

**Wisconsin Conference
United Church of Christ
Annual Meeting Saturday Worship
Saturday evening, June 7, 2014
Green Lake Conference Center
Michael E. Obenauer, Preacher**

This weekend we in the Wisconsin Conference, United Church of Christ celebrate our annual meeting. As we gather our conference leadership is in a year of great transition. Our Conference Minister and both Associate Conference minister positions are currently filled by Interims with full nationwide search processes underway. As a sign of unity all the churches were presented with a copy of the sermon preached at the main worship service last night in Green Lake. The sermon while it celebrates our unity, also celebrates the 20th anniversary of the Lay Academy, a leadership training program for Lay persons which has been important to the development and health of Emanuel Church. Do we have any lay academy graduates here this morning, please stand up? So today I am going to share the Rev. Dr. Michael Obenauer's sermon, it is called "Fire in the Pews" and calls each of us to share our spiritual gifts in the local church and local community without restricting or dehumanizing any person or group. From Ephesians chapter 4:11-13 I read . . .

"The gifts (Christ) gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." (Ephesians 4: 11 – 13)

One of my most striking memories of time spent with my father as a child is when he taught me to ride a two-wheel bicycle. My first "grown-up" bike was a shiny red number with training wheels. My father was a school superintendent so he worked rather long hours. He instructed me to begin riding after school up and down the sidewalk in front of our home. So I got on the big, shiny red bike with the training wheels and rode up and down the sidewalk until my father came home.

When Dad came home, he took me and the bike across the street to a big open field and took the training wheels off. He walked and then ran beside me, being my steady support for what seemed like hours and days. He never left my side. Then one warm Spring day, Dad and I were going about our after-school, after-work ritual in the big field across the street, and he was running beside me while I pedaled my bike. At least I thought he was running beside me. I looked around, and he was standing behind me several yards, with a big smile on his face, watching me from a distance as I rode my bike on my own. He shouted, "Good job! Keep pedaling, Michael, keep pedaling!" My Dad was not only my father; he was a leader, my teacher, my mentor.

The Church needs leaders – people who have lived through its traditions and learned its values, who envision the Church’s possibilities and encourage the Church to realize its potential, and who teach and model the joy which comes from being authentically and fully Christ’s Church.

Ephesians 4 is about the leaders which the Church needs – people who can love, mentor, and teach people -- seeking to follow Jesus -- to claim all of the power and the potential as a community that is in God’s vision for us. The text clearly describes the work of those God calls to leadership: equip the saints for the work of ministry, build up the body of Christ, help people to become like Jesus. Equipping involves training. Dr. Guy Sayles says about this passage: “Leaders offer people experiences which help them turn their gifts into skills, their talents into practices, their passions into actions, and their concerns into disciplines. Equipping as training is an indispensable part of the Church’s ministry of spiritual formation.”

Leadership is crucial to our life together in today’s community of faith; set in the culture of this time and place. Some of us walk as people demoralized and lost because the Church we experience today is not the Church of the 1950’s and 1960’s. We are sometimes lost in the haze of our “golden memories” of the “good old days”, and yet as usual, those days were only old and not always good.

It is as if God’s message for us is this: As we celebrate the free movement of God’s Pentecost, God is telling us, “My precious, precious children, it is time – IT IS TIME! ... Drop the shackles of death behind and become the fire I am lighting in the pews – your pews – the pews in the midst of my beloved community! Get ready to tell the story, to grow and nurture the faith, to act out the love, to work for peace and justice for all humankind, indeed all of Creation, particularly in your own neighborhoods, in your own communities, to let the joy flow before you as you are fire in the pews! Mourning is over, and a new day is dawning!”

Some scholars believe Paul wrote this letter from prison to a beloved congregation he had formed in Ephesus. This is a pastor writing to his congregation. His point in this powerful section of Chapter Four is a call to unity. In verse 3, Paul writes, “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” In verses 11 - 13, biblical scholar Susan Hylen says there is an understanding that good leaders are necessary for unity of the church. This passage plants the seeds of an image of leaders as a gift from God to guide, support, and nurture the growth of the body, the maturity of the body to the full stature of Christ, the head. And Paul doesn’t rest there. He pushes the Ephesians, and us, to embody the reconciliation made possible in Christ, who has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. In the time in which we live, we need this fire in the pews and these leaders to lift us to the stature of Christ, to break down the dividing walls which exist in our culture and even in our beloved community – between black and brown and red and yellow and white, between straight and gay, between rich and poor, between men and women, between young and old.

Twenty years ago in a land called Wisconsin, long ago and far away, a group of wise and forward-thinking leaders put their heads, their hearts, and their souls together. They were

people who loved the Church, who saw an opening to build for the future, who envisioned what their beloved community might need to grow to the stature of the Head, Jesus Christ. As they prayed, and sang, and cussed and discussed together, they might have come to this passage out of Ephesians, and they could see the future of the Church in their land bound up with faith development, with the nurturing and loving and building of leaders in congregations who could rise up in new life to help the Church grow up into the stature of Christ, to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

After a time of planning, and praying, and soliciting, and laying a good foundation, these prophetic leaders were ready to launch what they called the Lay Academy of the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ. They opened the doors and invited adults in congregations across the land to enter, to learn, to mature, to deepen, to actualize community, to see, hear, and speak more clearly and confidently, to return to their home communities and neighborhoods and to build and deepen faith, hope, love, justice, and peace so that walls of hostility could be taken down, and so the stretch of the beloved community could be wider and broader than ever before. In this way, the entire body could rise to the full stature of the Head.

The very presence of the Wisconsin Conference Lay Academy after twenty years reminds us of the great roles to which we must rise, encourages us to tend to the essential work of faith development for all ages in each congregation, to find ways to open up the walls so the fire which runs in our pews might burn even more with more renewing and encouraging newness in the land. Every time we together preach and teach the Good News, gather around the Table and the font, accept and give forgiveness, place children at our center and do not hinder them, work for justice and wholeness for this world and its people, the Creation which God made and loves, we know that we are living out what Jesus calls us to do. Every time we do that, we reinvent ourselves and proclaim God is not dead, Jesus is not dead, the Church is not dead – death is not even close to being the answer!

We are entrusted with the Good News of Jesus Christ. We are empowered with boundless energy and vitality, with fire in the pews, to lead in community, to raise the beloved community to the stature of Christ. Let us step out in faith boldly, with arms entwined in love. We are equipped, we are empowered, we are fire in the pews!

Thanks be to God! AMEN.

Notes:

Page one – The scriptural reference is from The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments, New Revised Standard Version, World Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1989 (copyright held by the Division of Christian Education of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America

Page two – from “In Repair,” by Guy Sales, 8/5/2012

Page three – from “Commentary on Ephesians 4: 1 – 16” by Susan Hylan in “Working Preacher”

