

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury
Sermon – September 25, 2005
“Faith Under Construction”

Philippians 2:1-13
19th Sunday after Pentecost/A
Lynne M. Dolan

South Glastonbury
Connecticut

I want to begin this morning by inviting you to open to the back cover of your hymnals. There you will find a copy of the Covenant of the church. The congregation renews its covenant whenever we receive new members. Let's however, break with tradition and say it together this morning.

We acknowledge that we are God's people and stand within the covenant which God has made fully known to us through our Lord, Jesus Christ. In the tradition of those before us, who were upheld by their faith in this covenant, we will pray for the presence of the Holy Spirit to lead and empower our lives.

We covenant together with one another, in fellowship of Christian love and trust, to worship God together, study the Holy Scriptures and observe the sacraments. We commit ourselves to support the ministries of this Church, to witness in the world to God's reconciling love, and to walk together in God's ways made known or to be made known to us.

As a community of faith, we acknowledge our continuing need of God's grace and our dependence upon one another in the fulfillment of this covenant.

I love our covenant. I love our church. Good and faithful people worked long and hard on this document. It is too important to quietly tuck away in the back of our hymnals only to see the light of day when we receive new members. We should be able to say our covenant by heart. It is so meaningful because it says so beautifully and clearly what it means to be a member of South Church. I hope that even if you are not formally a member of this church, but consider yourself one among us, that you can affirm these words and own them for yourself.

The language and tone of our covenant remind me of the Statement of Faith for the United Church of Christ. I appreciate the covenant's universality. It could be affirmed in any Christian church. It names a way of being, a way of becoming. It holds us to clear accountability. It is profound in its simplicity. It is more than a list of things we should do together, but a way we are to be together.

A covenant is more than an agreement. It is a sacred promise between God and God's people. We do not simply hold one another accountable to this document. God is part of this arrangement. With God as our partner in this agreement we should not be intimidated, but empowered. After all, we do not do these things for our own sake, to look better or enhance our personal portfolio, but because as followers of Jesus Christ, this is how we honor God. This is what a life in Christ is all about; to worship, to learn, to love and to serve. Therefore, guilt or fear or punishment should not motivate us to fulfill this sacred covenant, but rather the joy that truly comes from being and becoming more and more Christ-like.

Paul teaches us something about being and becoming Christ-like. What we hear this morning in this portion of his letter to the Phillipians is much like the covenant of South Church. He has some good and important things to say about transforming the body of Christ. Perhaps a bit of information about the church in Philippi would help us. The church in Philippi was successful, cosmopolitan, diverse, ambitious, and visible. Sounds like a church to which we could relate. The talent, affection and achievement of its believers have aroused great joy and affection in Paul. These folks have found a special place in his heart. However, it is because they are successful, ambitious and special, that they most need to hear what Paul has to say.

He warns them, BEWARE! Your achievement has led to self-sufficiency. Your pride has led to self-importance. Your focus on excellence has led to factions and competition and disunity. The church in Phillipipi shares some of the struggles we experience today. Susan Andrews believes Paul was saying to the Phillipian church, 'in becoming 'good at God' you are distancing yourself from the very one you are called to serve. Therefore, dear ones, repent. Humble yourselves. Harmonize yourselves. Focus not on how successful you are, but on how faithful you are. Together have the same mind—the same attitude—toward one another as Christ has toward you, as God wants you to have toward Christ.'

Paul reminds this church in Phillipipi that they are to think of "success" in a new and different ways as followers of Christ. Paul uses the word humility several times in this portion of his letter. The word "humility" has its root in the Latin *humus*, which means "earth." To be earthy does not mean to be weak or meek or self-deprecating. Rather, it means to be real, to be of one substance with others, to admit that a level of dependence upon God and one another in order to grow in your life of faith. To be humble means "to be of one mind, the same mind as Christ." It does not mean to agree, to share the same opinions, or think alike. What might it mean to be of one mind in this particular congregation? Even as we acknowledge our differences of opinion, varying talents, and a plethora of tastes and lifestyles—how might we share a vision and an attitude and a

spirit of Christ? That is what the membership task force has tried to discern in their work together. What are the core values of this congregation? How might we be of one mind, the same mind as Christ? They did not have to search far. Both the church's covenant and today's scripture lesson provide important clues for what it means to be a member.

That is what we should consider as we gather to discuss this issue of membership. In whatever we do and whatever guidelines we devise, how might we share a vision and an attitude and a spirit of Christ? How as a member of this congregation, might I become more Christ-like? The answers to those questions may sometimes seem a bit puzzling. Paul affirms the sense of paradox that is the very heart of Jesus' theology. As members of the body of Christ he reminds us that it is in giving that we receive, it is by serving that we are served and it is by humbling ourselves that we are exalted. We can accomplish none of this by our own accord. This is only possible by the God who is at work within us. According to Paul we are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Yet, our salvation is not possible without God being at work in us, enabling us both to will and to work for God's pleasure, as Paul puts it. God saves us with grace and power and love. It is only when we give up oneself, that we discover our true Self.

As we discuss the issue of membership we want to make clear that church growth is not our primary concern. We are not having these conversations out of fear of what is to come, but rather because we are excited by what we currently experience and by the possibilities that await us into our future. Growing in the Spirit of Christ should always be our primary concern. We have come to understand that people in today's culture are not always sure what it means to be a member of the church. There are several reasons for this. Many people did not grow up going to church regularly or grew up in a faith tradition other than the Congregational Church. Making people aware and familiar of the expectations we hold for membership is not meant to keep people in and others out. Rather, our desire is for people to be faithful to the gospel of Christ and faithful to Christ's call to us as his disciples.

Anthony Robinson, the author of *Transforming Congregational Culture*, the book that has informed the work of our three task forces, believes that membership growth is, in many ways, a by-product of effective ministry and mission, and not its goal. Kirk Hadaway claims that our goal in congregations is not necessarily to be large churches or even to be great churches, but rather to be *real* churches. By 'real' Hadaway means communities of faith where the sacred is experienced in life transforming ways, and where Christian faith becomes incarnate in the life of a congregation and its members.

Tony Robinson makes an important observation about churches today. He says, "especially in a time when too many congregations have become clubs or clans that are

dedicated to the contentment of their members, growth in membership is one indication that a congregation is not simply a club. Clubs tend to take in enough new members to meet their own needs, to pay the bills, to fill out the committees, and to add ‘people like us.’ Churches, on the other hand, grow because they are engaged in the movement of human transformation, of healing, of new life and change...Growth happens where lives are being changed, and in all likelihood that growth will involve the vitality of engagement in ministry.” (pp 115-116)

The church is in the business of transformation. It is our goal to rid ourselves of whatever might hinder the free movement of the Holy Spirit. Is there an attitude I hold onto, a doubt or skepticism or worry about our future that keeps me from being fully open to the movement of the Holy Spirit?

Paul calls us to be of the same spirit as Christ, to live a Christ-like life marked by selfless giving and servanthood. This is the mark of vital churches, even today. What Paul says continues to challenge us. He reminds us that downward mobility is the mark of Christ. It goes against everything the world preaches and teaches. We invite you to be part of the fruitful and faithful dialogue at the cottage meetings because like Paul, we love the church and we love its people. If we did not care about being faithful disciples, we would not bother.

The Hasidic masters tell the story of the rabbi who disappeared every Shabat Eve, “to commune with God in the forest,” his congregation thought. So one Sabbath night they sent one of their cantors to follow the rabbi and observe the holy encounter. Deeper and deeper into the woods the rabbi went until he came to a small cottage of an old Gentile woman sick to death and crippled into a painful posture. Once there, the rabbi cooked for her, carried her firewood and swept her floor. Then when the chores were finished, he returned immediately to his little house next to the synagogue.

Back in the village, the people demanded of the one they’d sent to follow him, “did our rabbi go up to heaven as we thought?” “Oh, no,” the cantor answered after a thoughtful pause, “our rabbi went, much, much higher than that.” This is what God expects. It is what a Christ-like life is all about; that we put the lives of others ahead of our own, that we seek in all things to love our neighbors, that we do whatever God calls us to do in order to live our life in Christ to the fullest. That does not mean doing extraordinary things, but those ordinary things extraordinarily well. Our call is to live as Christ lived, as one “who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” May it be so! Amen