

Our UCC Faith: Heaven on Earth AND Eternal Life
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Matthew 20:1-16, Colossians 3:12-17

Do you know whose 60th birthday just passed, without much fanfare?

The United Church of Christ! Created on June 25, 1957 as a merger of Congregational, Christian, German Evangelical and Reformed we are one of the youngest denominations on the American landscape, and yet it holds congregations that date back to colonial times.

We are a unique mix of 5,117 local autonomous churches with 915,000 members – each with a different story of origin, identity, and call. We work together interdependently, through our Church’s Wider Mission, to do things that no one congregation can do on its own.

As a body that balances independence with interdependence, there will always be things that the churches and their members agree on, but also things we disagree on. And that’s OK, because that’s the same as the people in our pews. We’re just trying to follow Jesus, to do the right thing, together.

We in the UCC share something called an Affirmation of Faith, which we at MCC read every month on the first Sunday before we share communion.

Within this affirmation are seven distinct theological statements, which I’ll be preaching about all summer. Just to be a little different, we’ll work backwards and begin with the final phrase:

*You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,
your presence in trial and rejoicing,
and eternal life in your realm which has no end.*

Trust is a complicated thing. We’ve all had someone make us a promise. But it seems like when that promise is followed up with a “Trust me”... well, that can make our stomach tie itself in knots, even a tiny bit?

From the over-abundance of empty promises we hear from politicians to the assurances we’re given about our security and well-being, we know how fleeting a promise can be. And yet, promises are still the very fragile building blocks of trust.

Recently I saw the movie "Sully", which features the story of Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, an American pilot who became a hero after landing his damaged plane on the Hudson River in order to save the flight's passengers and crew.

The scene that affected me most was the investigation that was undertaken in the accident's aftermath in which aeronautic experts evaluated a number of computer simulations to see if there was a better solution than the one taken by Sully.

So here was a room full of experts, watching experienced pilots work their way through a number of scenarios, doing everything they could to bring the plane safely to an airstrip. Every model they ran had the plane crashing and exploding. But they had to test them all out to decide if Sully and his crew did the right thing.

Finally, they came to understand that they did. Their final ruling was that the pilot, co-pilot, crew and passengers all worked together to come home safely. It was celebrated as a triumph of human determination; truly "the miracle on the Hudson".

It seems that our human nature is to seek proof before we can trust. That goes for everyone, even someone as trustworthy as Captain Sully.

How much more difficult is it to trust the promises made by a God we cannot see or hear or touch? No wonder this faith thing is so challenging!

The Bible is filled with God's promises: promises made to Noah, to Abraham, to Moses and Miriam; promises made through prophets and apostles; promises given by Jesus himself, like in our parable today.

Take heart! Believing God's promises was probably hard for them, too!

UCC theologian Roger Schinn writes that we may well "*wonder how men and women of the Bible knew and verified*" God's promises "*but surely they reflected upon their experience as intensely as we do on ours.*"

He goes on to say "*when they talked of God's promises, they were less inhibited in their imagination than we... they took their visions and dreams more seriously.*"

I think what Shinn is saying is that they too had to sort out truth from illusion. In the end it was the experiences they had with God; their relationship with God from generation to generation in both the good

times and bad that gave them the assurance to say that God was faithful and reliable and worthy of trust.

And it's the same for us: the evidence of what God does today is what gives us confidence in what God promises for the future.

That's how in our text this morning Paul could write to the Colossians about living in community with compassion and thankfulness for what God has done, is doing and will do among them to spread the word of love.

And what else does God promise? Well, for one thing, the assurance that we can never be so far removed from God's purposes that we can never return.

No matter how late we are to the party, like those workers in the vineyard, there is the gift of grace; an experience that gives us what John Calvin referred to as "illumination and power". Grace is a promise that can literally turn our lives 180 degrees back around to God – if we let it!

And we're also promised courage in the struggle for justice and peace. Whether we're talking peace in the global sense, or the serenity which calms our inner turmoil, both are gifts from God. However hopeless a situation may seem to be, the promise is that the day will come when swords will be beaten in plowshares and spears will be made into pruning hooks. In the meantime; we are promised courage to stand up and advocate for others.

I remember monitoring a checkpoint in Ramallah last April, when I was almost arrested for arguing with an Israeli soldier. The soldier refused to let an elderly man disabled man through the humanitarian gate rather than the turnstile. I started off pleading his case with respect, but ended with stronger words and tone of voice. I don't think I would have risked speaking up without the gift of courage which came out of nowhere. I'm certain now, it was God.

God promises us presence in times in trial and rejoicing, through the rough times AND the joyful times, in all of beautiful transitions of life that come to every household, every type of family, every kind of community; but also in times of great grief and pain.

Most of all, God promises reach far beyond the flesh and blood experience we have here and now. However we envision eternity and the afterlife; the promise is that our destiny is in the hands of an eternal and loving God.

Simply and wonderfully, we are a people of promise! How else could we be empowered to live with such dignity, integrity and joy? How else could we find the courage to do “the right things” with love and compassion? How else could we live with eyes and hearts fixed on that that promised day of peace yet to come?

As members of the United Church of Jesus Christ, we are a people of promise, living joyfully between the now and the not yet, building on the strong and mighty foundation of faith on which we now stand; a foundation that has been built for us and the world by the God who is the Lord of Life! Thanks be to God! Amen!