

In Our Own Words
A. Stephen Van Kuiken
Rincon Congregational Church (U.C.C.)
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The United Church of Christ affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God.
—Preamble of The Constitution of the United Church of Christ

Acts 2:1-8, 14-18

I continue a series of sermons on essential traits of the United Church of Christ, as we try to answer the question, “How is the U.C.C. different from all those other churches out there?” Last week I talked about “unity,” and this morning the theme is “freedom.” That is, the U.C.C. values the freedom of its members to find their own religious expression.

Scientists tell us that we need dreams to survive. A human being needs to have a certain amount of rapid eye movement, or REM, and if deprived of this dream state, will begin to deteriorate physically: depression, hallucinations, sickness and finally even death can follow.

In the same way, when deprived of dreams and visions, a human being’s spiritual life can die, as well. Now, by dreams and visions I do not mean mere fantasy. But rather, I am talking about the place where possibilities emerge. God’s spirit, the voice from the future, is constantly calling forth newness, for change, for renewal at the heart of everything. And when this spirit and flesh touch, there are visions:

*I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
You old shall dream dreams,
And your young shall see visions.*

The Word speaks to people through the imagination. We hear about stories of the past, stories of other people’s spiritual experience. But the Word does not speak to us until it is brought into the future, until it means something to us and speaks to our own circumstances. Only then does it finally speak to us, through visions. As people of faith, we are each called to use our imagination, to dream, to envision under the enchantment of the Spirit.

Episcopal Bishop, John Spong, said it well:

Our task is neither to literalize nor worship the words of yesterday’s theological consensus. It is rather, to return to the experience that created these creedal words in the first place and then to seek to incorporate that experience in the

words that we today can use, without compromising its truth or our integrity as citizens of this century.

For Jesus, it was all about being given dreams and visions by God. He wanted his followers to have the same kind of spiritual experience that he had, not just in his own generation but also in each generation. Everyone needs to be free to incorporate this experience in his or her own words.

New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, observes that the way of Jesus invites us to move from a *secondhand* religion to a *firsthand* religion. He writes:

Secondhand religion is a way of being religious based on believing what one has heard fro others. It consists of thinking that the Christian life is about believing what the Bible says or what the doctrines of the church say. Firsthand religion, on the other hand, consists of a relationship to that which the Bible and the teaching of the church point—namely, that reality that we call God or the Spirit of God. (p. 87-88, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time)

I came across an old folktale:

Once upon a time when the earth was new, the Creator decided that she wanted to play a game of hide-and-go-seek...

It was about this same time that the Creator's angels were having a meeting. They were afraid that people might try to kidnap or monopolize God, and so they decided that she had to be hidden in a safe place, a place where all people would be able to find her if they searched, but where none could own her exclusively. So they sent out angel scouts to find this perfect place...

Meanwhile the Creator had already found her hiding place, the safest, fairest and warmest place to hide, and yet the most difficult to find: inside each and every human heart.

In our own way, we are looking, or at least longing, for an experience of being truly alive and touching Gd, or what is “God-like” in ourselves and in each other. I once heard Andrew Greeley say that we all have God-experience. Each human being experiences the grace and wisdom of God at the depth of our being. And when we hear stories of others we are reminded of our own knowing, our own experience.

There's another story of the Hasidic master, Rabbi Barukh, and a time when his grandson, Yeheil, was playing hide-and-go-seek with a friend. Yeheil hid himself well and waited a long time for his friend to find him. Finally, he came out of his hiding place only to discover that is friend had not been looking for him at all. Discovering this, Yeheil ran to his grandfather in tears at his friend's faithlessness. Then tears brimmed in Rabbi Barukh's eyes, and he said, “God says the same thing: ‘I hide, but no one wants to seek me.’”

The journey toward the Divine Image is not an easy one. Entering into our own hearts is a quest fraught with fear, pain and frustration. There is a part of us that does not want to seek God. It can be a scary and risky business. We think, “What happens if I should make a mistake?” And others, who disagree, may ridicule us. They may question our integrity or try to push us out. But these are risks we must be willing to take. As George Bernard Shaw once said, “Every great idea starts out as blasphemy.”

Today’s scripture reading is about the joy of discovery in the game of hide-and-seek with God. Some of the early followers of Jesus were gathered together for the Jewish celebration of Pentecost, also known as the Feast of Weeks or the Feast of the Harvest, which began on the fiftieth day after the Feast of Passover. On this particular Pentecost, the Jesus people suddenly found themselves with words to describe their own, immediate contact with the Holy. Each was able to speak about their experience in their own language, *in their own words*.

And so, followers of Jesus did what people of faith have been doing for eons: they reinterpreted the story. In this case, they reinterpreted the Feast of Pentecost and celebrated it was a special time of discovery of the hidden Presence of God. It marks how it is possible for people to find their own words and how these words can help remind others of their own experience, too.

This story is about how we each can be reminded and become aware of our direct contact with the Sacred Presence of life. Yet it is also a challenge to the church. For we must continue the quest to find our own words and claim our own experience *if our faith is to be truly alive*. The danger has not been that we say too much; the danger has always been that we have not said enough. The temptation for each generation has been to rely upon the stories of the past of *someone else’s* experience and *someone else’s* words—a second-hand religion—instead of finding our own voice, our own words, our own experience. The temptation is choose the safety of sterility, where the words fade and become hallow.

The challenge of this story is to re-imagine who God is and what God is doing in our lives. For years women had been denied this opportunity. They were told to “keep silent,” to let men speak for them. It has been only recently in our human history that women, in some parts of the faith communities, have been able to find their own voices and use *their own words*.

Make no mistake, the Pentecostal path is not the safe one. This reminds me of the writer, who said that every time she ran the spell-check program it didn’t like the word “sacred,” and it changed the word “sacred” to the word “scared.” She reflected on this, saying, “I know the feeling, I have it.” When it comes to the sacred, there is fear, and a respect. “The proper word is awe. The sacred is awful; it is full of awe.” (Sara Maitland, *A Big-Enough God*) But we have no choice but to embark upon this dangerous journey and risk some failures, risk being wrong. We are called to claim our right to be spiritual pilgrims. The alternative is a kind of living death.

Because of this, some say we should question the elevated status of creeds and even the assumption of a closed and fixed canon of sacred writings. Robert Funk has said, “The canon of scripture adopted by traditional Christianity should be contracted and expanded simultaneously to reflect respect for the old tradition and openness to the new.” After all, the collection of sacred writings wasn’t set until 300-400 years after Jesus. John Spong points out that the people who participated in those councils of the church in that distant time weren’t any more brilliant, insightful, or knowledgeable than are the Christians of today. I would add that God is just as active today as in those earlier generations, too. The words of the prophet still ring true: “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh... Your old shall dream dreams, and your young shall see visions.”

One of the most profound examples of this is the story about Our Lady of Guadalupe. In his brilliant book, Virgil Elizondo talks about how the conquistadors, such as Cortez, brutally conquered what we know today as Mexico. (*Guadalupe: Mother of the New Creation*, Orbis Books, 1997) The beginning of the 16th century marked for the native of the Americas humiliation, destruction, sickness, enslavement and massive death. Two civilizations came together in an unequal struggle. The Europeans had superiority in instruments of war. In addition, their bodies had naturally developed immunity to the diseases that they carried with them. Between war and diseases, the native population would come close to being annihilated.

But maybe even more devastating than that, the conquerors came with their image of a violent God and this idea that they were the only civilized human beings with absolute dominion over non-Christian lands, the exclusive possessors of all truth. And so they destroyed everything of the indigenous religions, which meant the brutal destruction of the deepest roots of Indian existence and the collective soul of the native peoples.

The Europeans, you see, kept for themselves a monopoly of the sacred. Even after the natives “converted” to the new religion, they were still seen as less than human and denied ordination into the priesthood. This should sound familiar to us all!

But something new would emerge in 1531 on the hill of Tepeyac near what is today Mexico City. An Indian named Juan Diego had a vision of the Mother of God. She had the attire and the features of an Indian maiden and addressed Juan Diego *in his own language, in his own words*. This poor and lowly less-than-human-being was given a message to tell the bishop to build a shrine on that spot. At that shrine, Our Lady of Guadalupe would welcome *all people* on an *equal basis*, each to experience the wholeness and healing of God *for themselves*.

Now, I don’t have time to go into the rich story of Guadalupe today. But what was amazing was that it happened as the missionaries were trying to discredit and destroy the Indian religious tradition. Even today, European Christianity is still suspicious of any type of syncretism, forgetting the creative syncretism of its own European origins. Elizondo says it so well:

Guadalupe respects the two apparently irreconcilable religious views, takes in what is good in both of them, avoids what is false in both, and offers a new synthesis that will bring together the true aspects of both through a new imagery of God.

I am talking today about this wonderful possibility that we gently guard in others and in ourselves. We can speak of God in our own language, *in our own words*. We are called to create something that is new, yet eternal—a *new synthesis*, something uniquely our own.

You know, we often adopt someone else's script, follow the conventional standard and guidelines. And then we wonder why it doesn't seem to work. Don't get me wrong, the script is important. But we also have to use our own words, put our own stamp on it, to make it real.

The famous story of an 18th century Hasidic rabbi named Zusya now makes sense to me. As he was about to die, one of his students timidly asked what he was most afraid of about dying. "I am most afraid of what they will ask me when I get to heaven," he answered. "What will they ask you?" his disciples were eager to know. "They will not ask me, 'Zusya, why were you not like Moses, or why were you not like Solomon, or why were you not like David?'" he answered. "They will ask me, 'Zusya, why were you not Zusya?'"

Thomas Merton wrote:

For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore, the problem of sanctity is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self. (Seeds)

This struggle to find oneself, to be authentic and the freedom to do so is something that the U.C.C. knows especially well. That's why I put that wonderful sentence from the Preamble of the Constitution on the bulletin:

*The United Church of Christ affirms the **responsibility of each generation to make this faith its own**, in reality of worship, in honesty of through and expression, and in purity of heart before God. (emphasis added)*

In order for our faith to be alive we must have the freedom to be honest and authentic, to use our own words. The words of the prophet still ring true:

*I will pour out my spirit on all flesh...
Your old shall dream dreams, and your young shall see visions.*

Friends, God wasn't any more active 2,000 or 4,000 years ago. The nature and the activity of God haven't changed, but sometimes we act as if they have.

The generations before us weren't smarter or more spiritually sensitive. Human nature and activity haven't changed, but sometimes we act as if they have.

One of the current slogans of the U.C.C. is "God is still speaking," and I want you all to realize what a bold courageous claim that is!

Faith, indeed, must be a pilgrimage. It is a sacred journey form which we cannot be deterred even by the powers of institutional religion. This spirit is reflected so well in the lyrics of John Bunyan, who was one of the fathers of Congregationalism and who wrote these words, paraphrased here, while he served a 12-year sentence for not conforming with the institutional church that wielded the power of the state:

*He who would valiant be 'gainst all disaster,
Let him in constancy follow the Master.
There's no discouragement shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent to be a pilgrim.*

*Who so beset her round with dismal stories
Do but themselves confound, her strength the more is.
No foes shall stay her might; though she with giants fight,
She will make good her right to be a pilgrim.*

Each of us must synthesize God's spirit with our own flesh. This can only happen when we become ourselves and not someone else. To be ourselves, to use our own words, to speak our own language—this is a sacred task. We each need to discover how to be a unique incarnation, to merge our imaginations with God's creativity. As Augustine said, "Love God, and then do what you will."

Let me end with another story. Richard Selzer, a professor at Yale University Medical School, wrote a book of essays called, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*. He writes,

I stand at the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh: I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve.

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth I have made, who gaze at each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks,

"Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut."

She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles.

"I like it," he says. "It is kind of cute."

All at once I know who he is. I understand and lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show that their kiss still works.

Good friends,
There are dreams to be dreamt
And visions to be seen.
The Spirit still beguiles our imaginations
To figure out
New ways for love to work its way into the world
New ways for love to work its way through us.
And we can discover
That in every situation
The kiss still works.