

Braving Jesus
Ephesians 6: 10 - 20
First United Church of Christ, Northfield, MN
August 29, 2021
Rev. Wendy Vander Hart

May God still speak through these words of scripture and sermon.

Welcome to First United Church of Christ an Open and Affirming, Just Peace congregation of the United Church of Christ. My name is Wendy Vander Hart and I am the Interim Senior Minister at First United Church Christ for one last Sunday. I am the oldest of four children born to a preacher father and choir director/organist mother in the Reformed Church in America tradition. Church has always been at the center of my life in attending a denominationally affiliated college and sensing a call to ministry in seminary because an Open and Affirming church like First UCC embraced me. My life of faith has been a struggle to marry the Jesus of my childhood with the Jesus I have come to know through the United Church of Christ.

My service here at First UCC is the first fully integrated experience in ministry since I was ordained 32 years ago. You welcomed my gifts as a same gender loving woman. And even though my spouse Joanne and I have lived apart in this tenure, my ministry with you has had a completeness I did not know before. The confluence of being out, of being nested in a small town, making a difference in a pandemic and feeling the permission to preach boldly about racial justice has been life-giving.

You prayed for Joanne and me and the journey we are on post-cancer diagnosis for her. You showed great patience and resilience when I served the first six weeks remotely from my home in Massachusetts. You have received my skills openly despite wondering why an LGBTQ person would love Jesus so much when so many have been harmed in his name by the church. Your welcome means the world to me and to the world! No matter where you are on the journey of life or faith you are welcome here. And because you showed up today - this body is whole and complete and perfect.

My testimony has a lot in common with many of the stories you have told since we introduced this practice in worship last August. Together, in these testimonies, we have woven together similar threads of feeling rejected by the church, of communities where answers were valued above questions, where judgment took the lead over mercy, where systems of oppression were supported by biblical justifications, where even violence was explained by harmful theology. I have heard, Pastor Lauren has heard, each of you has heard where the church has caused pain in your lives. There is no doubt the church of Jesus Christ has been used and abused to maintain a status quo of supremacy that is downright ungodly. Over time that unholy behavior has been laid on Jesus.

Maybe you, like me, fully embrace the sign we had made for the first ever Pridefest in Northfield this year which proclaims – “Our church is sorry for all the hateful things done in the name of God.” At the same time, we know the church has failed to equip us for deep theological questions, a search for meaning and practicing wonder in the presence of the Holy. In light of all that life throws our way, we as church need to provide the tools to practice this faith. As life-giving as our ministry is now, we know from the work our Land Acknowledgement Statement Group has accomplished that First UCC is not without blame in the long history of the Christian church doing harm in Jesus’ name rather than the healing intention of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We need to learn more about the practices of lament, confession, repentance, forgiveness, reparation so that we do not repeat the harm we seek to heal.

As followers of Jesus, we still have much to learn. In my service as an Associate Conference Minister and among you dear First UCC I have seen the struggle about what to do with this Jesus in whose name so much injury

has been done AND in whose name so much life given. Most churches I witnessed have resolved this conflict by leaving Jesus behind. Over our time together maybe you have heard me talk about this a time or two or ten...

Bravely you are living into the mission of “practicing the courageous love and justice of Jesus.” Each one of those words was prayerfully, thoughtfully considered. I thank the Transition Team who wrestled with the question of Jesus guided by our covenant, listening deeply to one another and to all of you. I thank the focus group of under the age of 30 who talked about the dimension of Jesus to emphasize that led us to the word “courageous.” Thank you to the congregation for saying the first iteration – “practicing revolutionary love” was not deep enough and sounded more descriptive for a social justice agency than a church. Thank you too church for saying please help us tie our faith to our actions. Thank you search team for taking the conversation to potential ministers and calling a stellar Pastor in Cindy Maddox to partner with staff, lay leaders and walk forward with all of you.

Here on my last Sunday among you, I borrow language of Paul and ask you to pray. Paul writes, “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication... Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.”

When we pray, we acknowledge something is unfinished. Something is unfinished that encourages us to call upon God to be with us on the path towards its next step. In this letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul laid out a theology for the church and ends with a prayer that they equip themselves for an unfolding future in Jesus’ name. Every pastor prays for their congregation. Here is my prayer for you as we part company.

First UCC I pray that you become that courageous church. I pray you become that church that grounds and roots its people in the love of God found in Jesus- that sparks catalytic action for love, mercy, courage, justice and peace in his name. I pray that you become that church that heals the hurts of that other church so that people come to see the intentions of God that incarnated Jesus among us in the first place. I pray that you become that church that fearlessly and courageously practices the love and justice of Jesus even when the self-examination that takes is hard and even when conflict arises because embracing Jesus requires a lot of unpacking of hurtful history. I have seen you do hard things. I know you are equipped to do this hard thing.

Rev. Holly MillerShank who served our national United Church of Christ and most recently served as Interim ACM in MA wrote these words that describe what I believe God is calling you to. She wrote, “Ecclesiology is not synonymous with Christology: one’s love of the church, while interconnected, is not a substitute for one’s love of Jesus.

She continues, I love the church, I love the Church Universal, I love the United Church of Christ. I have given and will continue to give my whole self to ministry in and of the church. But my ecclesiology also teaches me that the church is comprised of humans; feats, foibles, failures and all. Unlike Jesus, the church is a constantly evolving institution... the church is a means to salvation, not our savior.

MillerShank goes on to acknowledge, “The church can (and does) hurt us. The church can (and does) bring us moments of deep joy. But those highs and lows are different from the eternal love of Jesus, our Christ: the one who is, and was, and ever shall be... I pray that you will continue to love both Jesus and the Church, but not confuse one with the other.”¹

Yes! This is my invitation and prayer for you First UCC- that you do not confuse the harm the church has done with who Jesus is.

¹ Holly MillerShank, [Northeast Regional Newsletter](#), July 29, 2021

At the same time, we need to give Jesus credit for the life-transforming things we do but have disconnected his influence from them.

When you practice seeing no strangers, remember the story Jesus told of the Good Samaritan on the road. When you extend an extravagant welcome, remember the table Jesus set with bread and cup seated beside the one who would betray him, the one who would deny him and the rest who would desert him. When you stand and walk and write and phone for justice remember Jesus who challenged systems of oppression. When we pray for the fullness of God's reign here on earth as it is in heaven remember this is how Jesus taught us to pray. When we welcome the immigrant, pray for healing, dedicate acts of mercy remember Jesus taught us to do so.

We join with Sikhs and Jews and contemplative Catholics and Muslims. We follow contemporary prophets like Otis Moss III, Traci Blackmon and Jacqui Lewis in a project of Revolutionary Love. If we choose to see, there are universal tendrils of connection to the courageous love and justice of Jesus. Jesus is not our only inspiration for these ways, but it sure helps that we can reliably turn to a source alongside others to help us know how to be and what to do. We seek not uniformity of thought but rather unity in going deeper around how the way of Jesus might be lived in and through us all.

Dear First UCC, I boldly pray to God that you will be that church. A church that provides brave space for the people gathered here and online, but also sharing your learning with other churches. The United Church of Christ as a whole could gain from your greater grounding in the courageous love and justice of Jesus. Our mission dovetails naturally with the mission of the MN Conference "equipping a courageous church alive with Christ's transforming love." We need each other to reclaim the church of Jesus Christ for the common good of all of God's creation.

If you are part of a wave of United Church of Christ congregations that equip friends and members to a reclamation project of Jesus – divorcing him from the hurts of the church past, what a healing balm you would set in motion. To make this kind of difference in the world, we need to be send down deep roots so our limbs and leaves can reach the sky. We do this not to show how right we are, but to add clarity of purpose to our actions.

God needs a church like First UCC to survive- a place where hope thrives, the welcome of Jesus is extravagantly offered, and lives are changed for the good. May it be so. Amen.

Benediction- Because God is so good, all the time, because you already walk the way of Jesus, because the Spirit is your unwavering companion on the journey- you've got this. Continue to spread your wings wider, go deeper in this complex mysterious tradition and all things will be well and all manner of things shall be well. And May God watch between me and you, while we apart, one from another.