

## *The Family of Earth: Expanding the Circle of Compassion*

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Tucson, AZ  
January 3, 2010

*Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things.  
Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God.  
Every creature is a word of God.*

—Meister Eckhart

Reading: John 17:20-26

Today, I start a series of sermons, “What is the United Church of Christ?” While it is impossible to encompass the essence of the U.C.C. in a single sermon series, these sermons simply identify some of the core values and a few unique gifts of the denomination. In doing so, I hope it can help us in our faith journey corporately and individually. So I start with the question, What distinguishes the United Church of Christ from other Christian denomination?

And so I chose four themes, four emphases, that help form a composite of a unique denomination: unity, freedom, justice and diversity. Today I begin with “unity.”

In early Christian history, the apostle Paul talked about the importance of unity and used the metaphor of a body. That is, the church is a single, unified organism, more than just the sum of its parts.

Now, some traditions emphasize the body as the local congregation. Others emphasize the body as the larger organization, hierarchy or institution. But the U.C.C., it seems to me, has put the emphasis of the body of Christ as *all Christians*. In fact, to claim that you are a denomination, which literally means “way,” is to imply that you are not the *only* way, but merely *one* way among many others. And when a denomination becomes too central, when it becomes an end in itself, it falls into what Richard Niebuhr called the “sin of denominationalism.”

This reminds me of a joke someone sent me this week. A woman goes into the post office to mail her Christmas cards. When she asks for some stamps the worker asked her, “what denomination?” She lets out a sigh, “Has it really come to this? O.K., I’ll take five Presbyterian, 10 Methodist...”

My point is that the U.C.C. is acutely aware of the *spiritual unity of all Christians and attempts to live this out as much as possible*. It would be very difficult to find a denomination that is *more* ecumenical than the U.C.C. (“Ecumenical” is from the Greek, *oikumenos*, meaning “the whole household” or “whole world” of followers of Jesus.)

From local ministerial associations to the National and World Councils of Churches, the U.C.C. has participated in far greater proportion to its size than almost all others.

But, of course, this unity does not stop with Christians and Christianity. Just as Jesus did not live just for himself, the body of Christ does not exist just for itself. And so we live in unity with other faith traditions through interfaith dialogue and organizations. Indeed, this unity of the followers of Jesus points beyond itself to an even greater unity of the entire world, the cosmos, the creation itself.

Many of you have seen this scene on T.V.: the mother bear senses danger and signals for her cubs to take refuge in a nearby tree. She then puts herself between her cubs and the big, dangerous male grizzly. She is willing to sacrifice herself.

Now, most of us parents understand this in the sense that we would not think twice about sacrificing ourselves for our children. We have an instinct to love, and when it comes to our family, this love knows no bounds. Jesus said, “there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for another.” What we call human love perhaps has emerged over eons from that natural, instinctive reproductive urge. Or perhaps it is kin to that reciprocal altruism we find in packs, which at its root has to do with enhancing one’s chances for survival.

We have an instinct to love, yet the circle of this love is limited. How many people are we willing to die for? Jesus said, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.” Human beings naturally limit the circle of people that we love.

However, there is also a natural human impulse to feel connected to nature and the entire world. This is a feeling that was expressed by Alfred Lord Tennyson when he wrote:

*I am part of all that all that I have met;  
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro’  
Gleams the untravell’d world, whose margin fades  
For ever and for ever when I move.* (from “Ulysses”)

Now, it is true that this felt connection with the world, this intuition that “I am part of all that I have met” is buried so deep within the human soul that we can only experience it in momentary flashes. Einstein, a man of great worldly spirituality, during a serious illness, was asked if he was afraid of death. He replied,

*I feel such a sense of solidarity with all living things that it does not matter to me  
where the individual begins and ends.*

Einstein was able to feel the deep connection to all things.

I was reading a book by Charles Birch, *Regaining Compassion*, and he wrote about how our society is materialists in the sense that our world view is derived from and dominated

by the so-called Newtonian universe. That is, the universe consists of separate particles pushing each other around—like billiard balls. Birch maintains that this view sees the world only as a collection of objects that have outward, physical connections. But he says that there are deep, inner connections to all things in the world. There is the world around us, yet there is also the world *within us* that is not recognized by the Newtonian universe. Birch notes,

*The new physics recognizes fields of influence such that an electron at one end of the universe is affected by an electron at the other end (p.21).*

Perhaps this is something that poets know intuitively. As John Donne famously said in his “Devotions”:

*No man is an island, entire of itself. Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind.*

There is a connection between all things, not just on the surface, but a connection that is deeply felt underneath. It is a connection not between objects, but between subjects, like the connection between friends. It is what John Muir meant when he said,

*If you try to pick up something by itself, you find it attached to everything else in the universe.*

Albert Schweitzer, that great humanitarian and scholar of theology, music and medicine, observed the mysterious coexistence of God and the laws of nature this way:

*There is an ocean—cold water without motion. In this ocean, however, is the Gulf Stream—hot water flowing from the Equator towards the Pole. Inquire of all scientists how it is physically imaginable that this stream of hot water flows between the waters of the ocean, which, so to speak, form its banks, the moving within the motionless, the hot within the cold: no scientist can explain it. Similarly, there is the God of love within the God of the forces of the universe—one with God, and yet so totally different. Let ourselves be carried away by that vital stream. (from Christianity and the Religions of the World)*

Part of what Schweitzer was saying was that the deeply felt inner connection to the whole world, the hot within the cold, is God. God is like this river flowing within us, with all things, and so we are connected through God. When we “let ourselves be carried away by that vital stream,” we live more compassionately, we live for the other and with an awareness of the whole. The 13<sup>th</sup> century nun, Mechtild of Magdeburg described this spiritual reality:

*The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw—and I knew I saw—all things in God and God in all things.*

She was able to see that current of water running underneath the surface, under the material world of nature. God is under the surface of all things. As Martin Buber said, “Those who go out to meet the world, meet God.”

Several years ago, in the vast forests of the Pacific Northwest scientists discovered what turned out to be the world’s largest living organism. Under the forest floor is this incredibly huge fungus. And there was also something else they discovered. All these enormous trees are connected to this mammoth mushroom at their roots. And because this fungus was intertwined at the roots of each tree, this meant that each tree was also connected to all the others. We, too, are connected. We are connected to the world by an unseen current, a hidden reality. At our roots, under the surface, at the heart of everything, we touch. William Sloane Coffin puts it like this:

*Our sin is only and always that we put asunder what God has joined together.  
Human unity is not something we are called on to create, only to recognize and  
make manifest.*

Jesus calls us to this recognition, this awareness. The unity is already there. It’s always been there. And Jesus calls us to *make manifest* our connections with the whole earth and to expand our circle of compassion to include everyone, saying, “Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.”

Part of this means that we recognize that we are one as a church. In John’s gospel Jesus says, “I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.” All of those who are touched by the spirit of Christ and wish to be guided by it are one, and we are to recognize this and make this manifest. The need to make manifest our oneness is clearly seen by the United Church of Christ. In the preamble of its Constitution, it says that the UCC was formed “in order to express more fully the oneness in Christ of the churches composing it, *to make more effective their common witness.*” In other words, the church itself must demonstrate its oneness as it proclaims *the oneness of all things within the unconditional love of God.*

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the humanist scholar Muretus, a fugitive from France, fell ill in Lombardy. Looking like a vagabond in rags he asked aid of the doctors. The physicians discussed his case in Latin, not thinking that this bedraggled pauper could understand the learned tongue. “Let us try an experiment with this worthless creature.” And to their amazement the “worthless creature” spoke to them in Latin: “Will you call worthless one for whom Christ did not disdain to die?” (Birch, p. 32)

Jesus Christ, in whom “all things were created,” lived and died in order “to reconcile everything” (Col. 1:15-20). Everything. Christ lived and died for every creature that we might at times call “worthless.” Christ died because he saw our holy and sacred connection to all things. “Every creature is a word of God,” said Eckhart. God is at the roots of one and all.

The late Joseph Campbell talked about this feeling of connection in an interview. He said,

*There is a magnificent essay by (Arthur) Schopenhauer (“The Basis of Morality”) in which he asks, how is it that a human being can so participate in the peril or pain of another that without thought, spontaneously, he sacrifices his own life to the other? How can it happen that what we normally think of as the first law of nature and self-preservation is suddenly dissolved?*

*In Hawaii some four or five years ago there was an extraordinary event that represents this problem. There is a place there called the Pali, where the trade winds from the north come rushing through a great ridge of mountains. People like to go up there to get their hair blown about or sometimes to commit suicide—you know, something like jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge.*

*One day, two policemen were driving up the Pali road when they saw, just beyond the railing that keeps the cars from rolling over, a young man preparing to jump. The police car stopped, and the policeman on the right jumped out to grab the man but caught him just as he jumped, and he was being pulled over when the second cop arrived in time and pulled the two of them back.*

*Do you realize what had suddenly happened to that policeman who had given himself to death with that unknown youth? Everything else in his life had dropped off—his duty to his family, his duty to his job, his duty to his own life—all of his wishes and hope for his lifetime had just disappeared. He was about to die.*

*Later, a newspaper reporter asked him, “Why didn’t you let go? You would have been killed.” And his reported answer was, “I couldn’t let go. If I had let that young man go, I couldn’t have lived another day of my life.” How come?*

*Schopenhauer’s answer is that such a psychological crisis represents the breakthrough of a metaphysical realization, which is that you and that other are one... Our true reality is in our identity and unity with all life. (The Power of Myth, p,110)*

No one was more aware of this underlying unity with all things than Jesus of Nazareth. He gave up his life not for a family member, but for every living thing. He also lived and died that we, too, might know the way, the truth and the life. He tried to raise awareness that we are connected with the whole creation, and he prayed that the church would demonstrate this reality, as well. Jesus tried to teach us, in the words of Albert Schweitzer, that

*Until he extends his circle of compassion to all living things, man will not himself find peace.*

Friends, may we, as the church, demonstrate through our own unity the unity of all things in God. And may we learn to extend the circle of our compassion, and may we come to realize and say, "I am part of all that I have met."