

Church of the Red Rocks – United Church of Christ
“What’s Next?”
Isaiah 40:21-32; Mark 1:29-39
Rev. Dr. Donna Cavedon
February 5, 2012

WOW! What a great annual meeting we had last week. Lots of reasons to celebrate at The Church of the Red Rocks. Annual meetings allow us to step back and review all that has been undertaken within a 12 month period. Did you see all the new programs that were started this year? Listing them all just makes us stop and say “WOW!”. Great energy! Great spirit! Great faith!

If you were not here for the Annual Meeting and have not heard the results of our historic Open and Affirming vote, I am pleased to tell you that the vote passed by 90% of those present. That is a wonderful margin of affirmation. Through this affirmation we have declared that we will stand with the marginalized to seek justice and fairness in this world. WOW!

As Dr. Ault noted in last week’s sermon, this step is only the beginning of the process of what it means to be Open and Affirming. The metaphor of vow is a powerful one for us as it reflects that any vow we take is only the beginning of a new life; be it a marriage or an ordination or any commitment we take on in our lives. While we catch our breath and celebrate this courageous stance, (Yes, they will know we are Christians by our love) the work before us is on-going.

Last Sunday morning the United Church of Christ’s devotion for that morning just happened to be *Still Open and Affirming After ‘All’ these Years*, written by Lillian Daniel, a UCC minister. “It seems like a long time ago,” Daniel wrote, “that our church went through the Open and Affirming process and made a statement welcoming all people to the church. But when I look at my calendar, I see that it was only two and a half years ago. In a congregation that is celebrating its 150th anniversary, that is very recent history.

Members of other churches, who went through the process many years before we did, had warned me that this might happen. They talked about how quickly a process that took up so much passion and energy could slip into past history, like something that had been checked off a list and completed, even taken for granted. Those of us who went through the open and affirming process can forget how surprising or even shocking those words of welcome might be to a first-time visitor to the church. Old news for one person is groundbreaking news for another.

We might forget how many people don’t know that there are churches like ours. We might forget to celebrate, to tell our friends, to invite the stranger. We might also forget to check ourselves, as a changing community, to see if we are still living up to those lofty words. We might forget to keep having the hard conversations. Because the work of welcoming is never done. A vote or a statement doesn’t take care of anything, unless we live it out each day.”

Lillian Daniels is correct when she says that the work of welcoming is never done. A vote or statement doesn’t take care of anything, unless we live it out each day. That is the work of an on-going vow – it takes work, intentionality and commitment. And perhaps some humor – just ask anyone who has been married for some time.

I feel called today to also address those of you who did not vote in favor of our becoming, formally, an Open and Affirming congregation. I am feeling called to ask you to stick

with us. We still have a lot to learn from one another and there is plenty of room to grow with each other. We may not all agree on what this vote means to us, but we are a family of faith, and families can still love and care for one another and work together regardless of differences.

We all have growing edges and learning curves. I like the bumper sticker that reads: “Oh no! Not another learning experience.” Sometimes we just don’t want to have any more of those, but being faithful and living up to the potential of who God calls us to be as individuals and as a congregation means growing in a variety of ways. This family of faith is a strong one, and I trust that we can agree to disagree and still find the bonds that unite us are stronger than those that challenge us. Maybe – just maybe - we can model a civil discourse that appears to be missing in our culture today.

It just so happens that last Monday’s UCC devotion entitled *Sweet Spot* speaks to this struggle. This devotion was written by Kenneth Samuel.

“A political cartoon depicts President Barack Obama standing between two men with angry expressions. The man on the right points a finger at the President and shouts ‘Socialist!’ The man on the left points a finger at the President and shouts ‘Sellout!’ In the middle of this convergence of anger, President Obama flashes a big smile and says, ‘Sweet Spot!’

Many people claim that to be at the center of conflicting ideas and opposing opinions is valueless. Many believe that compromise is never a viable option. We've seen this attitude on display in the U.S. Congress, we've seen it deteriorate ecumenical relations among Christian denominations and dilute the impetus for multi-faith dialogue and respect. We've even seen this attitude in ourselves from time to time, when we've allowed ourselves to become so stringently polarized that we are openly hostile to any attempt to bridge the distance between our perspective and a differing one.

But the cartoonist who depicted Obama's stance between two opposing ideologies was on to something. Very rarely does any one side have a lock on all the truth. And while there is a time to take a stand and stand firm, the door of dialogue and compromise with others should never be shut completely. Center spots are not easy spots to be in, but sometimes they serve as the axle that holds the wheel of the community together.

In many respects, Samuel writes, the Apostle Paul led a reform movement within Judaism that put him at odds with many in his faith tradition. He could have advanced his cause with no regard for the concerns or beliefs of those who disagreed with him. Instead, he followed the advice of a council of his religious cohorts and submitted himself to the Jewish rites of purification, which he himself considered to be unnecessary. In so doing, he was able to continue his work among the Gentiles without disrespecting the religious traditions of his orthodox brothers and sisters. *Sweet Spot.*”

This devotion is closed with the following prayer: Dear God, please don't allow my passion for what I believe to disconnect me completely from those in my community with different perspectives. Keep me open to the sweet spots in my life. Amen.

On a personal note I share with you why this vote and stance are important to me in my life. As a pastor I have now lived through two churches that have become officially Open and Affirming. The first person I called after both votes was my sister, Celeste. Both times I was overcome with emotion at the enormity of the stand for justice that a Christian church has taken that I could not speak. What this justice stance means for my sister, an openly gay woman, is overwhelming to me. What this justice stance means for those seen to be on the margins in our culture is overwhelming to me.

This vote is a deepening and continuing of our commitment that ‘no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here’. This is a profound spiritual stand, and it takes my breath away.

When I read the ONA statement crafted by our own ONA team, I am struck by the inclusivity of the embrace extended to those at the margins of our society. This issue is not just about sexuality but it means that we will embrace all left-handed folk. If you were not here a couple of weeks ago to hear Dr. Ault’s sermon of *Being Left-Handed in a Right-Handed World*, he spoke to the fact that we all have something that we struggle with in our lives. His example was that he couldn’t smell and had flat feet. We all have things with which we struggle and we all yearn to belong, to know that we are indeed children of God, and that God loves us still – regardless of our left-handedness.

I am proud of this congregation and your courage to step out of the box and stand with others for justice. And I am proud of you who voted no as well because of your courage to vote as you felt you needed to. I am proud to be one of your pastors and to stand with you today as we walk into the future – sweet spots and all.

As we walk into the future as a servant church it is also important for us to take the time to nurture ourselves. This is ‘What’s Next’. Leonard Sweet wrote that “Faith is a social practice, but one that requires solitude. Sometimes society, sometimes solitude. Sometimes it is not good to be alone. Sometimes we need to be left alone to see what God has for us to see.” But it is all of us together – as church – that makes it work.

Donald Tuttle tells the story of a little boy and his father. They were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The boy looked at the stone and thought about it a little. Then he asked his father. “Do you think if I use all my strength, I can move that rock?”

The father thought for a moment and said, “I think that if you use all your strength, you can do it.” That was all the little boy needed. He ran over to the rock and began to push on it. He pushed and he pushed, so hard did he try that little beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. But the rock didn’t move – not an inch, not half an inch.

After a while, the little boy sat down on the ground. His face had fallen. His whole body seemed to be just a lump there on the earth. “You were wrong,” he told his dad. “I can’t do it.”

His father walked over to him, knelt beside him, and put his arm around the boy’s shoulder. “You can do it,” he said. “You just didn’t use all your strength. You didn’t ask me to help.”

The world in which we live tells us that it is all up to us. It tells us that we have to be strong and independent. It tells us we can’t and shouldn’t count on anyone or anything else. And yet, what faith tells us and what Jews and Christians have known forever is that we have a ready resource in God, strength for those who ask.”

Yes, we can overwhelm ourselves with important and busy work. But Jesus modeled for us the practice of justice and solitude. Today’s passage in Mark opens with Jesus healing Simon’s mother-in-law on the Sabbath. Breaking out of the box of the rules of the day, beyond the religious laws of his time, Jesus saw a family in need and broke all sorts of rules and regulations by healing on the Sabbath. When this woman was restored to health, she too got up and in her role of providing hospitality began serving those gathered, including Jesus, also on the Sabbath. Then Jesus took the time to go to a quiet place and pray. Justice and solitude. We cannot do one without the other, and we cannot do it alone.

As we gather this morning around the communion table we are able to do so, not because we merit it by what we do or how we pray, but because God meets us with grace and unconditional love. Can we do no less. Amen.

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