

The Church is a Place
Acts 16: 9 – 15
First United Church of Christ, Northfield
Rev. Wendy Vander Hart
November 22, 2020

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

The church is a place. Those were the opening words of a sermon preached by former Executive Minister Ben Guess¹ at an Annual Meeting of the MA Conference eight years ago. It was our last time meeting as an Annual Meeting in a beloved space on the campus of Mount Holyoke College. For a decades long span the United Church of Christ would take over the campus for a weekend long meeting in June that had revival aspects to it as well as the inevitable drab drawn out congregational processes. It was a bucolic gathering place, a hangout with colleagues space, a sermon free weekend, time that ended with a grand worship service filling the Chapel with lofty volunteer choir music and resonant organ notes. Communion among almost a thousand people is memorable.

The church is a place. Christmas Eve- candlelit because there was no electricity. Warmed by a fire started in the woodburning stove by dawn. Two services packed to the gills at 8:00 p.m. and 11 p.m. accompanied by a pump organ, choirs singing from the balcony overlooking the softly illumined faces by the aisle candleabra and lanterns in windows. The Old Dutch Church of Sleepy Hollow a stone building sadly built by enslaved persons for a Dutch colonial landowner in 1697 was my childhood church for those Christmas Eve as well as summer worship gatherings. The nearby burying ground where my mother's ashes are buried and where mine will someday too.

The church is a place. A robust congregation of 250 souls, some arriving by school bus, heartily beginning worship with a hymn sing. An apse under which a choir augmented by ringer friend singers proclaim My Shepherd Will Supply My Need. Another choir – Choir Light sings a favorite anthem, "We've Come This Far By Faith." A wide open front "chancel" area where a broad Scandanavian style beech wood communion table stands. Vows stated, rings exchanged, the power dramatically cut out on a steamy rainy October afternoon. Still in darkness people streamed forward for bread and cup. A couple blessed and sent. Our wedding day at First Church in Cambridge.

The church is a place. What places of church are rising in your mind and heart right now? Pilgrim Point, First UCC, First something else?

The church is a space. In these days it is this space called Zoom where we are living digitally. Here we still we baptize, reaffirm baptism, commune, pray, proclaim and long. We long for a return to place, to comfort, to stability. We ache for proximity, touch, smell and sound. We lament the space between us even while we are grateful to at least see faces, hear voices, feel some connection to a people, to God's people.

That the church is a place or a space has always been important. The phrase "we supposed there was a place of prayer" captured me in this scripture from Acts. Paul and his companions on the road sought out the church as a place. How did these strangers to town know there would be a place of prayer by the river? The text gives us no clues. All we can surmise is that Paul and companions are seekers of sacred places, spaces where people meet to pray, to console, to challenge, to share good news.

The place to pray that they found was a surprising one. First, it was led by a woman and a well to do businesswoman at that. As a purveyor of purple cloth, Lydia was a woman of means. That she was leading

¹ Rev. Ben Guess, The Church Is a Place, MA Conference Annual Meeting June 16, 2012

<https://www.macucc.org/newsdetail/92791>

worship with a congregation made up of other women was unusual. That they were hospitable to men showing up from the road even more so. That these men received her leadership, joined in their practice and stayed for coffee hour was simply amazing! Lydia's place was an island in a sea of male dominated, colonized people.

The church is a place and beyond a place – the reach of the gospel crosses all kinds of lines. While it provides a scripture reader with a challenge to pronounce geographic spaces, the original hearer's ears would have been perked by the range of places Paul and companions travel to bring good news. As commentator Eric Barreto explains, "For the writer Luke, these geographical details are not mere window dressings or simple signposts to help the reader keep their place on the map... Unmistakably for Luke, this is the way upon which God plans the church to walk. We ought to follow God's call to reach across cultural and ethnic boundaries and learn to find opportunities to do God's work in unexpected places. In Acts, this road is particularly marked by the panoply of people toward which the Spirit reaches out—Macedonian, Philippian, Thyatirian, Jewish, and Roman alike. Ought not our missional paths bear the same character?"²

Our Transition Team has been learning about our Northfield area neighbors and how it shapes our church as a place. What has stood out to us after the election is how Northfield is a blue dot in a sea of red. Perhaps this should not be a surprise, but if you thought the lawn signs in Northfield would be predictive of the overall vote for President in Rice County – it affirmed that we are a blue dot in a red sea.

But I am not here to preach politics. I bring no judgment to this realization of our island living except to say that this learning should shape our ministry. For those who suppose First UCC to be a place of prayer, what should they expect to find? From my experience to date, First UCC is an island among Christian churches in Northfield with a chance to reach populations that need a place, a refuge, a haven from "judgy" Jesus and are looking for "justice" Jesus.

I know some of you come from a Christian tradition where their practice of Jesus has harmed you. I too am one of those. Being on the receiving end of Exodus International LGBTQ conversion materials that proclaimed to be rooted in love were not just painful they did serious damage to my sense of belovedness in the sight of God. Clawing back from that intervention, claiming not only that God accepts who I am as a same gender loving woman but embraces my marriage was an act of faith. For a while I rejected Jesus because I thought he was behind that conversion therapy. I believed he was one who judged my salvation to be in question because of who I loved. But then I found the church that practiced justice Jesus.

I praise God for the progressive Christian voice of Church of the Covenant in Boston who ordained me and where the Open and Affirming movement in MA was born. The church is a place. I praise God for Melrose Highlands Congregational Church that was not yet Open and Affirming but came to our wedding. The church is a place. I praise God for First UCC and its practice of OWL, its hospitality to CYAN and its adoption of Open and Affirming, Immigrant Welcoming, Just Peace and making a pledge to engage racial justice. The church is a place. The physical signs around our church that we saw in our Prelude slide show offer an unmistakable vision of extravagant welcome. And from where I sit, and what I would suggest, that welcome is rooted in the teachings, the life, the justice of Jesus. All of our island stances, all the ways we are shaped for hospitable ministry, all of the ways we are shaped as a place are in dialogue with the justice of Jesus.

The signs around our building that proclaim "Jesus is wild about you." "You are so loved." "God loves you just the way you are" matter. In the sea of Christian practice, these messages are an island. Being an island, a refuge, a haven has never been more important than it is right now.

² Eric Barreto, [Working Preacher Commentary](#), May 9, 2010
© First United Church of Christ, Northfield MN

The church is a place. Thanks be to God!