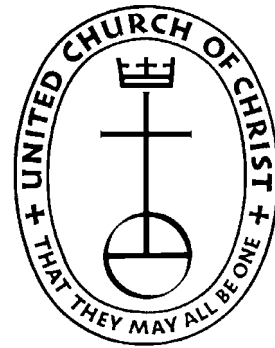


The UCC – Church As a Team Sport

A Sermon By —
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This sermon discusses our church's deeply rooted belief in the priesthood of all believers – the idea that everyone in the church, not just ordained clergy, has an important role to play. Everyone in the church has opportunities and responsibilities for sharing leadership.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson
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Reading: Exodus 18 (selections)

First Congregational Church
(Long Beach, California)

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If you remember the biblical story, Moses, a Hebrew slave child in Egypt, was raised by the Egyptian ruler's daughter. Later, in a moment of anger, Moses killed an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Hebrew slave. He then fled to the land of Midian where he married Jethro's daughter and settled down. But after encountering God in a burning bush, Moses returned to Egypt, confronted the ruler and liberated the Hebrews from their bondage.

Once free though, this band of former slaves was frustrated, wandering in the wilderness. The story I want to read today takes place when Moses and the freed slaves reached Mount Sinai, near Midian:

Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, learned all about what God had done for Moses and for Israel and how Our God led the Israelites to freedom from Egypt. Jethro sent this message to Moses: "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am journeying to meet you."

Moses went out to greet them. He bowed low before Jethro and kissed him, and they inquired after each other's health. Moses told them everything that Our God had done to Pharaoh and to Egypt for Israel's sake. He told of their journey and its hardships and how God provided for them. Jethro rejoiced in this good news of Our God's kindness to Israel.

The next morning Moses served as a judge resolving the people's disputes. He was surrounded by them from dawn until dusk. When Jethro saw this, he asked, "What is this about, with all the people around you? Why do you sit there with people from dawn until dusk?"

Moses replied: "The people come to me for God's advice. If there is a dispute among them, they come to me to settle their differences."

Jethro said: "This is not a good way. You and your people will wear yourselves out. It is too great a burden. Let me give you some advice. Teach them the laws and statutes, how to conduct themselves and what they should do. Find, able God-fearing people, honest and incorruptible, and appoint them as officials. These can serve as judges. Let them handle the simple cases and bring only the difficult cases to you. Thus your burden

will be both lightened and shared."

Jethro urged Moses to delegate, to share responsibility and privileges with members of the community. He tried to help Moses see it wasn't all about him. It was about the community. "Thus your burden will be both lightened and shared."

Reflecting Jethro's thinking, Unitarian minister Forest Church said that "life is a team sport." And in the United Church of Christ, I think the way we view the church is as a team enterprise where burdens, privileges, opportunities and responsibilities are all shared among the members.

In 16th-century Europe, the Roman Catholic Church was essentially the only expression of western Christianity. It was a church with a rigid hierarchy with the pope at the top. It was a church dominated by its leaders – bishops and priests in that era told Catholic lay folks what to believe and what to do.

Catholic clergy were seen as special people. Life was divided into two categories. On top were the spiritual elites – priests, nuns and monks – folks able to attain perfection by spiritual rituals and ceremonies, able to forgive sins and serve as intermediaries between people and God. On the bottom, lay people were spiritually inferior and couldn't do the "sacred work."

Now the 16th-century Protestant reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin rejected that distinction between people. They insisted religious leaders were not innately better people; they weren't more spiritual, they weren't closer to God. Everyone could help lead a church. Everyone who was literate could read the Bible and didn't have to rely on priests to tell them what it said. Everyone could approach God directly in prayer, not needing meditation by a saint or a priest.

Those early reformers joined Jethro in saying it is better to spread out the leadership and responsibilities. Our denomination, bringing together the traditions of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Church, came out of that Reformation thinking.

Our structure and approach to religion today reflects mostly the Congregational way developed by the Pilgrims and Puritans of early New England. In 1620, the Pilgrims arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts. In 1629, the first Puritans came to Salem. And in 1630, several more Puritan ships arrived in Boston. The Puritans and Pilgrims merged together and they are our earliest American forbears.

By 1646, less than two decades after the Puritans arrived, there were 29 Congregational churches in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. And it seemed a wise idea for those

churches to come together to develop common standards and practices. Thus they gathered together in Cambridge in 1646.

Now this council of Congregational churches was purely advisory; each congregation could forge its own pathway. But the document that came out of that council, called the Cambridge Platform, expressed what was true for most congregations.

There were three things the Cambridge Platform established that are still central to the United Church of Christ.

First, authority rests in each local congregation. The Puritans rejected any hierarchy; they didn't want bishops to dictate what they could or couldn't do. Each congregation could define for itself what church meant.

By the end of the 17th century there were significant differences among the Puritan churches. Some of the Boston churches nurtured by ministers from Harvard were seen as too liberal and thus Yale was established to train more orthodox clergy.

Now likewise today, there is a real range of beliefs, practices and attitudes toward social issues in the UCC. This congregation is very different from other Long Beach UCC churches: Bayshore, Los Altos, Second Samoan, Woodruff. Each congregation is on its own pilgrimage.

But at the same time, the Cambridge Platform said those autonomous free churches should be in communion with one another. They should mutually care for each another. There would be no bishops in the UCC, no hierarchies of power, but structures were developed to provide for mutual care and edification.

Secondly, the Cambridge Platform said Puritan churches were bound together by covenants, not creeds. Church members made promises to one another instead of agreeing to a common set of doctrines. The first American Puritan church in Salem in 1629 had this one-line covenant at its core:

We covenant with the Lord and one with another; and doe bynd ourselves in the presence of God, to walke together in all God's waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his blessed word of truth.

That was their covenant, their promise. The First Church of Boston had a different covenant, and Old South Church and the First Church of Cambridge had their own covenants.

Today, most members of this congregation see Jesus and God in less traditional

ways than do members of many other UCC churches. When First Church began in 1888, its statement of faith, its covenant, was much more liberal than the covenants of other Congregational churches in the Los Angeles area. We are free in our denomination to establish our own covenants, to make our own promises in relation to how we see church. And what we have in common with other UCC churches is that commitment to mutual care, not obedience to the same creed.

Thirdly, the Cambridge Platform understood leadership in a way radically different from the Catholicism of that time – the Puritans spoke of a “priesthood of all believers” which in my mind is exactly what Jethro was suggesting to Moses.

Early Congregationalists did not view their ministers as different kinds of people – more spiritual, more God-like.

The priesthood of all believers meant then and means now that everyone in the church has a significant role to play. Everyone in the church has opportunities and responsibilities for sharing leadership.

When I was ordained almost 38 years ago in that church in Cambridge where the Cambridge Platform was created, during the ordination ceremony I sat in the congregation, not on the chancel, in order to be symbolically called “out of the congregation.” I was a church member called to perform certain tasks on behalf of the congregation – tasks for which I had been trained and tasks to which I felt called. Ministers in our tradition join the local churches we serve; we are equal to other members. We become part of the team in our ecclesiastical team sport.

For many folks a minister is chosen by God to lead a congregation, separated from others by God and empowered with the authority to make all critical decisions.

But that is not the way we do church. Sometimes when I express frustration with our system of church governance, our office manager, an Episcopalian, teasingly asks, “Don’t you wish you were in a church where father always knows best?” There are times I would like that, but that’s not who we are.

So how do I see my role as one of this congregation’s ordained ministers?

I see myself as a teacher who in sermons and classes asks questions about our faith and makes suggestions about what our faith might say to the social and personal issues of daily life. But as the sign on my door says, “Think for yourself, your minister may be wrong.” My task is to share my convictions, my understandings of our faith in order to stimulate you to come to your own conclusions.

I lead and create the liturgy for our Sunday service, not because God has endowed me with unique wisdom, but because I am the one you selected to perform those tasks based on my training and abilities.

I spend a great deal of my time as an administrator, dealing with personnel and buildings and a variety of everyday issues in an effort to help this institution function so that we can all carry out our own ministries, so that the institution allows us to be a community reaching both inward and outward.

Often my role as a minister is to be a cheerleader – supporting others in their efforts to live out their faith; supporting the Summer Day Camp, the Drop-In Center or the Getting to Know You Groups. Cheerleading, trying to excite others about opportunities to be part of those programs.

Let me end with a couple stories about my years in southern Africa. I served a church in an urban mining city in Botswana and helped create a second church in a squatter's village outside that city. After I had been there a couple months, the Church Moderator, Mr. Ntsatsi called me aside and very gently said, "Your preaching is very good, Moruti, very interesting. But too much of even a good thing is still too much."

He introduced me to the preaching plan which I would develop with the assistance of lay leaders. I would preach perhaps two Sundays a month at the main church and one Sunday at the squatter church. Perhaps once or twice a month I would sit in the congregation while lay people preached. Shared ministry.

Likewise, pastoral care was to be a shared responsibility. Mr. Ntsatsi again called me aside and said, "Moruti, you have gone to see our members in the hospital. That is good. But you are embarrassing us. You are going alone. That makes us look lazy. Take us with you."

I was expected to organize small groups to visit people in the hospital or at the time of death or after a birth. The visit was not about me, an individual leader, but about the community sharing its love and care for one of its members.

Folks in my African church understood what the Protestant reformers meant by the priesthood of all believers, and I think they would have cheered for Jethro's suggestions to Moses.

This congregation is our faith community and all of us need an opportunity to share in its leadership and all of us bear the responsibility to make it a community of nurture for its members and a community of outreach creating a better world. Church, like life, is a team sport. Amen.