

## **Sermon for Local Congregations for June 9, 2024**

*Created by the PA Conference Ministers based on notes from Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson*

### **Readings:**

Poem: *Rebirth* by Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson (in the bulletin)

Gospel lesson: *John 17:20-23*

### **Sermon Text:**

“That they may all be one.” This single line formed the United Church of Christ and set our mission. In Jesus’ prayer to God near the end of his life he asks that God grant the disciples unity (and those who believed because of them) and to bring them oneness in God as Jesus himself is one with God. We, as the UCC, embraced that prayer and that hope when we formed. And we still do.

Our unity in the UCC was never uniformity. Uniformity might have been easier since it would be clear who is in and who is out. Instead, the UCC sought a flexible union. An open union in which everyone would come in with their traditions, their worship, their theology – and we would still be one. One in Christ Jesus. With all the gifts that each person brings, we would do the work of discipleship and BE the church.

Within that flexible and open unity today, we are hungry. Hungry for a deeper spirituality and an experience of the Divine Presence. Hungry for a hope that

seems impossible given today's headlines. Our hunger grows as the world becomes more complex, confusing, and complicated. Many seek the Divine Presence through their creativity. That may be artistic, musical, or visual and comes to fruition in worship. The Spirit moves through us, and our Spirit-led creativity is expressed in our ministries, such as innovative ways to get food to the hungry, provide shelter for those in need, and the like. The Spirit can show up in our conversations with others – unexpectedly – and the Spirit may lead us in new and surprising directions that bring renewal and new life. If we are open to it.

What would it mean for us to be faith-led? To focus on being people of the Spirit? What might that look like? Could being faith-led mean to commit to living as One in Christ?

Living as One in Christ means we commit to being a United and Uniting church, as we were in 1957. Is being United and Uniting how you see your work in ministry and in the church? Standing as United and Uniting means we must explore what it means to be a diverse denomination. Diversity is inherent in our unity – we are not uniform. Our diversity is beautiful and challenging. Inspiring, eye-opening, and a test of our ability to love our neighbor – especially when our neighbor thinks and worships differently than we do.

As one body in Christ - where we center our unity – we are called to embrace diversity and lean into our commonalities and our differences. This is even more important as we engage our ecumenical partners in dialog. We already have deep conversations with ecumenical partners (Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians and more) and perhaps you, in your community, also worship with these partners. Our conversations must go deeper. We must explore anew where we come together and how we can be in ministry – united – in the future.

Being a United and Uniting church also means we lift, honor, and acknowledge the gifts of all our members; of all who participate in the lives of our churches. With that honor comes the recognition that we need strong lay leaders. We already have strong leaders. We need more. We need more leaders not only to be the voice of the United and Uniting Church in their churches, but to be a voice for the church out in the world. Lay leaders who can lead churches – who can (and do) preach, teach, plan worship, visit shut-ins, speak with authority in their communities. Lay leadership means all of us. Every single Christian - no matter their age or ability - has something to offer that the world desperately needs. Lay ministry and leadership must be strengthened. The UCC and your conference will commit to that.

In 20 years, who will we (the UCC) be? Some wonder given the trend of church closures if there will still be a UCC in 20 years. Rest assured, there will be a UCC but it will continue to change as it has since our beginning. The way forward is sharing, as it was in Jesus' day. Sharing bread; sharing leaders and pastors and ideas; sharing a cup of cold water in Jesus' name.

Will new faith streams be joining us? Our commitment to United and Uniting must be stronger. Are we open to new partnerships and new directions? Do we seek new opportunities to welcome those who may think differently than we do, but who hold Jesus at the center of their lives? If we will continue as a United and Uniting church we must step out, and seek out, other believers.

Our ministry and our commitment to the gospel can grow! Our experience of the Divine Presence can grow. Our faith can grow. If we are living in the Spirit and being guided by the Spirit, new and exciting things happen - they break forth. As the poem says, "Change comes/sweeping/like the winds of hurricanes/flooding waters rising high/ taking with them/doubt/fear." Let our doubt and fear be silent. Listen for the Spirit, for "there is a vision/for this time and space."

In this newness what more could we be? Could we become more intergenerational? More reliant on diverse spiritual expressions? Might we even develop a more porous and fluid relationship with God and the Holy Spirit?

Friends, the Spirit is alive and at work among us. Where do you see it? We see it in churches coming together, filled with new purpose and direction. We see it in young people, worshipping alongside the elderly, singing together. We are the church together. Not just us, in our own buildings, but all Christians – we are the church together. The Spirit calls us to be diligent in our search for unity (not uniformity). Seek others who have Jesus at the center of their lives. The Spirit is inviting us to something new – together. How do we hear that Spirit and share it with one another?

In this season of change may we align with the prayer of Jesus, “that they may all be one” and may we say along with the poet, “I am in this present/I am in this newness/full of Spirit.”

Amen.