

Micah 3: 5-8
Jeremiah 28: 5-9
Matthew 10: 40-42

Welcoming Prophets and Little Ones
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When I say, "It's the real thing." what comes to mind? How about, "Nothin' says lovin' like somethin' from the oven." How about, "It's the economy, Stupid." Isn't it amazing what we store in our brains? This is because some very clever people spend a lot of time crafting these words for our consumption, to gain our trust, to sway our opinions. And I haven't even started singing any of the jingles.

Sometimes, I have to admit, I getting a little grouchy when I hear a slogan or a catch-phrase once too often. This keeps me from being completely enthusiastic about many organizations, even the church. The United Church of Christ, to which we belong, has used many phrases as definitions and identity markers. One of them, used in the founding merger back in 1957, is "That they may all be one," a quote from the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John: a wonderful expression, rooted in the early church, and so appropriate for a denomination born of a merger. More recent tags are ones like "Open and Affirming." We are an Open and Affirming Congregation, which is great, but an outsider would need a clearer definition (which we provide in our weekly bulletin) to know what that really means. Other churches may decide to become "Just Peace" congregations or "Green Justice" congregations, which likewise need elaboration and clarification. They sound great, but what do they mean?

Ten years ago, in 2004, the United Church of Christ began a new identity and marketing campaign to let the world know that anyone could find a spiritual home in the United Church of Christ, be strengthened and nurtured in their faith, and be blessed to reach out to others with their God-given gifts and talents. This was named "God is Still Speaking." Part of the campaign included the admonition "Never place a period where God has placed a comma." This is not biblical: its source is Gracie Allen, as in George Burns and Gracie Allen. We certainly employ an eclectic mix of metaphors and sources, we UCC folks.

Our Gospel reading today speaks of welcome: welcoming the prophet, the righteous person, and the "little ones." The UCC proclaims as part of its online resources for deepening faith within the UCC, "We are People of Extravagant Welcome." And every once in a while, I see us living into that statement. The challenge for all of us is to go beyond the sound bite or the ad campaign or the slogan into a demonstration of our beliefs.

So much for slogans. Our spiritual tradition, we must remember, is not one of slogans, but of story-telling. It takes longer to tell a story, but it means more. Here are two.

When four-year-old Lee Howard Dobbins died, 2000 people came to his funeral. This was amazing. Little Lee had a hard life. It was 1853, his mother had been a slave and his father owned her. His mother died in slavery. Before she died, she entrusted her son to the care of another slave woman, who treated him as her own. That woman's family, and others, escaped to the North along the "underground railroad," a network of people working to assist fugitive slaves.

Lee had been carried for days and nights by other slaves who sought freedom, but his adoptive mother was forced to leave him behind in Oberlin because he became too sick to travel. She had several other children with her and Dobbins' biological father, who was the slave owner, was hot on their trail. The people of Oberlin, Ohio, welcomed little Lee and cared for him during his last days of life.

The doors of First Congregational in Oberlin were opened for his funeral and the place was filled—an incredible outpouring of grief for the child. At the funeral, the pastor stirred the congregation with the words:

“My friends, we meet this afternoon under peculiar circumstances, to pay our respects to the lifeless form of what, according to the laws of this country, is, at most, a ‘thing.’” And he went on: *Erect a monument to the memory of the little slave boy, bearing the inscription, “Resurgam [Rise again]”: and believe that as certainly as this little one shall rise again, so surely it is written on the institution of slavery, “it shall fall.” While you meditate, give thanks that our ancestors in the faith stood firmly against the false claims of culture and acted out the Gospel through defiant deeds of love. Pray for the strength to do the same today...and do not be afraid to weep.”*

A stirring eulogy. Today, in Oberlin, the story is remembered in sculpture and in dramatic retellings. Here is a more contemporary story of suffering and injustice:

A couple of years ago, a UCC minister traveled to an indigenous village in Mexico called Amatlán. A man came to speak to him and his companions about his experience with crossing the border and working in the United States. His wife sat next to him knitting something while he shared his story. The man, who looked to be in his early 30's, told the visitors about how when his wife became pregnant they had no money and no financial hope for starting their family. So they made the decision for him to go to the U.S. and find work.

He scraped by in Mexico, saving up the \$500 it takes to pay a coyote to illegally lead you across the border. He paid his money, and then he walked through the desert with a group of men under cover of darkness, unable to see if there was a snake or a scorpion in his path. He walked through the blaze of unforgiving daylight, wearing holes in his shoes and becoming exhausted from dehydration. One man in his 70s collapsed from the heat, so he carried him on his shoulders the rest of the way. When they crossed the border, they were immediately intercepted by the Border Patrol and taken back.

Penniless and humiliated, he started over. He earned that \$500, he took the horrendous journey again, and this time he made it into the United States where he found work. He worked ten-hour shifts with no breaks making less than minimum wage, never stopped even when he cut his hand open washing dishes; his boss wouldn't let him stop. And since he couldn't speak English, he couldn't express his needs, let alone defend himself under harsh treatment. After three years of saving up a little money under these conditions, he went back home, where he met his now three-year-old daughter for the first time.

At this point the visiting pastor looked over at the Mexican wife. She was still knitting, still looking down; and then a tear rolled down her cheek, but she quickly wiped it away, as if it was an enemy to which she refused to succumb. Finally, a student in the visiting group, moved by the

man's testimony, asked, "How can we help? What can we do to change this?" And he looked at the Americans and said, "Just be nicer. Don't treat us like we're horrible. Be kind."

Last week, one of the children in the Summer Drama Camp asked me a question. They were practicing for a performance of 'Moses and the Freedom Fanatics.' The actress, Ani, asked me: "If the Bible said that slavery was bad back when someone wrote the story of Moses, why did slavery last so long after that?" The answer is complex, of course: the Bible says many things on the subject of one human owning another. But I brought up the fact that there is more than one form of slavery: that forms of oppression can change over time. Ani said, "You mean, like sweat shops?" and we talked a bit more about modern injustice through a biblical lens.

So the question brought to us today by our Scriptures and by our experience is: what prophetic voice do we need to welcome today? What is the moral equivalent of slavery, and what is the corresponding moral equivalent of justice and welcome? 2700 years ago, the prophet Micah spoke out against mercenary prophets who lulled the people with easy words and comfortable promises. He gave more challenging instructions from God: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly. 2600 years ago, Jeremiah confronted the prophets who said that peace was right around the corner, because he knew that the future held a lot of suffering. He gave more challenging instructions from God, saying that the spirit of the laws must be internalized and embodied. 2000 years ago Jesus sent his disciples out into the world suggesting that even a cup of cold water, offered with extravagant welcome, would bring a spiritual reward. Jesus challenges us to welcome the difficult prophetic voice, all the while being aware of the most vulnerable little ones.

Who is Jesus telling us to listen to and learn from and welcome today? Can we offer the cup of cold water to a resident of Dismas House, who has been trapped in addiction and crime, and now has the chance to break free?

Can we offer a cup of cold water to the service people returning from four or five or six tours in Afghanistan, who are shackled with suffering from depression and PTSD, who are treated with suspicion and fear, but who now need care and acceptance?

Can we offer a cup of cold water (or in the words of the man from Amatlan, "be nicer") to the undocumented immigrants in our midst, who are living in the shadows of a work culture that they maintain with their sweat, who are too afraid to seek medical care when they are injured because they might be deported?

The cup of cold water – an extravagant welcome – acts of prophetic courage: where does one thing stop and the other begin? Maybe by practicing this prophetic hospitality we could enter the place where we "might all be one," each of us a "little one" loved equally by God. We would join little Lee Howard Dobbins, and the Mexican worker and his wife and daughter, and countless other slaves and workers and soldiers and released prisoners, each one of us needed in the Kingdom of Heaven. Each one of us needed to bring justice and mercy, healing and forgiveness, humility and hope, on earth as it is in Heaven. Amen.