

ROAD TRIP TO JERUSALEM
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University Congregational Church
March 13, 2011

Reading: Genesis 3: 1-13 (NEB)

The serpent was more crafty than any wild creature that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Is it true that God has forbidden you to eat from any tree in the garden?" The woman answered the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden, except for the tree in the middle of the garden. God has forbidden us either to eat or to touch the fruit of that; if we do, we shall die." The serpent said, "Of course you will not die. God knows that as soon as you eat it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods knowing both good and evil." When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good to eat, and that it was pleasing to the eye and tempting to contemplate, she took some and ate it. She also gave her husband some and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they discovered that they were naked; so they stitched fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

The man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze and hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" He replied, "I heard the sound as you were walking in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself." God answered, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree which I forbade you?" The man said, "The woman you gave me for a companion, she gave me fruit from the tree and I ate it." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done? The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

Have you heard the story about a couple had two very naughty little boys, aged 8 and 10? They were always getting into trouble. The boys' mother heard that there was a priest in town who was good at correcting children. So, she decided to send her 8-year-old son in the morning and her 10-year-old in the afternoon. The priest, a huge man with a loud voice, made the younger boy sit down and asked him strictly, "Where is God?" The boy's mouth dropped open, but he sat there, wide-eyed and said nothing. So the priest repeated the question in an even louder voice, "Where is God?" Again the boy made no attempt to answer. So the priest raised his voice even more and shook his finger in the boy's face and yelled, "WHERE IS GOD?"

The boy screamed and ran from the room. He went directly home slamming the door behind him. He hid in the cupboard. When his older brother found him, he asked, "What happened?" The younger brother, gasping for breath, replied, "We are in BIG trouble this time, dude. God is missing - and they think WE did it!"¹

We might wonder what kind of trouble WE are in this first Sunday in Lent. Lent is the Christian season of preparation for the Passion of the Christ, observed by congregations throughout the world and across denominational identity. It lasts 40 days but does not include Sundays. It begins with Ash Wednesday and concludes on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter. The 40 days reminds us of the testing of Jesus before he engaged his ministry. Lent is meant to be a time of repentance, prayer, fasting, and charity. Congregational churches developed special days of penitence for Lent starting in 1918.²

Why are we invited to repentance, prayer, fasting, and charity? I think the idea is that our hearts be cleansed and our souls opened for the gift of God's radical grace. We are invited to make space for the God who became flesh and was not ashamed to suffer like any human being. To put it another way, the Lenten trip to Jerusalem is the journey God makes to take the shame out of suffering for the needs of the world.

Lent begins with the recognition that each and every one of us is vulnerable. Like Adam and Eve we are naked and feel ashamed. We are exposed and feel debased.

¹ Monu Manama, "My Cyber Diary," April 6, 2006 at <http://chackochan.blogspot.com/2006/04/its-lent-season-so-some-jokes-related.html>. Downloaded 3/10/11.

² John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism: 1620-1957* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1992), pp. 436-437.

One of the fascinating and amusing ironies in this story is that after eating the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve realize that they are naked. They sew fig leaves into a loincloth and hide from God. They are ashamed of their nakedness. They make two assumptions about God. The first is that God had not already seen them naked, exposed, and vulnerable. They had not seen their nakedness before, so how could God have seen it? How in the world could they have concluded that? God didn't know they were naked? God has seen it all. There are no surprises for God. From a literary point of view, God made their birthday suits and it was good – good enough for God.

The second assumption is that God saw them naked and God was ashamed of them. There is no evidence that God is ashamed of anyone because we are vulnerable. Vulnerability is a fact of the human condition since day one. Or if I may say so, we are created in vulnerability. As James Hillman put it, from the moment of our conception we are old enough to die. We remain vulnerable throughout our entire life. Each of us walks the earth clothed in many layers of vulnerability. And indeed, our body is one of them, not for its bareness, but its susceptibility to violent action, disease, and decay. Lord knows our emotions are sometimes unprotected, be they of passion, fear, anger, or joy. All of our intellectual powers are assailable, whether you are working on an engineering problem or a human resources question. Regardless of the project how many times have we said, “Well I made that decision I could with the information that was available to me?” Madeleine L'Engle said, “When we were children, we used to think that when we were grown-up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept **vulnerability**... To be alive is to be vulnerable.”

There is something about human pride that cannot admit to limitations of mind, or physical strength, or spiritual capacity, or social skills, or sexual prowess. Human pride sometimes makes us act like two-year-old children who stamp their feet and demand, “My do it!” Human pride cannot say, “I need some help with this.” Human pride cannot admit that I made mistakes, or I failed, or I just don’t get it. And human pride is equally disturbed that someone we love or trusts makes mistakes, fails, and never fully comprehends. Human pride denies our vulnerability and it goes before every fall from grace. As Reinhold Niebuhr tried to teach us, human pride is the foundation of human sin.

I sometimes feel like the little boy who sobbed all the way home from church, following the baptism of his baby brother. Finally his father asked, “Why are you crying?”

The boy wept, “Because the minister said he wanted us to grow up in a good Christian home. But I want to stay with you guys.”

The truth is that no one is as good or as Christian as we want to be. That is true of churches and seminaries and denominational leadership. We just are not perfect and we never will be. God has known that about us the whole time and God is not ashamed of us. That is what we ought to know about each other and there is no cause for shame.

I mean that to apply to my family and to me. I mean that to apply to University Congregational Church in the midst of a difficult transition. We can all second-guess what happened, where we failed, what we should have done better and differently. All of those are fair questions. I am especially concerned about how we

improve our understanding of congregationalism and how decisions are made at UCC. But what I cannot deal with is the constant rumors and innuendo. I cannot stand the shame that some would project my way or toward the lay leadership of the church. I got a lengthy email demanding, “Where do you stand?” I try to answer these questions as openly as I can but I am still vulnerable. I get tired. I cannot remember one conversation or email from another. I worry about whether I am being honest or consistent and the things I cannot say. I wish I had said some things differently and spoken more precisely. So yes, I am naked – and fortunately for you it is a figure of speech and not a physical reality. Let me tell you a story about someone I deeply cared for but somehow let down.

I was the executive director of a Unitarian Universalist camp and conference center many years ago. I had on my staff a wonderful graphics artist and marketing employee. She was very bright and creative. She was pregnant and in her second trimester her doctors discovered that her fetus had major medical issues. It had spina-bifida and was hydrocephalic in both spheres of the brain. If she were to take the baby to term several surgeries would be required to shunt the brain and drain off as much fluid as possible. After birth the baby would require multiple surgeries and never have anything like a normal life. Its chance of surviving birth was less than ten percent. There was less than one week before her second trimester ended and if she wanted an abortion she would have it almost immediately to keep within the law. She wanted my opinion.

I did not and do not see my role as telling people what to do, or stipulating the moral choices I think they should make. I will love them and support them in the

effort for them to take responsibilities for their lives. I will try to offer resources that they might consider as they make those decisions. I will work to try and imagine the outcomes of choices, knowing full well that no one can predict the future behaviors of others or the full implications of our moral choices. Of course I would intervene to stop someone from taking their lives or hurting others but seldom are those the circumstances in which most of us make moral choices.

She chose to have the abortion and I assured her that I believed in her and the choice she made. But this was not what this young woman wanted to hear. She did not want moral reflection. She wanted my blessing. And somehow or another I failed to convey the deep love and profound respect I had for her as a human being and a woman of conscience. I had failed her.

That was nearly twenty years ago. I have thought about that conversation many times. Somehow or another I did not get it quite right. My pastoral care had its vulnerabilities. My pastoral care has its vulnerabilities. No minister's work is ever unassailable.

We are all vulnerable. And since we do not have a stitch on at this point I want to share a few ideas that I have about the future of UCC. Now these are not fig-leaf ideas, but may in the long run do more than cover our derriere.

In the first place I have seen several very loving and helpful emails about what we should do next. There are many good ideas out there. I thank you for the hope that you have for our church, the love that some have sent my way, and the many expressions of commitment to our future. But let me tell you what I believe is the next most important action to be taken. I am laying this out because I believe in this proposal

and I don't want anyone to say, "Well why didn't Dr. Blaine say so in the first place?" Or, "I wish he could have been a little more clear with us." So let be say so and be as clear as I can. OK? Is that fair? I also know that because we are Congregationalists we will make up our own minds and this is not an idea that I can force upon you. You will have to think about it and agree to it. Just don't leave the service this morning and think I am indecisive.

Before we can talk about a five-year plan, or a marketing plan, or a search committee for a Christian Educator we have got to assess who we are as a congregation and the processes that we will use to make decisions. What do our Constitution and Bylaws say we are and how effective is our governance structure? What have we learned in the last month and how will we walk together into the future? I believe we have to do that work and do it soon.

I also believe that we need a helping hand in that process. I strongly urge us to invite the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches to send a consultant to help us mediate the current issues and discern the steps we can take to strengthen our congregational processes. When we talked about joining the NA last summer we discussed the advantages of membership. Such a service is one of those advantages. Now why do we need such services?

In the first place we are tired, our nerves are just a little frayed, and we are emotionally in over our heads. Now I am not saying that is true of every single individual. But there is a difference between an individual family member going to a therapist and family therapy. We dare not presume that a member of the family can engage the dialogue and remain above the fray. We need someone who has no vested

interest and is not emotionally involved.

Second, a good consultant is going to be looking at institutional patterns of behavior and allow us to see how we work as an organization. Years ago I was a consultant for the Unitarian Universalist Association and sent to a church that had just called a new minister and wanted to think creatively about the future. One of the very first exercises that we did was to talk about the history of their church, beginning with the very first minister. They talked about Charlie and what a nice guy he was. They joked about the fact that Charlie always took his shoes off when he got to work and so you never could hear him coming down the hall. “He scared the hell out of the church workers on more than one occasion,” a secretary said. I asked the obvious question, “What happened to Charlie?” “Oh,” someone replied, “We fired him!

Then we went through the next eight or ten ministers and it turned out that they had fired every one of them or they had left under dark circumstances. I asked about the immediate predecessor. “Well, we fired her too.” I then asked why they had called this woman to their pulpit. They told me that they wanted a minister who had a reputation for strong church growth. “So,” I asked, “Did she do that?”

“Absolutely,” someone answered. “But she was just too aggressive and demanded too many changes that would help us grow.”

As we looked at each one of these pastorates we were able to see that the congregation could not keep its ministers because of significant conflict of expectations. Even when the minister fulfilled their expectations they were really not the expectations the church had of its clergy. That was an institutional pattern of behavior that no one in the congregation could see about itself.

Secondly, a consultant can hear “both sides” of an issue and reframe the conversation so that each side might be able to hear the other. That gives us the opportunity to talk with each other and not about each other. That allows us to discover the common values and hopes that we share for our church. A consultant might even bring in a “congregational covenant of behavior” that stipulates the basic ground rules about how we communicate with each other. I know that may sound a little pedantic but that is why there are speed limit signs posted on the highway. We have to be reminded once in a while what the rules are.

A consultant from the National Association is someone who will understand how congregational churches are organized and how they conduct business. There is a “congregational way” of being church that is distinct from Presbyterian or Methodist governance. What would it hurt for us to have a disinterested Congregationalist look at our bylaws, policies, and procedures and suggest ways that we can be more effective and inclusive? What is it that we can learn about Congregationalism that strengthens University Congregational Church? I suggest a consultant from the National Association because they are going to be deeply aware of Congregationalism and our traditions, as opposed to consultants that may not be as familiar.

Please understand that a consultant from the NA will not be in the position of requiring us to do anything. We can take or leave their insights, their wisdom, and their suggestions. If we agree to do this, our commitment is to bring them here, attend whatever meetings or processes they create, listen and learn. I do not know what costs may be involved for us but I think failing to engage in such a process will be even more expensive in the long run.

You should know that the Alban Institute, one of the most highly regarded church consulting organizations in the United States, trains consultants of the NA. Alban has done the most research and offered some of the best manuals on congregational conflict available today. That is the kind of training that a National Association consultant will bring to UCC.

Obviously I cannot do this. Some have suggested that perhaps Dr. Don Olsen from the Plymouth Congregation be engaged. Don has had this training and I have every confidence in his ministry. But Don and I have talked about this and we both agree that given the history of our two churches this is not a feasible idea.

This is my suggestion to you. I hope I have been clear and unequivocal. I understand that it is not a decision for me to make. I also understand that such a process also has its risks. We will still be vulnerable. Darn it! We will still make mistakes. Damn and blast! But I believe that we will also come out of it a stronger church and a kinder people.

Hear me when I say from the depths of my heart that we need not be ashamed. Enough of that! I have more love for you that you might realize. I believe in our future and I believe that we can take steps together that will propel us forward with the love and transforming power of God.

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