

THE RHINO, THE ELEPHANT, AND THE GORILLA

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University Congregational Church

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Readings from Acts and St. Paul (NRSV)

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. (Acts 6:1)

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles has also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him say, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat supper with them?” (Acts 11: 1-4)

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of you be in agreement and that there is no division among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Has Christ been divided? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (I Corinthians 1: 10-13)

I have been thoroughly saturated this week by the pain and anger that many of you feel in the decision to restructure our church, and consequently the release of Karen Robu, our Director of Children and Youth. You have no idea how much I have agonized over this and the pain that it has inflicted on my family, especially my daughter Emily and my wife Mimi. I do not intend in this sermon to argue the case that was made by the Committee on Ministry and the Church Council for this decision. The challenge for me at this point is how can I be the pastor to those who will allow me and how can we make better decisions and create better processes in the future.

I offered just a few readings from the letters of the New Testament to make the point that the church has always been engulfed in conflict. On the one hand the early churches were created in a culture of conflict with the occupation of the Holy Land by the Roman Empire. On the other hand we read from Acts an early church conflict

about the distribution of charity to the widows and orphans. The Jews and Jewish Christians, whose primary language was Greek, made the complaint that their needy ones were not given a fair share of the church's charity for the poor. They argued that the Hebrew and Aramaic speaking Jewish Christian had an unfair advantage.

Almost the entire book of I Corinthians is a long list of complaints and conflicts within that congregation. The first division in the church was about the legitimacy and authenticity of various Christian ministers, including Apollos, Peter, and Paul. The people fought about who was the better Christian based on their spiritual gifts such as teaching, healing, and speaking in tongues. That was the lead up fight to Paul's wonderful thirteenth chapter on the supremacy of love above every skill and talent. Other issues included whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised in accordance with Jewish custom in order to become Christians; must Christian converts follow Hebrew kosher food regulations; how should the common meal be shared justly; and the issue of sexual immorality in the church. We could spend many hours laying out the issues that early congregations fought about.

Most of us do not understand the fights of the early churches and have even less interests in the specific issues. But I can assure you that these questions were for them were every bit as painful as church fights are in the 21st century. Christians believed passionately about their congregation and their own beliefs about what it means to be a community of faith. Since the year 33 A.D. every person in every congregational conflict believed that he or she had the best interests of the church in their hearts. And none can know the hearts of others to dispute their intentions. They were appalled to find out that others had very different ideas. Don't think for a

moment that the word “betrayal” just arrived in the lexicon of church life during the first week of March, 2011.

The heart of every church conflict is fundamentally the question of who we are as a community of faith and what is our purpose. What does it mean to be a church and how do we best fulfill the mission of the church? We will never achieve unanimous agreement about what that means and how we will best accomplish our tasks. I think that is especially the case in congregational churches.

I have said to you on many occasions that even though the church is this side of the cross it is still this side Eden. We are a human institution served and staffed by human beings who are flawed and needy. We are a human institution served and staffed by many gifted and talented people, University Congregation being a sterling example. In the mix of our limitations and treasures God has placed the gospel into our hands. Into our clay hands God has entrusted the Good News that human beings are of value and worthy of transformation. Because our hands are clay we will fumble, bobble, and drop the Christ child from time to time. That does not change the grace and trust that God has given to us. That does not vacate the church’s call to mission and ministry.

Despite the fact that some of us are not willing to hold hands any more; and some of our hands are dried and cracked and bleeding; and some of our hands are warm while some are cold or clammy, we are still called to gather in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ. We are yet given the covenant to work and worship so that peace, justice, and human reconciliation will find its way in our world.

In a note to the choir this week, Bob Scott wrote:

“I ask everyone to take time for a walk in the park and

remember that we have an unusual opportunity at UCC to be an important part of the life of the church with our music. There have been times in my life when I was tempted to throw what I "knew" away to look for a more satisfactory and exciting road. When troubles mount up like mountains and it is difficult to see the path---step back, breathe deeply--take time to walk. And now is one of those times. An old philosopher friend of mine always said, "If you find yourself in a rut, decorate it." My rut is beautifully decorated by many friends and events. You are among the best.

Please stay focused on our mission. We have a great opportunity to continue what we all love and at the same time make a contribution to the community and church. Their support for us has remained unwavering.

Thank you, dear friends, for your energy, talent-and patience. We need you all---See you next Wednesday.

Much love to each of you,

Uncle Bob”

After the death of Moses, Joshua led the Hebrew people into the Promised Land. If you remember the Exodus story you know that the people were not too far from Egypt when some began to complain. They thought perhaps they had made a mistake and began to revision their days of slavery. Some wanted to return to the servitude of Pharaoh and the “flesh pots” and idols of Egypt. That kind of anxiety led them to wander for forty years before they could cross the river Jordan. Moses himself would never make it. Even under Joshua’s leadership, after they entered into Canaan – the land of milk and honey – they were still tempted to go back and live in the past. They were tempted to forsake God’s promise for the future.

And the painful reality that we are left with today is that we cannot take back the past week. Trust has been broken. Pain has been inflicted, despite the reasons and best intentions of anyone in this room today, on both sides of the issue. Bob Scott

urges us to keep focused on the mission of this church. So please allow me to tell you a story about my life.

In the mid 1980's I was in the process of getting a divorce. I had left the United Methodist ministry and I was working with a therapist. I was employed by the Mental Health Association of Pinellas County. On my first Sunday out of the pulpit I decided to attend the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Clearwater. Their building is in the round with tiered pews. I sat on the highest pew as far away from the minister as possible. I signed nothing. Somehow the Rev. John Burciaga found out who I was and asked me to have lunch with him. We talked a great deal and he asked me if I would consider being credentialed as a Unitarian Universalist minister. I told him that I could not consider such a possibility for at least for a year. I needed to conclude my therapy and re-think my vocation. He said that was fine and he would honor the year I needed. "By the way," John said, "would you mind teaching an adult Sunday school class?"

I agreed and taught an adult Sunday school class on the book of Genesis. I had 60 people in attendance. One of my favorites was Mitzie Farrington who covered her Bible in a grocery store paper bag. You remember how we used to cover our textbooks for school. She was surprised that she would be a Unitarian bringing her Bible to Church on Sunday morning.

About a year later I received a phone call from John. I won't say it was to the day but I recall it was within the week of the year. Again we had lunch. We talked. And then John said, "Gary you have been hurt and you have done some hurting. But

you have been called and it is time for you to take up your calling and return to the ministry.”

What I want to say to you dear friends is this: We have been hurt and we have done some hurting. It is now time for us to recover our mission and restore our ministry. The only way that we are going to get past this is to walk through it. When the Psalmist declared, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley,” he did not say, “even though I walk around the valley,” or “over the valley” or “under the valley.” He said, “through the valley.”

And of course he freely admits that it is the darkest valley. In dark valleys we cannot see clearly what is in front of us. In the darkest of valleys we walk by faith not by eyesight. We will bump into things, we will trip on things, and we will fall down. Some times we will get lost. And because it is darkness we do not exactly see what is on the other side. None of the Hebrews who left Egypt arrived in the Promised Land. Such a journey is frightening and some will refuse to take the trip. We will lose some more on the way.

All we have is the promise that God is with us. We can walk through the valley because God is with us; his rod and staff comfort us; God prepares a table for us; and God blesses us with the anointing of oil. I do not know about you, but that is a promise that I cling to. That is the promise that God extends to everyone in this room, no matter how angry, or disillusioned, or hurt, or betrayed, or culpable, or innocent. If we do not have such a promise this church has no possible future. And I believe that is the faith required us this morning. The depth of faith is not an expectation of

perfection of anyone, but a profound commitment to the process of reconciliation. In the words of Maltbie D. Babcock, may I encourage us to:

Be strong!
We are not here to play, to dream, to drift,
We have hard work to do, and loads to lift.
Shun not the struggle, face it, 'tis God's gift.

Be strong!
Say not the days are evil – who's to blame!
And fold the hands in acquiesce – O shame!
Stand up, speak out, and bravely, in God's name.

Be strong!
It matters not how deep entrenched the wrong,
How hard the battle goes, the day, how long;
Faint not, fight on! Tomorrow comes the song.

My hands are open to yours. My mind is open to your ideas. My heart is open to love. My soul needs forgiveness all around. My will needs your strength. All of these are choices that each one of us will make today and in the weeks to come. We will not all agree but we need not be disagreeable. Whatever you choose, be at peace with God and may God's blessing be with each and every one.

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