

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, September 20, 2020**

“Tensions in the Wilderness”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Christian Scripture: Exodus 16:2-15



One of the items I have on my desk is a rather nifty promotional brochure that describes Centre Congregational Church during Jack Bixby's tenure (John N. Bixby, Jr.).



The brochure describes 'our building', 'church services', 'our common beliefs', the 'music of ministry', 'fellowship opportunities', 'organization and leadership', 'what we do beyond ourselves', and 'Christian education'. One of the most interesting sections is entitled 'our membership'. The brochure reads, "Centre Congregational Church has nearly 500 members". It states further that forty members joined within the last twelve months". Wow! Five-hundred members and forty of those added during that year alone.



In contrast, today we have about 125 members. According to the most recent annual program report we added only four, not forty, to our membership in the last twelve months. Now, this is not necessarily a comparison to lament. I am sure that I now have as many joys and frustrations in the ministry that Jack did then. Jack's ministry was not necessarily stronger nor weaker than mine is now. I am not any more or less fulfilled in my calling now than Jack was then. We cannot be ashamed nor proud when comparing and contrasting eras because the times and contexts are radically different. In many ways, comparing Bixby's era with Couper's era is like comparing 'apples and oranges'.

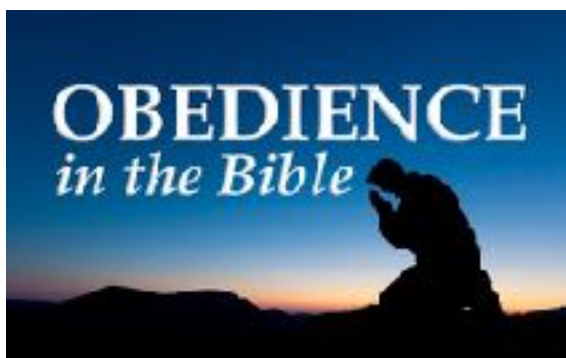


In our Hebrew scripture reading, two eras are described. One when the Israelites were in Egypt and one when they embarked upon the exodus and

wandered in the desert. While in the desert, the Israelites remembered their time in Egypt quite nostalgically (and unrealistically?). 'Ah, those were the good ol' days!' Apparently, while in Egypt, the Israelites *somehow* had a diet that seemed wonderful.



Verse three, chapter sixteen states that the Israelites recalled that while slaves in Egypt they “sat around pots of meat and ate all the food [they] wanted”. Then in the desert, they feared starvation. So, we have two very different contexts, that of plenty and that of want - or that is how it seems. And so Bixby’s church of thirty years ago *can be seen* as a time of plenty and the church of today can be seen by us as a time of want.



Yet, I believe that no matter what era we think we are in, whether we suppose we are in a time of plenty or a time of want, that we are called by God not to grumble, but to be *obedient*.

Jack Bixby is one of my heroes because he was obedient to his calling and to doing the gospel while ministering at Centre Church.



Dorothy vander Meulen affectionately wrote in her book *This Jewel on Main Street* that after a process of study and discernment, Jack led the church to vote to become a 'Just Peace' church.¹ According to the United Church of Christ, a 'Just Peace' church "focuses attention on alleviating systemic injustice of all types using non-violence and calls us to offer the message, grounded in the hope of reconciliation in Jesus, that 'Peace is possible'".² During Jack's tenure, the issues foremost in the headlines were poverty, U.S. and Soviet relations, nuclear war, and Cold War proxy conflicts in Latin America. Because

¹ Dorothy van der Meulen, *This Jewel on Main Street: Centre Congregational Church at 200 years 1816-2016* (Shires Press, Manchester Center, VT), 2015, p. 20.

² "Just Peace", United Church of Christ, https://www.ucc.org/justice_just-peace, accessed September 21, 2020. See also the "Pronouncement on Affirming the United Church of Christ as a Just Peace Church", 1985, http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/257/just-peace-church-pronouncement-1985.pdf?1418423617, accessed September 21, 2020.

of the church's engagement in these many issues, Centre Church founded Loaves & Fishes, joined the 'Bridges for Peace' program, and began a partnership with our Sister Parish in El Salvador. These engagements of a 'Just Peace' church demonstrated obedience to God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I interviewed Jack for this message this morning. Let us hear from him his recollections: "My memory of the decision to become a 'Just Peace' church is vague.



That was back when Russia was Reagan's 'evil empire' and [it] was peddled that way. Centre Church was directly involved in the 'Witness for Peace' program with a few church members going to the Soviet Union (including Mary-Ellen and Don Webster) and nearly a dozen Soviet citizens came here on different occasions. We hosted them. They spoke in our sanctuary to standing room only crowds. Nuclear weapons were proliferating. It was a different world. Several prominent church members advocated for the 'Just Peace' identity. They're all gone.



Our other big focus, in those days was Loaves & Fishes, food for those who need it. We stood for justice and peace in a world that needed it. We were on the move. Several members of the congregation were directly involved in both endeavors. They're almost all gone. In the end, I'm not sure what difference it made except that at the time the 'Just Peace' identity seemed to be congruent with the focus of the church's ministry, and certainly with my ministry. I was very involved in and beyond Brattleboro in the peace movement. So, we were affirming what we were doing".

When in a time of plenty, with apparently lots of food in Egypt, God asked the Israelites to be obedient, to follow God's instructions.



The instructions would lead them through the plagues, out of Egypt, and eventually to the Promised Land. When in a time of want, when apparently there was a great shortage of food, God again asked the Israelites to be obedient, to follow instructions, instructions that would enable them to survive and grow despite the scarcities in the desert.



The Lord said, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for the day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions” (Exodus 16:4). The lesson for us this morning is: No matter the abundance, we as God’s people are to be obedient and no matter the scarcity, we as God’s people are to still remain obedient.

In a time of plenty, with 500 members, Centre Church was obedient by declaring itself to be a ‘Just Peace’ church and living-out that declaration.



In a perceived time of scarcity, with 125 members, Centre Church is to remain obedient by continuing to live-out its declaration that is a ‘Just Peace’ church as it confronts the issues of our day: racial justice, health care, and the climate change crisis.

This lesson is also for us as individual people of faith - you and I. No matter whether we have little, no matter if we have abundance, we are called nonetheless to be obedient.³



We are all called to tithe our money to the ministry of this church. We are all called to give of our time and talents to the ministry of this church.



To conclude, I'm going to give the floor back to Jack. Let us give him the last word: "The 'Just Peace' church identity in some ways has to do with the integrity of language. Does what we say or write accurately describe what we do and who we are? Or, *vis versa*? It's that integrity that our faith establishes and defends. Otherwise, we're lying to ourselves and/or violating our self-understanding. "In the beginning was the Word..." (John 1:1). Just what does that mean? Are we really who we say we are? Who do we say we are? Do we

³ Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez, and Justo Gonzalez, "Proper 20", in *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year A*, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, Ronald Allen, and Dale Andrews, eds., (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), p. 405-6.

need to ask and answer that question routinely, never once and for all? I think so”.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to you at home, the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.