

## “On Being Stewards of Grace”

Luke 7:36-8:3

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I remember where I was when President Kennedy was assassinated. I know where I was when Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon. I have no clue where I was when the Congregational, Christian, Evangelical and Reformed churches merged into one denomination, the United Church of Christ. That was 50 years ago in Oberlin, Ohio. Fifty years ago I was a fourth grade student at High Street School. Grace Robb was my teacher. It was the year I received my first Bible, a gift from this very Congregational Church! I have it here with me in the pulpit!

While I was hanging out at Kinne's Corner Store trading baseball cards, aching to trade my Willey Mays for a Mickey Mantle, and finding no takers, church leaders from around the country were celebrating the birth of a whole new denomination. I had no clue about that at the time. In fact, it was many years later that the words 'United Church of Christ' actually reached a place of consciousness in my mind. In the spring of 1971 I was filling out the application for seminary. I got to the page where you declare your church affiliation. I looked for Congregational, but it wasn't one of those listed! I knew I wasn't a Methodist or a Lutheran or a Presbyterian. I thought that the omission of Congregational was odd because Andover Newton was where Congregational ministers get their training. I had to write to the minister I had had in Confirmation to find out I was now in the United Church of Christ!

Though I totally zoned out on the first 14 years of the UCC's history, I've been on board for the last 36! Among the many things I appreciate about our denomination is the commitment to being a force of unity in the world, a commitment to bringing people of faith together, naming our common ground, celebrating what unites us rather than harping on what separates us. Indeed, the motto of the United Church of Christ arises out of that prayer in John's Gospel where Jesus prays for his disciples, **'that they may all be one.'**

One of the unifying strategies is the common lectionary, the selection of Bible passages for each Sunday that takes us through the entire Bible in a three-year cycle. Whether you attend Trinity UCC in Chicago or Shepherd of the Hills UCC in Arizona or the UCC in Monson, Maine; if you're in church this morning, you'll be hearing about the woman who poured precious ointment over Jesus' feet and then dried his feet with her hair. We're all digging in to the same text, pondering the same characters, encountering the same truth.

In this Gospel narrative, Simon the Pharisee and the other authority figures are shocked that Jesus would associate with a blatant sinner such as the woman in the story. Luke describes her as 'a woman of the city.' But Jesus sees this woman as a person who needs a little grace. She needs a break. She doesn't hide who she is or who she's been. She presents herself as one who needs a little grace, a little kindness. Her community has judged her harshly. They have labeled her. She is tired of being criticized. She is hoping for a fresh start. She has no idea where to begin. Everyone else in the house sees her as a woman to be scorned. Only Jesus sees her loving spirit. He alone treats her with grace. If anyone in the story is to be judged, it is the self-righteous ones, Simon and his pals.

This is a story about grace. This story marks a defining moment in the history of religion. This story introduces grace as God's way of relating to the human family. In this story, God steps out of the judging role and into the forgiving role; God is revealed here as the One who sees what is redeemable and moves in the human realm to do that work of redeeming.

Though most builders would prefer constructing a new house with new materials on a new building lot, the God of the Christian era prefers the 'rehab' approach, prefers to work on the old house with the leaky roof, the tired, rundown shelter with the broken windows, the structure with rotted out floor joists and a crumbling foundation. In the Christian Story, God is revealed as One who comes into the world to deliver a little grace, a plan of amnesty, a strategy to forgive, a vision to unify.

Simon and the others in the house are heard to grumble about what appears to them to be an undeserved amnesty. It galls them to watch Jesus treat this woman with a welcome. It ruffles their feathers to see him be so forgiving of a woman they had deemed unforgivable. They would prefer she be sent back to wherever it is she came from; back to Samaria or back to Judea or back to Central America. Simon and the others are absolutely correct in their observation. It is an amnesty Jesus offers, a free gift, a grace. It's what sets him apart. It's what gets him into a lot of trouble. And it's what endears him to us now.

What I know is that you and I are the heirs of this grace. That is, we have inherited this posture for being grace-full. In the same way that I inherited my grandfather's Waltham watch and was expected to be a good steward of it, I have also been entrusted with this unique way of being in the world. I am a steward of grace. We all are! We are stewards of grace. We have been entrusted with this gift and the way to preserve it is by living it.

When I think about our beloved denomination, the United Church of Christ, I think of this scene that Luke paints of Jesus at the home of Simon the Pharisee, in the presence of this woman of the city. I see our church standing as Jesus stood, not being one more voice of judgment, but offering something new, a response full of grace.

In my life, I have encountered lots of people who judge harshly. Their judgment is so cutting it leaves the world wounded and bleeding. Perhaps you know people like this. But I have also known men and women and children who have chosen instead to live gracefully, to see what is redeemable and to align themselves with the forces of redemption. Perhaps you know people like this. They leave the world looking more like one of those patch-work quilts, all tied together, all snug as a bug in a rug, all united as one piece of art!

Two months ago, I heard some commotion coming from the connector area. I listened for a moment, then heard the unmistakable tinkling of glass breaking over tile, then the predictable silence. Stepping into the connector, I could see that one boy was trying his hardest to open the door to come in while two or three other boys were holding the door to prevent the first from entering. It's what boys do sometimes. They saw me coming. They froze in their tracks. I surveyed the situation. I could see that I had two options: to come down hard on their reckless behavior, making them feel worse than they already felt; or, to meet them where they were in their state of coming undone. I chose the latter. You knew I would. I said simply, "So, what did we learn here?" We chatted a bit about what had been learned. They went their way and I went mine. I don't know about them, but I felt we had all experienced a moment of grace. I felt like I had claimed my inheritance as a steward of grace. The window can be replaced; as fragile as it is, it can be replaced. Even more fragile is the relationship between a pastor and a 10 year old boy, or the relationship between a church and a family.

In the United Church of Christ, we err on the side of grace. This is our blessed inheritance. This is why some people find this denomination is not a good fit and why others find it is the only place that does fit!

So, when our nation debates issues such as immigration policy, the church speaks as one who is a steward of grace. When the state debates issues of equality for same sex couples, the church speaks as one who is a steward of grace. When the town debates zoning policies for affordable housing, the church speaks as one who is a steward of grace.

I am enamored with the idea of being a steward, a care-taker, a party responsible for nurturing those gifts that have been placed in our hands. The Apostle Paul refers to this as a “treasure in earthen vessels.” He thinks of grace as the treasure. He thinks of the church as the earthen vessel; the fragile, breakable container entrusted with the well-being of the priceless treasure.

Lo, these fifty years, the United Church of Christ has labored to be this earthen vessel, this steward of God’s grace. May the next fifty years be more of the same! In the greatest of hope, Amen!