

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, August 7, 2022
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev Dr Scott Couper
“Living into the Promise”
Christian Scripture: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16



On the sixth of June 1999, I was, according to a certificate on the wall of my office, “received into full ordained ministerial membership in the Southwest Association, Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ”. At my ordination service, a friend and mentor who is a Blues musician played a stunning solo electric guitar version of Curtis Mayfield’s 1960s song “People Get Ready”. If you recall, the opening lines are “People Get ready, there’s a train a comin’. You don’t need no baggage; you just get on board. All you need is faith to hear the diesel’s hummin’. Don’t need no ticket, you just thank the Lord”.¹

¹ Curtis Mayfield & Impressions, “People Get Ready”, 1965, found at: <https://www.google.com/search?q=people+get+ready+curtis+mayfield&oq=People+Get+Ready+Curtis+Mayfield&aqs=chrome.0.0i355i512j46i512.9855j1j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>, accessed August 8, 2022.

I find that sometimes the most basic answers to questions about transcendent truths lead to questions that are equally profound and baffling as the preceding answer. For example, Curtis Mayfield basically asks in his song, 'What is needed to be whole?' to which his response is 'All you need is faith'. Well, the follow-up question therefore is, 'Well, what is faith?' To which the apostle Paul responds in letter to the Hebrews, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). To which we can ask 'For what are hoping that we are assured will happen and what are we sure of that is not seen?' And the answer to these are 'the fulfillment God's promise'. And the question we ask is, 'what has God promised?' To which the answer is, and I think we have now come full circle on this, 'that we shall be made whole'. So, that we are not seen to be chasing our tails, we may finally ask 'Well, what constitutes "being made whole"'? The answer, ultimately, is: 'to be united with one another and with God'.

Friends, though we are all broken in many ways, at this communion table we are being made whole by uniting with one another and with God. Communion is about the sharing of life with God and with one another. We desire to know God and we want to be known by God. We want to love God and we want God to love us on a deep and personal level. Likewise, the sharing of life is about knowing others and being known by others, about caring for others and being cared for by others on a deep and personal level. Here at this table there are no superstition,

no doctrine, no magic, no dogma, no hocus pocus. The only thing here at this table is the joy of loving and being loved.

No matter the relationship, a meal is a conduit for knowing and caring. Think about it. Consider a baby at a mother's breast. Or, consider a family, large or small, sitting at the table. Though seemingly trite, the question "How are you today?" is about knowing and being known. The request "Please, pass the potatoes" is about caring and being cared for. The simplest conversations had at the table are said to foster relationships. For couples, often the first experience of knowing and caring for one another is going out to dinner. The care one takes to cook, the practice of setting the table, the acts of passing and receiving food and drink all create relationships and thus facilitate wholeness. This week, I sat with Bob Keller and watched him enjoy a strawberry milkshake I bought for him and I observed his daughters demonstrate profound love by providing water for him to drink with a small sponge. Whether we are taking our first breaths or our last breaths, and all that happens in between, food and drink facilitate knowing and caring for another.

At the table, we are being made whole by being united with one another and with God. We remember that the Great Unite-er used food and drink to facilitate a covenantal bond with his friends whom he loved. The table is where we are assured that "we may all be one" (John 17:21), just as Jesus prayed in the

Garden of Gethsemane. Paul's words assurance and conviction about things unseen are about realizing *in part*, a glimpse, of that which is not yet realized perfectly or completely. At the table we are becoming that which we are not yet - whole.

The German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his book *Life Together*, "The fellowship of the Lord's Supper is the superlative fulfillment of Christian fellowship".² It is this Christian fellowship that binds us together with one another and with God who makes us all whole. We don't need no baggage. We don't need no ticket. All we need is faith. Faith in what? That you are being made and will someday be whole. At this table, then, *live into the promise* that we are being made whole together.

This was the word of God. And it was preached to the people of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen".

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London, SCM Press LTD, 1962), 112.