

God Bless the Wrinkles

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Amos 6:1a, 6-7; Luke 16:19-31

It is an honor to be with you this morning as part of your year-long celebration of your 125 years of faithful witness and service in the name of Jesus Christ. I bring you greetings from the Rev. Geoffrey Black, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, who is looking forward to being with you next spring, and from all of us in the national setting of the UCC. Emanuel is blessed with a strong legacy as a congregation and we celebrate with you all the ways in which you have embodied the extravagant welcome of God's love and grace. Your generosity and sharing of gifts and resources with the wider church are appreciated and your involvement with your local community over the generations has certainly changed the lives of countless women, men and children for the better as you continue to live your beliefs in concrete, tangible ways. You have faith in - in yourselves, in your church, in your community, and in your denomination. All of this, of course, flows from you outward because you have faith in God.

So thank you - thank you for your steadfastness, your faith, your witness, and for the invitation to be with you today. My only regret is that this visit falls in between the corn roast and the pig roast. But Bill and Ellen have promised to take me out for lunch so at least I won't go home hungry.

Will you please pray with me:

God, be in my heart and in my words so that which you would have us know and understand shines forth with grace and with love. Amen.

OK. So I have read the brief history of Emanuel Church Hales Corner and I've got to tell you - it makes me want to read more. No, really! The next time there is great groaning in a church meeting when the request goes out, "So, who would like to take the minutes?", I am going to remember the detailed historical record carefully preserved since 1888 of the minutes of this church and say to the group, "We may think today that this is drudgery and pointless, but I bet several generations into the future, folks will be fascinated to know just what happened here and how we talked about it."

What a gift those minutes are! "A motion was made, seconded and carried to purchase a blackboard and table for the church school." Who could have known that action, duly noted, would eventually evolve into the Parks Edge Preschool? Or we are given a glimpse into the ethos of the congregation when, in 1895, a motion was made, seconded and carried to grant all women equal voting rights in the church, long before women were granted the right to vote as citizens in our country? Or we note that in the midst of the Great Depression, when money was tight all around, the first bathroom was installed in the parsonage. Rev. Hornburg and his family were undoubtedly thrilled with this, especially when the first snow storm blew through.

It's a remarkable history, and as I read and reflected on the scripture texts for this morning, I looked again into the faces of the women in the photo from the 1930's of the Frauen Verein, the Women's Guild, and gave thanks for every wrinkle etched into the faces of some of those gathered.

Amos the prophet cries out: "Woe to you who think you live on easy street in Zion...Woe to those addicted to feeling good - life without pain. Those obsessed with looking good - life without wrinkles. They could care less about their country going to ruin."

When you look at that photo, you wonder just what those women went through - how many children they gave birth to and how many of those children died in childbirth; how many potatoes they dug up and crops they harvested; how many apple pies they had baked to raise money for the church; how much time they spent studying their Bibles. Those women earned every one of those wrinkles and when it came time for the annual Women's Guild picture taking session, they were not going to find a way to smooth them out or make them go away. No, they posed proudly for that picture, assured that all their efforts are for the glory of God, not for their own glory. Wrinkles be damned - or rather, wrinkles be blessed!

We are told in Luke that the rich man dressed in the finest of clothes and feasted sumptuously while Lazarus went hungry, begging, covered in sores. Too often, way too often, we are focused on the things that really do not matter. While we might not be wealthy like the rich man who died and went to Hades to burn, envying Lazarus enveloped in the arms of Abraham in heaven, if we are honest with ourselves we know we can get wrapped up in appearances, in having the latest and greatest mobile device, the latest lawn mower or coolest car, the sharpest outfit or pair of exercise shoes. Or rather, pairs of exercise shoes since it seems that there is now a specialized shoe for every activity.

But I don't want to focus on the personal aspect of these scriptures - I think we get the point that being selfish, not caring for others, and being self-absorbed is not really how God wants us to be. Instead, I want us to grapple for a moment with what this means for us communally - as a church, a community, a nation. Who are we corporately in relationship to the rest of the world? How does the use of our resources - our funds, our spiritual gifts, our numerous abilities, our hearts and compassion - reflect our faithfulness?

Those can sometimes be tougher questions to ask because we are so used to seeing the world through our own lenses. As I read through the story of Emanuel Church, I sense that there has been a careful sensitivity to keeping a wide angle lens on the world, to the needs of those around you as well as to the bigger picture of unity during often contentious and tumultuous times of denominational mergers.

How well are we looking out for everyone now? This week, there might be a shutdown of the federal government. If that occurs, the ripples already happening because of the reduced expenditures caused by sequestration could turn into tidal waves for the most vulnerable among us. Is our country going to ruin before our eyes? If you live in Detroit these days, you might think so. If you live in parts of Cleveland, you might think so. If you lost your home or farm to foreclosure, you might think so. If you are buried in medical bills you can't pay, you might think so.

But if you still have a job, have a pension, a home, kids in college, medical insurance, and the ability to pay the bills, you might think things are OK. Maybe not great, but OK.

Whether or not our country is going to ruin - and there will be as many opinions on that as there are people analyzing it - the question for us as a church, as a community of believers, is - do we care? Do we care enough to listen to the cries of the distressed, the homeless vets, the hungry children? Do we care enough to be uncomfortable with a changing climate and an

abused planet? Do we care enough to stay together, trying to discern what God is calling us to do in response as disciples of Christ?

If the answer is YES, we do care, we do have faith in ourselves and in the future, then it is time to focus on resurrection possibilities rather than on crucifixion probabilities. Doing this together, in community, looking out towards the whole landscape of human living and global realities, means for one, that we keep in perspective the kinds of things that can tear at the precious threads of our unity. Churches so often are torn apart by petty arguments over matters that don't really matter. But when we are healthy in community, we learn to disagree, discuss and move towards consensus on those things. Not everyone will always get their way but if the whole is better for it, we are all the better for it. We learn to live with the wrinkles and the occasional pain rather than flee from them or pretend that nothing is happening.

So let me lift up two aspects of how coming together while looking outward leans us into a resurrection faith.

First, the a community of welcome will be one that continuing is evolving in understanding God's love for all of God's peoples. Your Open and Affirming covenant is truly an inclusive one and a beautiful affirmation of the United Church of Christ's three core values. Those values - extravagant welcome, continuing testament, and changing lives - reflect our belief that God is always at work in and among us, making lives new and extending the love of Christ to all. It is also a commitment you have made to keep your lens on the world one that is inviting rather than scrutinizing. So thank you for this extension of your legacy.

But you will be changed as God's people find you and join in your ministry here. They will bring their own gifts, of leadership, of grace, of perspective, of needs to you and the community will change. People don't just come to be made into replicas of those already there. As the notes from the 60th anniversary put it, in Rev. Kutz's words, "On this road of our Lord there is no turning back. Face to the future and moving, so it is that Emanuel church becomes sixty years young, not years old, and the challenge of the years to come is accepted with humble confidence."

Your ONA covenant is part of the way you are continuing to face the future, evolving in understanding what God is doing among you and the community in which you live. You are one hundred and twenty-five years young now, and still moving forward. New life is stirring here - thanks be to God!

The second aspect of leaning into this resurrection energy is realizing that you must reach out, stretch out even further than you ever thought possible. Do you care enough about what is going on beyond Hales Corner to find other communities and companions who share your hope for what God wants and desires for God's people? The rich man, writhing in pain from the flames of his own making, implores Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers to warn them to turn from their opulent lifestyles before they, too, are sent into damnation. But Abraham says to him, "If they did not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead." In other words, it's too late for them to get this word by a miracle. The evidence was already before them.

Emanuel Church, continue in your outreach and caring for your community. Continue to support your denomination and the ways the UCC is able to partner with many in this country and around the world to bring relief in times of disaster, hope in times of despair. But I also want to encourage you to join the efforts and advocacy of those speaking up and out about the

systemic forms of injustice evidenced all around us. You may already be doing this individually or jointly, but in this day and age of national amnesia about the power of liberty and justice for all as a core principle for our nation, we need all the people and communities we can gather to refocus our priorities.

There are movements of people all around this country and the world sounding the alarms about climate change, about the ever widening gap between the very rich and the rest of us, about women's rights and dignity, about our public school systems, about mass incarceration, about the harmful chemicals and antibiotics in our food system, about -- about -- about. You name it, the alarm is going off.

Do we care enough? Together, do we care enough? God is always at work in us, awakening us to see the world around us and the beautiful sisters and brothers who walk with us on this journey we call life. There are many around us with lots of wrinkles - they have been engaged in the struggle for justice and peace for a very long time. They have earned those wrinkles.

I believe that Emanuel Church does care, and does care enough. Your spirit of openness to the winds of the Holy Spirit is inspiring. When you hit the century mark, the anniversary booklet included these words: "As Christians we do not stand pat. We do not do things simply because they have been done that way before. From the faith of Christ within us and among us we appraise the present day situation and we respond in that faith to this modern situation." Twenty-five years later, celebrating this milestone, I challenge you only to stretch even further into the world and join with others who care as passionately as you do to respond to this modern situation. Rapid changes have occurred over the past 25 years which can leave our heads spinning in confusion.

But God is also in that whirlwind, looking for allies and companions who care enough. People who are not self-absorbed but other-directed. People who love their wrinkles and who don't try to hide all the bumps and missteps taken along the way. People who know forgiveness and grace. People who love enough to know that God is not done with them yet.

May the record show that it was moved, seconded and approved that Emanuel Church cared enough to make a difference because they had faith in the future.

Happy Anniversary, Emanuel Church! God bless every one of your wrinkles.

Amen.