power of people committed to one another in community cannot be under-estimated. The Bible and all of Christian history shows that God always works through people and we are at our best when we are the gathered body, bound by promises and undergirded by genuine love. Someone once said there is no such thing as a solitary Christian. Our faith is inherently communal. If there was a recipe for church the key ingredient would be people – plural, not person, singular. But wait, there is more! When we are at our best the church itself is not solitary or stand alone but rather connected in a web of connection that strengthens the individual body and the collective. This is why we tap the power of interfaith and UCC Conference connections. A former staff colleague of mine, Jonathan New, puts it this way, “we can’t be THE church by being A church.”

By definition a church is plural and a most effective church is one that is connected to something outside of itself. Saying “I do” creates a “we.” This is what we celebrate in these covenants we have made today- the affirmation of “we.” We have pledged to not do this ministry in Christ’s name alone. Because we are not alone – we can be brave!

And indeed we must be brave. These days are demanding on the church not because we are trying to survive and thrive as an institution but because there is so much need that the church can respond to.

What would you do if you were brave First UCC? This will not be the last time I ask us this question! You can ask and answer that question because you have said “I do” to one another and your pastors want to be brave with you. You can ask and answer that question because you have the imperatives to “let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” You can ask and answer that question because you have wider UCC partners who are asking and answering the same question and we can learn and act together and multiply our witness.

The power of “we” joined with Spirit-guided motivation and commitment changes the world! These membership covenants created here are not to sustain the administration and proper working order of First UCC – it is to change the world – thanks be to God! Because we have each other – we can be brave!

There is risk in saying “I do.” We hold fast to community with wide-eyed awareness that we will let each other down, that our vulnerability will be exposed, that we are imperfect human beings who fail. And yet we say “I do” and hold fast to community because it is the way God envisioned the world by creating human beings. Even God was not content to be alone and so we pledge to one another to do our best, to follow the example of Jesus and to forgive abundantly. With thirty imperatives there is a lot

of possibility for disappointment. And yet we forge ahead, trusting our efforts matter and help us be brave.

Let us all say “I do” with abandon as God calls to us each. Tap the power of “we.” Be brave! Do these things and our life together will be blessed, you will know joy in service and fellowship, and you will be a blessing in Christ’s name. Amen.