

Loving God,
Open our eyes to see what is beautiful,
Open our minds to know what is true,
And open our hearts to love what is good;
In Jesus' name, AMEN

“Come and See”

a sermon by Terry E. Shoup, January 20, 2008

The story is told about a Congregational minister who was getting really enthusiastic in his preaching to a gathering where there were people from a variety of denominations present. At one point in his comments he said "It's great to see so many Congregationalists here today". A voice from near the back said "I'm Episcopal." Seeing the possibility for an interesting discussion of why different denominations appeal to different people, he turned to the man and said "Why are you Episcopalian?" "Because my father was, and my father was because my grandfather was." This wasn't quite what the Congregational minister had been aiming for so he tried a different way: "What if your grandfather had been mad? What if your father had been crazy as well?" "Well," came the reply "I guess then I would be a Congregationalist."

It is useful for us to try to understand what is it about our church that is unique that might be appealing to others who pass our way.

In this morning's scripture reading, we find John the Baptist reacting to Jesus' presence. This is shortly after John had baptized Jesus (which we heard about last Sunday). In this encounter, John mentions to two of his disciples who were nearby, the importance he sees in Jesus. As Jesus passes by, his presence becomes a focal point of interest for two of the disciples of John. They approach Jesus and ask an opening question that is somewhat like a rhetorical greeting we would use today "where are you staying?" When we greet people with "how are you?" or "How's it going?" often we really don't want to know the details of their physical condition—rather it is a polite way to engage the other person. It

should be noted however, that sometimes these initial greetings which begin with a superficial comment can sometimes lead to a more substantive dialogue that has important meaning. Such was the case with the two disciples of John who greeted Jesus.

In response to the question about where he is staying, rather than Jesus saying, “Oh, I’m living temporarily with my parents,” or “Oh, I am staying at the local Motel 7,” or “Oh, I’m homeless person,” he chooses to offer a challenge to these two disciples. He responds simply with the words “Come and See.”

Jesus realizes that the best way to convey information is through an experiential encounter that shows first-hand what is actually true. His challenge leads the disciples to spend an entire day interacting with Jesus and ultimately leads to the calling of his first two disciples.

Just as we have seen in this scripture today, sometimes what starts out as a casual encounter can ultimately lead to a life-changing experience!

This encounter leads us to think about what we offer to those who inquire about our faith. It suggests that we consider what we have to show to those who “come and see” whether it be:

- 1) our denomination as a global organization,
- 2) our unique church here in Almaden Valley, or
- 3) our individual faith.

It speaks to the same question that was asked by the congregational minister in the story earlier in my remarks today.

- 1) Why are you a part of the UCC?
- 2) Why are you a part of this particular church?
- 3) Why do you believe what you believe? And what about your belief causes you to act as you do?

Let's look briefly at each of these important questions.

The UCC - The United Church of Christ is in some ways a traditional denomination in that it shares many of the same beliefs as other protestant denominations. We all believe in the love of God the creator, we all believe in the saving example lived by Jesus, and we all believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to be present and active in the world and in our lives. So what is it that makes this denomination unique?

Some of the key uniquenesses are:

- Intelligent dialogue on contemporary issues of importance
- A strong independent streak (self governing with freedom coupled with responsibility).
- A progressive denomination that engages both heart and mind.
- A strong commitment to unity – with each other and in partnership with others outside the denomination.
- A strong commitment to tying faith to justice.
- A commitment to using intellect to understand cutting edge theology
- A commitment to engagement in service in an ever-changing world.
- One of the UCC's most recent distinguishing characteristics is its penchant to believe that ... God is still speaking, ... even when it puts us out there alone.

Some years ago, a UCC pastor wrote an article entitled, "The United Church of Christ: An Exasperating and Heady Mix." We are many voices, and harmonizing these voices can at times be perplexing. At its best, however, the UCC denomination enters the 21st century in faith, hope, and love, seeking even wider diversity and a deeper understanding of God's purpose.

If these unique characteristics appeal to you, then you may be one of the 1.4 million members in 39 regions in over 6,000 congregations who proudly call themselves members of the United Church of Christ. (Although, true to their independent nature, some can't agree on the name and prefer to call themselves "Congregationalists.")

AVUCC – What then would we say about our own local UCC congregation here in Almaden Valley? If you look at what we say about ourselves you can discern just how special and unique we really are. Our web site explains that we are a community of believers who are sustained by a basic belief in God, the creator of all things, taught by the example of the life of Jesus Christ, the Savior, and nurtured by the leading of the Holy Spirit.

It goes on to say that we recognize the *uniqueness of each person as a gift of God*, and because of this we uphold the worth and dignity of all individuals. We live this value by welcoming people from many backgrounds into our church community. This radical hospitality manifests itself in the denominational statement that we often use: "No Matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

But what makes us particularly unique is the following:

- More than most UCC churches I have experienced, we value our (sense of) community as friends and care for each other on a daily basis and in times of joy, sadness, and crisis. We value these connections to each other and to God. We especially value the way these two characteristics interact. (No doubt our strong sense of family and community is rooted in the fact that most of us have been transplanted here from other places in the country. For many of us this church

family has become our real family since we are living far away from our biological families.)

- At AVUCC we value our worship setting in-the-round because it embodies for us the centrality of God and our connections to each other as we celebrate our joy and thankfulness. I know of few UCC churches who have this type of setting for their worship. It is truly unique and makes for a special worship experience.
- At AVUCC we value our covenant relationship with our Episcopal partners. In the spirit of Silicon Valley's idea of a joint venture, we are truly on the cutting edge of what I believe churches will become in the future.
- At AVUCC we are a community that focuses on the importance of families and we especially value fellowship. (There are few churches who eat so well and so often!)
- We believe strongly in the importance of providing a loving, caring environment where children can grow and develop. At a time when many churches are experiencing a lack of children, we are blessed with the exuberance, excitement, and energy of youngsters in our service. Our children represent the future of our community!
- We are a community of believers who place a high value on service to others, with a particular emphasis on compassion for all people. Look at our engagement with shelter feedings, with Habitat for Humanity, Heifer Project, Crop Walk, turning wheels, and the list goes on and on!
- We are a group of people who continue to search for meaning and direction for contemporary living. What we do on a

Sunday morning stretches our minds, challenges our beliefs, and informs our actions during the week.

If these characteristics appeal to you, then you should “Come and See” this church that celebrates its humble beginnings in a prune shed. Yet, like our parent denomination, we also can be an exasperating mix. There are times when we don’t handle conflict well and when our fierce independence becomes a factor that disturbs unity. There are times when we don’t communicate thoughtfully and lovingly. At our best we have the potential to be a beacon for what is beautiful, true, and good. This community and our world have a critical need for what this congregation can offer. To become the best that we can be as a beacon is our calling and our challenge.

God may indeed be still speaking to AVUCC. We need to listen carefully to hear and to understand this message.

Think about the following two questions:

1. What new directions does God have in mind for his faithful in Almaden Valley?
2. Because of our uniqueness, what new calling do we have to be the hands and feet for the kingdom of God in this community and in the world?

As we move from the denomination to the local church to each of us as individuals, we must also focus on the notion of our calling—as a denomination, as a local church, and as individuals. The notion of our role as individuals is the third piece of who we are.

This is the part of Jesus’ message that questions: “Why do you believe what you believe? Why are you UCC? Why are you here this morning?”

Our own Faith - I suppose each of us would answer these particular questions in our own unique way. In my own case, both of my parents were E&R before the UCC came into existence. Although I was not raised in the UCC church, this denomination has always seemed like one of my church homes throughout the years. I have probably been UCC for a longer period of time than any other denomination.

For me, the most important factor in my belonging to a particular church or denomination is whether I can wholeheartedly serve the organization and what it stands for. In this way my faith is rooted in active engagement with what I believe. Perhaps this is also true for you.

What I think is the most important message in our lectionary reading today is the fact that people are invited to “come and see” for themselves what this denomination, this church, this faith, and this Jesus is really about. In truth, it matters less what we say to people about what we believe. What really matters is what people see when they look at what is happening.

We are a people who earnestly believe that God is still-speaking, and we must consider carefully what God’s messages coming our way are telling us.

We must be careful not to limit our vision when we consider engagement with the community and the world.

We must be careful to not limit God's mission (which we are about) to our own families, friends, congregation, neighbors, and folks we feel comfortable with. Our ministry is also with those beyond our borders, not just geographically but socially and psychologically--those who are often not included in churches today.

We must be willing to accept change—even when it makes us a bit uncomfortable. Indeed, we are called to be the agents of God’s change in a world that is more diverse, more troubled, and more in need of love than ever before.

Most importantly, we are called to give life to the message of Jesus in the denomination, in our local church, and especially in our own lives.

- My prayer for each of you today is that you (both as individuals and as a community of believers) will continue to be the beacons that God intended, so that when people “come and see” they see not us, but the Jesus we love and serve.
- My hope is that you will continue to be open to the leading of the Spirit of God in our midst so that the messages from the “still speaking God” can reach both your intellect and your heart.
- My prayer is that you will act on the messages in ways that spread the love of God to everyone you encounter.

AMEN