

## *Articulating Our Values*

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In 2005 a group of people at Spirit of Peace Church got together and over the course of several months talked about what are our values in the United Church of Christ. We set ourselves a challenge, what is called a “ten-word philosophy”, actually five two-word phrases. Like a value *haiku*, if you will. Putting that kind of limit on it forced us to be very deliberate about our word-choice, to think about what really matters most to us. We also avoided using traditional Bible or church language. The church has its own jargon, words and phrases that mean something to us, but don’t necessarily mean anything to those outside the church. So we sought words that anyone on the street could understand, but that would resonate with Bible and church language. For inspiration we drew on hymns, and also on some of the writings of our UCC General Minister and President, The Reverend John Thomas, who has a way with putting old Biblical concepts into fresh language. Two of the phrases we came up with are from him.

The five values or virtues or principles we came up with were: extravagant welcome, abundant life, eternal love, courageous witness, and transforming community. It’s hardly an exhaustive list, but it’s proven to be very useful for us. Concise, yet full of meaning; ancient yet contemporary.

The first one, “Extravagant Welcome,” comes right from John Thomas himself. He articulated this value shortly after he became General Minister and President, and it found an excellent expression in that first “God is still speaking...” TV ad, with the famous bouncers keeping people out of a church, followed by the phrase, “Jesus didn’t turn people away; neither do we.” No doubt you recall that the ad came under heavy fire. Yet it was provocative because it played on the image that many unchurched people believe: that they won’t be welcome, that they’ll be kept out because of their clothes, or their family situation, or their lifestyle. The ad was also provocative because it forced us in the church to ask of ourselves: are we really as welcoming as we like to think we are? Or are there in fact people who we would prefer not to come to our church? The guardians of the Temple may claim they are keeping out impurity, but what they’re really keeping out are people. And that’s the rub: whenever impurity, bad influences, sinners, are kept out – it’s really people who are being excluded. But God does not see people as impure. Rather, people – human beings – become an opportunity for us to encounter God. In Jesus’ parable, the way we treat people is the way we treat God. If we exclude people, we exclude God. And when we welcome them, show hospitality to them, visit them – so we do also for God. It’s not up to us to separate those sheep and goats: that’s God’s business. Our business is instead to show mercy, kindness, welcome. For each person represents God to us, not by any virtue they possess, but because that is how God chooses to be known in the world.

The second of the values is “Abundant Life.” This one and the third one of “Eternal Love” represent a twist on a more conventional Christian topic: eternal life, which is another one of those “jargony” terms that Christians often go on about. Our values group turned away from this phrase and instead sought another equally Biblical one: abundant life. This comes from the gospel of John, where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd. He says, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Eternal life is a hard concept for me to wrap my brain around, but abundant life – that’s something I can understand. Think about it: I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. Even that word “abundant” goes nicely with the word from our first value, “extravagant.” It sounds like “overflowing.” Even eternal life sounds kind of boring compared to it. What would an abundant life be like? Well, think of the opposite: a stingy life, a miserly life, a meager life. Don’t you ever have times when life seems like drudgery? You toil away at a thankless job. No one at work acknowledges or appreciates what you can really do. You squabble with your friends and family. Home is just an endless list of chores to do. You go to school only so you can get a good job; you

work only so you can pay the bills. What's abundant about that? But hear this vision from Isaiah: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and you labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food." (Is.55:1-2) That sounds like a different life. "Delight in rich food!" Now that's a message we don't hear very often these days! The Bible talks about food and feasting as a metaphor for the good life that God offers. Our world today tells us that life is not abundant. We have to work hard and earn our keep. There's not enough to go around, so we'd better get our share and guard it closely. Now there's definitely a good side to conserving and saving. Yet the Bible returns again and again to this more generous worldview. This is what God offers to us: not mere life, not even life that never ends. No, God offers abundant life, life that overflows, life that bursts at the seams. Joy, bounty, beauty, freedom, all good things! If we trust that God gives life abundantly, then will we be stingy with others? Will we continue to labor for that which does not satisfy? Will we settle for dullness? Meagerness? Poverty?

Speaking about abundant life will change the way we view life itself, and the same thing happens with "Eternal Love." I don't think we'll suffer from the same lack of imagination over eternal love that we might for eternal life. We can imagine what eternal love is like. Our society feeds us many stories about love at first sight, true love that conquers all. The romanticized version is something of a fantasy, and yet haven't we indeed known true love in our lives? Whether it's love for a partner, or the love of parents for their children, or siblings for one another, hopefully all of us have experienced how strong and powerful and unbreakable love can be. And if we know love in our families, how much more can we know love from God! There was a woman who had a wastrel son. He got into drugs and became a thief to support his habit. Finally his wild living caught up with him. He contracted a disease that threatened his life. The woman was desperately worried about him and went to her pastor. "I love my son," she told him, "but the way he's lived, I'm so afraid that when he dies he will go to hell. If anyone deserves it, he does. Yet he's my son, I love him!" The pastor asked her, "How did you respond when your son came home?" She replied, "Oh, it had been so long since I'd seen him that I'd long ago given up hope that I'd ever see him again. I just threw both my arms around him and held him as tight as I could. I told him how much I love him, and how I would always be there for him. I told him that I knew he would die if he kept on the way he had, but I knew I couldn't make him change. Only he could do that. But I told him that whenever he was ready, I'd be there for him, to support him in any way I could." When she had finished speaking, the pastor paused for a moment. "That," he said at last, "is exactly the way God responds to each and every one of us." This is what eternal love means, and God will never betray that love. Eternal love is abundant, which means that there's more than enough for our loved ones. There is also enough for our enemies. And that is what Jesus called us to do. Love our enemies, bless those who persecute us. If we really affirm love as one of our core values, then we will have to consider how to love our enemies. For if we can't do that, then we have to wonder how eternal our love really is.

In the fourth of our values, our small group was trying to find a way to express our commitment to justice. But that's a tricky thing to do without getting into problems of judgmentalism or self-righteousness. Fortunately, we were saved once again by the UCC's General Minister and President, who around that time wrote an article on "evangelical courage." We really liked what he was getting at, but we still had problems with that language. He was talking about evangelism in terms of "good news," but for the purposes of our group, if ever there was a churchy word that outsiders don't understand, it's "evangelism." Instead, we turned it around slightly and came up with "Courageous Witness." Really, it means the same thing. After all, what are we bearing witness to so courageously? The good news! But to go back to this question of the good news to which we bear witness. In Jesus' first sermon in Luke, he says, "I have come to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captive, to restore sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free." The term "witness" reminds us that we are not the source of that good news. It is our job to proclaim it, to give testimony to it, and sometimes

that does indeed take a lot of courage! Because there are forces in this world who work against that good news, who want people to remain in prisons both spiritual and literal. And yet when we start thinking that justice is on our side, we run the risk of judging and condemning others. As our small group struggled to find language for this, we came up with another phrase, one that didn't make it into our final five values, but I think is an important complement, and that is "confronting abuse." This phrase isn't about passing judgment, but about standing up and calling what we see. We all have power which we can use for good or for ill. Evil, if you think about it, is not something different from good: rather it's about the misuse of power that can be used for good. This way we are not condemning anyone as evil, rather we are calling on their capacity for good, calling them to higher ground. A relationship is implied in this phrase, a connection between the witness and the one receiving the witness. When we bear our courageous witness, we ought to have that same mind in us. For it is true that sometimes we might be mistaken in our witness. But we should proclaim it anyway, with courage but also with humility. If we are wrong, then let us trust that God will grant us greater insight. But let us not allow our fear of failure to keep us from bearing witness in the first place.

Finally, we come to the last value: Transforming Community. Modern American Christianity tends to be very focused on the individual. Jesus died for my sins, so my soul could be saved and go to heaven. Even the phrase "Jesus is my personal Lord and Savior," sounds privatized and individualistic, not unlike "Jesus is my personal coach and trainer." We lose sight of the fact that Jesus wasn't so much concerned about individual souls saved so much as a community healed and restored. He didn't really talk that much about salvation and going to heaven when you die. Instead, he talked about the kingdom of heaven as something we encounter here on earth, a new community that is defined by the kinds of values we've talked about: extravagant welcome and abundant life, eternal love and courageous witness. Our starting point was that phrase Jesus used so often, "the kingdom of heaven." But as you should be able to tell my previous paragraphs, we found this phrase to be too churchy. So what does Jesus mean when he speaks of the kingdom of heaven? Well, he's talking about a community in which we are related to each other in a special way. So we next tried variations of the phrase "family of God." Jesus certainly uses metaphors of family: Call no one "Father" except God, whoever hears and does my word, is my mother, my brother, my sister. And churches often refer to themselves as a family. Yet this phrase didn't quite satisfy us, because the word "family" has become so sentimentalized. We speak of the nuclear family of mom, dad, and kids, in a way that doesn't reflect the diversity of families out there. Sometimes even talk as if the family is this little unit threatened by all kinds of problems "out there." As a result, people often treat their homes like a fortress, complete with locks and alarm systems. Families can become an "us versus them" mentality.

But consider this: the church is the only organization left in our society where people gather across family lines, across lines of age and gender and family configuration. A church is like a family, yes, but it is something more. It brings people together who are not bound by blood, and binds them instead by Jesus' name into the kingdom of heaven. The church is a community with all kinds of families, broken and whole and reshaped. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you belong. Yet the church is still more than that. It is a community that transforms. But a community can also be one of the worst things in the world when it is a clique, defined by who is in and who is out, a line that is maintained by mockery and disdain, hatred and even violence. Nor is the church a community like Noah's ark, one that merely gathers us up and shuts us off from the world, keeping us safe but also keeping us the same, while the storm rages outside. The church is not a community of the *status quo*. It is a community that changes us. We become different people for being a part of it, we are transformed and made new – and in turn we go back out from this community to transform the rest of the world.