

Success Stories
It's a Matter of Pride
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-Luke 4:18-19. "The Lord has put the Spirit in me, and appointed me to tell the Good News to the poor. I have been sent to tell the captives that they are free and to tell the blind that they can see again. God sent me to free those who have been treated unfairly and to announce the time when the Lord will show all kindness."

-Luke 8:16 "No one, after lighting a lamp covers it with a bowl or hides it under a bed. Instead, the person puts it on a lamp stand so those who come in will see the light."

Every six weeks or so I descend upon the middle school youth group for a regular installment of our God However Known series. This year I have warned them, and the high school youth group, that I was going to push them to make values based decisions that will somehow engage the world in positive ways. We are going to work for justice. We are going to be worthwhile. We are going to become "agents of change" in our hemispheres of existence, and stand tall for what we believe in.

They loved the idea! They all jumped up from their seats and started to shout.

Just kidding. They actually looked at me like you are looking at me right now.

Blank faces. Waiting for the next transition.

When I returned from summer this year, I wanted to do something different. I wanted to help them sink their teeth into a faith based values system that made sense.

So in our first installment I laid out what I think is a pretty simple premise that most everyone can get on board with.

God loves everyone.

God wants what is best for everyone

God calls us to be equal partners in this life.

I keep God in the equation because I'm a man of faith; but the teachings are fairly universal, I believe. Love everyone. Do what is best for all. Be an equal partner.

The underlying implications in these three simple statements are that we are all worthy and deserving of universal love, that we are also called to recognize that blessing in each other, and that we are called to act, as our church compact says, in Christian concern for the welfare of all people.

In some ways, this is an extremely simplified version of the Social Gospel preached at the turn of the 19th century by progressive preachers like Walter Rauschenbusch. Rauschenbusch was a fierce supporter of equality, and he believed that we are called to work NOW for heaven on earth. Though controversial at the time, he encouraged his congregation to focus on living a christocentric (Christ centered) life here and now, working to bring about a kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven. This social gospel

challenged the industrialized world, called into question the morality of corporate greed, and encouraged all faithful believers to look to the life and teachings of Jesus as the guideposts for an all encompassing salvation. He believed that we should work for the kingdom NOW, and that the primary lessons that we should take from the life of Jesus is by following in his footsteps of social engagement with those most likely to be cast aside, victimized and demonized by an oppressive dominant culture. He believed that heaven is a place where those who had been cast out are welcomed in, where those who have been beat down will be lifted up, where the poor are cared for, the sick are tended, and the wealth of our communal works were shared by all. (The 99% movement would be wise to take their theological directives from Rauschenbusch.) His phrase, "God is now acting" sounds a lot like our national denomination's favorite tag line, "God is still speaking."

It was this progressive belief system that set him up in direct opposition of the individual Salvationists, who tend to stray more toward a belief system which focused more on the afterlife and the salvation that came by renouncing this world and focusing more on the next. Rauschenbusch argued against that opinion, believing instead that the primary purpose of Jesus was mission was that, "it is not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven." (Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century)

There is a certain beauty and a saving grace to be found in individual salvation. I've known drug addicts and alcoholics who would not be alive today if not for a personal conversion experience. I myself have had numerous occasions in my life where I have felt personally touched by a living God.

I can also understand that a worldwide vision of heaven on earth can sound a little optimistic in these days of war, famine, oppression and brutality. Personal relationships with God, and individualized faith can be one hopeful and helpful way to live in realistic acknowledgement of a world bruised and broken.

But I believe in my heart that working towards a world that is free from oppression and injustice is what we are called to do. The majority of the life and teachings of Jesus were focused on changing the social welfare and well being of those people who were so easily cast aside by the culture of the time. When I think of the "greatest hits" of the life stories of Jesus, I think of healing the sick, feeding the hungry, calling and caring for the outcasts, and encouraging people to work for a world of greater good.

And as a man of faith, and as a follower of the Christian way, that is where I feel most energized, most alive and most relevant in my relationship with God. I've heard the secular humanists say the same thing. And there's not a Buddhist I know who wouldn't love to be a bodhisattva, working to bring about the worlds enlightenment.

I believe this is the theological or ideological backbone that has made this faith community a story of success. There are many reasons why people come to UCG; our children's programs, the engaging worship, the outreach that we do; but I believe one of the strongest pieces of the ministry that we offer is our stance on issues of justice and

dignity. And what will bring about the harmony of heaven more than standing with one another, side by side, and guarding each one's dignity and saving each one's pride, as the song says.

A shining example of that is our commitment to being an Open and Affirming Church. When UCG went through the Open and Affirming process in 1991 and 2, it was a fairly radical thing to do. The United Church of Christ was the first denomination to ordain to full standing clergy an openly gay man--in 1973. But the national denomination didn't publicly declare full welcome and inclusion of openly gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered people until the General Synod of 1985. Since that time over 900 UCC churches have taken the steps, gone through the process and publicly declared that they are OnA churches; and that number continues to grow every month. At the moment, that makes up just under 20% of our denomination; which means we've still got a long way to go.

When UCG went through the process, there were 60 churches that were OnA. Once again, it was the pioneering spirit and beliefs of this group of sojourners that brought us to where we are today.

I wasn't here when UCG went through that process. But I know it was a time of great intention, discussion and discernment. We took over a year to engage the process; and in the end some people felt so strongly against it that they left the church. But since that time, many more have come to this church.

Being an Open and Affirming church is not simply a political or a theological statement; it is a matter of pride. It is about affirming the dignity of one another, and through our mutual affirmations being a stronger community; more open to the light and the love and the justice declared by God, that all of us are worthy and accepted and loved; just as we are.

Just as Isaiah was appointed to tell the good news to the poor, to set the captives free, to bring sight to the blind and justice and dignity to those who have been cast aside; so too are we.

When we tell the stories of our own life experiences, to our friends and allies, but to those who would challenge our acceptance and support to our LGBT community as well; we find common ground in the struggles we have seen and faced; if we empathize and sympathize and express our humanity and our struggles and our fears and our joys; then perhaps we can begin to sway the hearts and minds of the hard hearted and the misinformed.

No one comes to bigotry by accident. It is a learned trait. And to help people un-learn it, we must give them true life examples of life and love and grace. Already the stories are beginning to seep in around the edges of society. Just this last year, 53 % of Americans said that *marriages between same-sex couples should be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriages.*

While that is still only about half; that is over half. That is progress.

And that progress will continue when you share your story with other people. That is how we instill the social gospel. By converting one individual at a time.

If you have been held captive by societies restraints, victimized by the blindness of others, imprisoned in a world of false expectations because of who you are and what you have been created to be by God, fear not- the Lord will show all kindness; and so will we.

The beacon of hope was lit at this church almost 20 years ago; and since that time it has been a safe harbor for hundreds of us. When you support this church, through your financial giving, through your attendance at our worship, through our programs and partnerships and our presence at parades, you support that radical notion of love and acceptance and dignity for all.

Please join me in prayer:

Imagine, in your minds eye, a young person who has struggled with their identity. Who has struggled to define themselves in this world- who has struggled to come to terms with their sexual orientation. And see that person- alone, scared, angry, confused. And reach out to them. Send them light. Send them love. See them start to glow and see that light begin to strengthen them, to comfort them, to give them peace.

Let them know, god, that they are loved by you. Let them know that you have created us to be; just as we are. Let them know that there are places in this world where they will find comfort, they will find kindness, they will find love.

Strengthen us, Oh God to face our struggles in this life. To fight oppression when we see it. To challenge injustice, and to dismantle the systems of bigotry and hatred that we encounter.

And give each of us the quiet fortitude and grace to meet the challenges in this life with open hands, open hearts, open minds, and with love large enough to welcome the whole world in. Give us peace, Lord. Give us justice, lord. Give us love. Amen.