

July 3, 2005  
Matthew 11: 1-6,  
First Parish Church  
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## *Come Listen, Go Serve*

This is a day in which we are reminded of our roots in several ways.

These last few weeks we've been considering the stories of Abraham and Sarah, the stories which are at the roots of the Jewish faith. Today we heard about Rebekah's arrival into the family to become Isaac's wife. I think I'll leave them to themselves today.

Tomorrow we celebrate our birth as a nation. We are reminded of the privilege it is to live in a country where we are free to worship in the manner to which our conscience and our God calls us.

And this weekend, three thousand people, (including my husband, Ron, and Bill Imes) from all over the United Church of Christ have gathered in Atlanta, Georgia for the biennial meeting called General Synod. This year's theme is *Come Listen, Go Serve: God is Still Speaking*.

With the wonder of live video feed, we can watch the proceedings on our computers. Just go to [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org). Yesterday, I only saw a couple of small segments, but happened on the introduction and invitation to the next synod in 2007, which will be the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary synod in Hartford, Conn. At each synod, those gathered remember the stories of the uniting vision and mission that brought together the

Congregational Christian denomination with the Evangelical and Reformed denomination - two groups that themselves had been formed by mergers in the 1930's.

All this merging was part of the larger ecumenical fervor that was prominent at times in the last century. We also saw the joining of the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren and the rejoining of the Presbyterian churches, and others. People were tired and frustrated by our tendency in Protestantism to keep protesting and breaking off from one another. The hope was that we "may all be one" in Christ Jesus.

In the early years the UCC spoke often of itself as a united and uniting church. Although there have not been any other formal mergers, we have created a special partnership with the Disciples of Christ, which allows clergy to move freely between churches in the two denominations, and also created a common board for world missions.

Along with remembering our history, many other things happen at General Synod:

- worship,
- fellowship,
- opportunities for service in the community where synod is

- workshops on a multitude of topics,
- election of the officers and ministers of the church (Cally Rogers-Witte, who was my conference minister in the Southwest Conference, has been nominated to be the Executive Minister of the Wider Ministries Board. She is giving her talk as we speak.),
- decisions about the operation of the church,
- and dealing with resolutions that have come from parts of the church itself.

In some ways synod is like a family reunion – people who share a common heritage, people who care deeply about each other, but people who when it comes right down to it don't always see “eye to eye” about things.

I had the opportunity to be a delegate to synod in 1987. The primary issue at that synod was the location of national headquarters. It's like trying to decide whether or not to move your sanctuary to a new location. It was an emotional discussion that was not resolved at that synod. At the next synod it was decided to move from NY to Cleveland, Ohio, where the headquarters are still located.

The other thing I remember about that synod had to do with food. Food often plays a prominent role in family gatherings doesn't it. I call the '87 synod the synod of the beef stews. Several groups planning special evening dinners had independently all chosen beef stew. The convention center, not realizing that there would be considerable overlap of attendees, didn't mention this to anyone. So the first

night we all enjoyed the beef stew. The next night, those of us who were repeats began to wonder. Then the word got out that indeed all the dinners were going to be beef stew. I confess I didn't attend the last one.

At this synod the primary issue for the church itself has to do with consideration about the path to ordination. Currently you have to have a four-year college degree and three years of seminary. However, because there are fewer young people going to seminary and the costs of higher education keep increasing, and because of the needs of rural churches and some ethnic churches we are considering other options. I expect this matter will receive very careful consideration.

Then, at this synod, as always, there will also be proposed resolutions. These statements of concern about matters that affect the church and our society come from folk within the church itself. If you read yesterday's Portland paper you know that three of the proposed resolutions relate to matters of marriage. If you read closely you noticed that those proposed resolutions don't see “eye to eye.” There are also proposed resolutions regarding financial investments in the Middle East, environmental stewardship, and many others.

When synod passes a resolution, they do not speak “for” us. Their decisions are meant to speak “to” us. Resolutions are a way for us to hear from others, who our brothers and sisters in the UCC, but who don't always sit next to us on Sunday morning. Resolutions ask us to give prayerful and thoughtful

consideration to these matters of significant concern.

Why do we deal with resolutions? I think one of the reasons is that we have a conviction in the United Church of Christ that God is still speaking. This conviction traces back to our roots in congregational heritage. We heard it expressed in the refrain in the hymn we sang a few minutes ago, “There is still more light and truth to break forth from God’s word.” The pilgrims left their homeland and traveled to a new world because they believed this. They gave up a lot because they were unwilling to be bound by the religious tradition in which they were embedded. They decided to take on the yoke of Christ rather than what they perceived as the yoke of the Anglican church.

In today’s gospel reading we hear Jesus offering us a new yoke. We tend to hear this passage as primarily an offering of comfort in the midst of difficult times.

*Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden. Take my yoke upon you. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

In their context in the gospel, these words are also meant to be a contrast between the yoke of Jesus and the yoke of the Torah. We modern hearers would not be aware but the term yoke in a religious context in those days meant the yoke of the Torah. The rabbis spoke of the need to be diligent in following the law. The early Christian church, on the other hand, came to understand that being faithful did not mean being bound to every word of the law.

As John Thomas, executive minister and president of the UCC, said in a recent newspaper article,

*Our faith is not in a book or a tradition, but a Sovereign who is risen, is present to us, and thus a Word that “still speaks.”*

A word from which more light and truth continues to break forth.

So we come. We come to First Parish church, to Cumberland Association meetings, to Maine Conference meetings, to General Synod – to listen to the risen Christ who still speaks. And then we go forth to serve.