

“Life Together”  
January 29, 2023

Colossians 1:15-20  
Matthew 18:15-22

A while ago I was talking with someone who had just learned that I was a minister. And I got this response that I’ve heard before. He said that although he was “kind of a spiritual person” he didn’t like organized religion. You know, I could only reply: “Then you’d love being at the Congregational Church! We’re the champions of *unorganized* religion.”

We’re all living out our faith in so many different ways that it’s hard to get a handle on just who we are.

We are, of course, in the very best sense of that very good word, a *liberal* congregation. “Liberal” implies a sense of generosity and we are generous in our thinking and with our time and our lives as well as our treasure.

We value the *freedom* we have to think out and work out what is always a changing faith in a changing world.

Following the lead of Jesus, we have an *inclusive* sense of community.

We’re not all alike. But we are similar in our openness to and respect for the faith of others. We are similar in our faith that God is still working within us and among us and through us in the world. We are similar in our fierce recognition that this church belongs to us. It is *our* work, *our* life, *our* responsibility. The success of everything we do depends entirely on our members.

Congregationalism, then, naturally attracts women and men of genuine conviction, of adventurous faith, and of gracious respect for each other’s sincerity.

If you’re visiting here this morning, my guess is that you’ve been looking for a place like this. There aren’t many places in town like this congregation. As Bob Abernethy, the host of PBS’s *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* said to me after he worshipped here once: “This is the real thing.”

It is.

Already this morning we welcomed 6 new people into this unruly fellowship. And when our worship concludes, we will do our best to *appear* organized as we meet together to recall what we in our disparate ways have done and to look ahead to another year of unorganized life together. We call this our “Annual Meeting.”

This congregation is a home.

This congregation is a community.

This congregation is a gathering of flawed and redeemed people. And yes, here I’m using “religious” language, so we’ll have to come back to that phrase.

**This congregation is a home.**

Robert Frost wrote that “Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in.”

This congregation is a place of such welcome.

Last summer, I received an email from Robert Gavin, now a retired professor of biology at City College of New York. He wrote:

“This note brings an expression of gratitude. ... I was formerly associated with The Congregational Church in Iowa City. In 1962, I was a biology doctoral student at the University of Iowa and regularly attended services during my six years at the university. I believe I had a formal church membership, but I am uncertain about that. I was an usher for some Sunday services...I often stopped by the church office for a brief chat with the secretary whose name I struggle to remember. I developed a good relationship with Rev. John Craig.... I left Iowa in 1968.” Dr. Gavin continued: “Iowa City in the 1960s was not the most hospitable place for African-Americans. I believe that I was the lone African-American in regular Sunday attendance. The church welcomed me, and I want you to know how grateful I am. I have only fond memories of my relationship with The Congregational Church. Perhaps some of your elderly members remember me.”

Perhaps.

It has long been true that *all* are welcome here.

In recent years a lot of people developed an “irregular” relationship with this congregation. They were here, active and involved. And then one day we looked around and asked, “Hey, where’d they go? What happened to them?”

I’ve been in touch with some of them. They confirmed what I thought might be the case. They didn’t “go” anywhere. Nothing “happened.” In their own minds, they haven’t even left. This is still their church.

And my guess is that many will be back—though probably not all.

Why do I say this? Because there are people in this congregation who are active and involved, who were away for a while. And when they returned, we welcomed them home. What else could we do? What else would we do?

This congregation is called to be a home, a place of welcome for *all* people. In part that’s because of our own history. Our beginnings were as *pilgrims*, as refugees, as outcasts. Our Congregational tradition challenges us to be a place where everyone is accepted.

When you come here, we have to take you in. We rejoice to do so and we are glad that you are here.

This congregation is a home.

**This congregation is a community.**

A community develops when diverse people come together for common purposes. A community grows when individual preferences and agendas give way to a larger, more compelling vision. We find our unity, not in uniformity of belief, but in using our different gifts for the common good.

We are strong, at times, but it is not in our own strength that we come together. We are good, at times, but it is not by our own goodness that we are at work in the world. We are wise, at times, but it is not by our own wisdom that we apprehend our calling.

It is by the grace of God that this congregation is a community.

**This congregation is a gathering of flawed and redeemed people.**

Home and community appeal to us.

A congregation is a *Christian* community, however, and that requires honesty about who we are and how we live together. It helps if we think *theologically* about who we are.

We cannot escape the reality of sin. I used the word “flawed” because it’s a little easier to take, but in any honest assessment of ourselves we are confronted with our *sin*. At its root, our sin is not a specific action but the alienation that we know—our separation from the best in ourselves, from one another, and from God.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus suggests that sin will be evident in the community of those who follow him.

Jesus tells his followers: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” I remembered those words as I was thinking about our annual meeting and thought they might be a nice and inspiring reminder of what’s going on and who is present when we gather. But then I read a little more carefully and found that Jesus was talking about when two or three *gather to confront and confess their sin!* That’s where the living Christ is present.

That’s some meeting!

We are grateful for those times when we do the right thing, when we live up to our own high calling in Jesus Christ. But we also recognize that we come up short. We miss the mark. We sin.

The good news is that God forgives and is still at work among us and within us.

We gather as flawed—OK—*sinful* and redeemed people.

Together we find a home.

Together we become a community.

“Together” is the key. Because of our emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility before God, keeping a group of us *together* is as difficult as the proverbial herding of cats.

In one sense, that’s my job—I’m not so much a shepherd as a cat herder—but in another sense that is the calling of each of us and all of us in this congregation: to bear one another’s burdens,

to share one another's sorrows, to celebrate one another's joys, to keep us *together* in this home, this community.

It all comes down to this—to *this* local congregation with all of our weaknesses and all of our strengths, with all of our sorrows and all of our joys.

Isn't it wonderful to be a part of this?

So again, to those who have joined us today, welcome. To those who are wondering just who these people are, come and see. To those who have been around for a while, oh, it is such a privilege to share this ministry with you. Many good things are in the works here for the year ahead. Many other things will happen that we cannot expect or anticipate and we will change with the challenges.

Welcome, all.

Welcome home.