

Sunday, March 25, 2007

Sermon: Looking at the Big Five-O

As many of you know, this year New Milford is celebrating its Tricentennial – it's 300th Anniversary. Part of that history is the establishment of this church, which was actually on the minds of the settlers from the start, but which took a few years to accomplish – so we will celebrate 300 years in 2016. But there is something special about birthdays and anniversaries that occur in years ending in 7 – Well, let's just see – how many here were married in a year ending in 7 – 37, 47, 57, 67, 77, 87, 97 – anyone getting married this year? Please stand.

How about those born in a year ending in 7?

How would you like to be Pippin of Italy was born, not to be confused with Pepin "the short" of France? He was born in 777.

And in 1777 Hans Christian Ørsted, the famous Danish physicist and chemist was born – Doesn't ring a bell? Is there a Dane in the house?

In 1847 Alexander Graham Bell and Jesse James were both born and in 1947 David Bowie, Nolan Ryan, Farrah Fawcett, Billy Crystal, Elton John, David Letterman, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Arnold Schwarzenegger and your esteemed Senior Pastor all came into this world, making 1947 a banner year, especially for my mother who celebrated her 45th birthday four days after I was born.

But really we're not here to talk about me and all my close friends – but about the wonderful things that happen in another year ending in 7, the formation of the United Church of Christ, 50 years ago in 1957.

Look at the back of your bulletin

A CHURCH AT FIFTY

The United Church of Christ, at fifty, is still one of the youngest churches in the United States. Indeed, some who were present at its birth in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1957, are still alive and active.

...the United Church of Christ is now remembering the primary legacies.. and rich visions that shaped its first days.

* "... the authority of the Christ in the continuing life of the church.

* ... the Church's commitment to friendship with all Christians.

* ... a theology of inclusive community.

* ...The commitment to be a missionary church,

* "... a charter to be ecumenically bold, and to be a catalyst for overcoming prejudices, changing unjust structures and for achieving a just, inclusive and peaceful world.

Rev. Avery D. Post (President of the United Church of Christ from 1977 to 1989)

I wonder if this exercise we just went through, reading a letter from an acknowledged leader in the church, isn't somewhat like what the fellowship in Philippi went through when they first read the letter from Paul that was our second scripture lesson this morning.

Philippi was a congregation that was facing division within and challenges from without – they were thinking about what had been handed down to them as the teaching of Jesus and what that meant for their life in the world.

I've been reading, and I would recommend, this book by Gary Wills, called *What Paul Meant*. It causes you to take a new look at what is in these letters to these young congregations – less than 50 years old at that point. Wills writes: The early gatherings were the most egalitarian groups of their day. Paul worked with, paid tribute to, and receive protection from his Sisters in Christ. There would be a concerted effort, over entire centuries, to hide or conceal this fact.

Then he talks a little about one woman Paul called a fellow apostle, a woman named Junia and greeted in the letter to the Romans. In order to obscure the fact that a woman was called an apostle later bible translators changed her name to Junias, a male name.

It took two thousand years to get back to where we started on equal authority for women in the church. And even now the struggle continues, especially in circles where celibate men gather in gold-trimmed robes and wear funny hats and surround themselves with the world's richest art collection and make decisions in secret about such things as women priests and birth control. I'm not sure that's what Jesus had in mind as he carried the cross through the streets of Jerusalem.

But it is not so in the United Church of Christ. The anniversary we celebrate is not for the birth of the church but for its latest evolutionary landmark – how the churches set aside some of their historic differences and joined together for a more effective witness to the Gospel.

And another thing we celebrate is how that was done in the most egalitarian, democratic, and transparent way possible – just as things were done in the time of Paul.

I don't know if there were gold-trimmed robes or funny hats involved in the creation of the United Church of Christ – who really knows what goes on in Cleveland? But I do know that every congregation was given a choice to join, every member given a chance to vote, and all the arguments, all the disputes, all the problems were put on the table for the world to see.

And that process continues to this day. There are open invitations to serve on committees, like the search committee for an Associate Pastor, and annual meetings of individual congregations, of associations of churches at the county level, of conferences of churches at the state level, and of the all the churches in the United States every other year at what is called the General Synod.

If you want to lay claim to the fellowship of the church as it was meant to be, then you're in the right place, brothers and sisters in Christ.

2007, on the Big Five-O anniversary of the United Church of Christ, the General Synod will be here in Connecticut, and you can all have front row seat. Adam Shimmell, a member of our congregation, will be a delegate, and we will all be hosts to visitors from every region of the country and around the world.

During Lent we've been talking about things that strengthen our faith – and participation in the democracy that is the UCC will do just that – our faith in the working of the Holy Spirit in our midst. I'm very happy that we have Martha Lape here this morning to tell us how we can be involved. She will tell a little now, and then be available at coffee hour for questions and conversation.