

Living Well, Living Wisely
July 5, 2015
James 3:13-18 (The Message)

It's half-time . . . When we last gathered we were in the first half of the year we call 2015. Today we are at the very beginning of the second half of 2015.

The mid-point of the calendar year offers a wonderful opportunity to check in to see if we are moving in the direction we had hoped and planned when the year started, and to make any necessary mid-course corrections. It is also an ideal time to reorient ourselves more generally to what it means to live well and to live wisely.

Our Scripture reading from the third chapter of James helps us move in that direction.

Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts.

Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom - it's animal cunning, devilish conniving.

Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats.

Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced.

You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.

May God bless the reading and hearing of these wise words, and let us pray. Holy, Wise and Caring One, help us to know you and to live your wisdom. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Last Sunday I shared that our denomination – the United Church of Christ – was in the middle of something called General Synod. Held every two years this national gathering affords an opportunity for many in our tradition to come together in one place for several days of worship, learning, and decision making.

At this General Synod – our thirtieth, held in Cleveland – delegates voted on more than a dozen resolutions¹. By now you may have heard about some of these. The media has been especially attentive to a few.

Not everything considered passed. Some of the resolutions that did not pass, include

- amendments to the UCC constitution and bylaws that would have shifted leadership of the national setting from the current four-person collegium structure to one general minister and president,²
- a call for legislation requiring the labeling of genetically engineered foods as such on packaging, and³
- recognizing the actions of Israel against Palestine as apartheid.⁴

These resolutions did not pass because they did not receive the required number of votes. At General Synod a resolution must be affirmed by at least two thirds of the votes in order to pass.

Several resolutions did acquire enough support to pass. Resolutions that passed include some that are not all that controversial:

¹ For a complete list see “Resolutions Submitted for Consideration by the Thirtieth General Synod.”

<<http://synod.uccpages.org/resolutions/index.html>>

² Anthony Moujaes. “General Synod Votes To Retain Current Leadership Structure.”

<http://www.ucc.org/news_general_synod_votes_to_retain_current_leadership_structure_07012015>

³ Tim Kershner. “UCC Resolutions Address Both The Heavens And The Earth.”

<http://www.ucc.org/news_general_synod_ucc_resolutions_address_both_the_heavens_and_the_earth_07012015>

⁴ Jaweed Kaleem. “United Church Of Christ Takes A Stand On Israeli-Palestinian Conflict With Divestment Vote.”

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/30/united-church-of-christ-divestment-israel_n_7697624.html>

- joining two denominations in full communion: the United Church of Christ and the United Church of Canada,⁵
- supporting equality by actively dismantling racism (two resolutions: dismantling systems of mass incarceration and dismantling the New Jim Crow), and⁶
- implementing good stewardship of all space, including outer space, by recognizing the need for an outer space environment free of humanly constructed debris⁷

And some resolutions passed at General Synod have generated a lot of discussion within and beyond our denomination, especially

- requesting that the National Football League team in Washington change their racially demeaning name and mascot, and⁸
- calling for boycotts and divestment from companies that profit from Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands.⁹

Perhaps as I shared this partial list of resolutions you were considering how you would have voted if you had been present at Synod as a delegate. I won't tell you exactly how I would have voted, but can assure you if my voice was the only one that counted the results would have been different.

Since many of us here come from a variety of denominations and Christian traditions, I want to be sure that we all recognize the role of the work of General Synod. In other denominations when a national gathering like this happens and decisions are made they are then enforced at the level of local church as new ways of being the church.

In our denomination – the United Church of Christ – the General Synod speaks to not for our local congregations or other settings of the church. In other words, while General Synod resolutions say

⁵ Jeff Woodard. "UCC Affirms Full Communion With United Church Of Canada."

<http://www.ucc.org/news_general_synod_ucc_affirms_full_communion_with_united_church_of_canada_06292015>

⁶ Micki Carter. "Dismantling Racism In Our Criminal Justice System Subject Of Two Synod Resolutions."

<http://www.ucc.org/news_general_synod_dismantling_racism_in_our_criminal_justice_system_06302015>

⁷ Kershner.

⁸ Emily Schappacher. "UCC General Synod Calls On Washington NFL Team To Change Name, Logo."

<http://www.ucc.org/news_general_synod_calls_on_washington_nfl_team_to_change_name_logo_06292015>

⁹ Anthony Moujaes. "UCC Votes For Divestment, Boycott Of Companies That Profit From Occupation Of Palestinian Territories." <http://www.ucc.org/news_general_synod_israel_palestine_resolution_06302015>

something to us because we are a covenant people they do not demand our agreement much less our compliance. Our local church has real autonomy.

While some here care a great deal about the national setting of our denomination others have far less interest and some have no interest at all. What we do share in common is a love for and commitment to this expression of church – the Fort Myers Congregational United Church of Christ.

I won't be asking for your vote this morning, although such a response would be informative and interesting. I will, however, be calling you to think about what it means for us to live well together even to live wisely together as a local congregation while affirming our considerable diversity.

In recent weeks I have encountered a number of strong personal preferences about who we are and who we are becoming as a church. Consider some of the areas in which we differ that have generated considerable conversation among members and friends here in this community of faith

- some prefer to sing the words to hymns just as they did when growing up while others prefer the inclusive and expansive language found in our current hymnal,
- some strongly prefer pews in the sanctuary while others are open to chairs or any number of seating options,
- some prefer more pietistic preaching while others favor more activist sermons,
- some prefer that clapping be reserved for very specific occasions within worship while others favor the opportunity for spontaneous applause at any time, and
- some prefer Communion or, if you prefer, the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist, be celebrated in the same or a very similar way on a monthly basis while others are open to varying approaches and frequencies.

Breathe! . . . Take a deep breath or perhaps two or three . . .

In houses of worship all across our land today many ministers will ask people to affirm specific doctrines, to agree with detailed statements of faith, and to be submissive to their spiritual authority.

In contrast, we gather together in this sacred space to worship to be

- reminded that we are made in the image and likeness of God,
- reoriented to the Way of Jesus, and
- reconnected with the power of the Spirit.

We gather trusting that our Still Speaking God is speaking to us individually while also addressing us as a community of faith. We come not to hear a preacher tell us what to believe, but rather to find our way together toward true wisdom.

We

- value unity over uniformity,
- welcome doubt and difficult questions, and
- embrace our call to live well in community.

We come to be nourished at the Table ready for our eyes to be opened again to the power of God's wisdom. This is a wisdom that, according to this morning's Scripture, "begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others."¹⁰

Amen.

¹⁰ James 3:17, The Message.