

# Cherishing our differences in an election year: It's gospel

By Mary Susan Gast

Five years ago, just before Annual Meeting, I received a letter. It was probably a difficult letter to write. I know it was a painful letter to read.

It came from a life-long member of the United Church of Christ, someone whose views on social issues and political realities would most assuredly be at odds with mine, someone whose faith is indisputably rooted in the same gracious Love as mine.

It was a difficult letter because it slashed at the connections between Christian faith and social justice which, to me, are inseparable and inescapable.

It was a painful letter because it captured so well the frustration of a person who feels her views demeaned, her faith unheeded.

From her perspective the United Church of Christ had dismissed

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her and reduced Christian practice to the bandwagon support of trendy causes.

For a number of years, I have been talking to just about anyone who displays a glimmer of interest about my three abiding hopes for the United Church of Christ:

1. That we be very clear in the articulation of the Biblical bases of



our beliefs and practices, embracing diversity as a "given" aspect of our unity in Christ for "no one can say, 'Jesus is Sovereign' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12: 3b);

2. That we never give up our historic commitment to movements of liberation, to what I perceive as our dedication to working out the understanding of Genesis 1:27, that all people are created in the image and likeness of God; and

3. That, in the process of carrying through on hopes No. 1 and 2, we treat one another with kindness.

Seemingly, in the eyes of my correspondent, the UCC's reach for hopes No. 1 and 3 had fallen short of our grasp.

In the current election year I have received many letters regarding the overlap of faith and politics within the United Church

of Christ. Most of them have been copies of letters, written to and by various individuals with concerns for the I.R.S. investigation of the UCC's tax-exempt status or John Thomas' statements about Jeremiah Wright.

In the current election year it is probably wise to remind ourselves as a church that there will be times — and there have been times — when our beliefs, our faith, our understanding of discipleship, impel us to actions in the sphere of politics.

And to remind ourselves that as a church we know that we could count up the number of times when we've ever all agreed on anything and come up with a number that wasn't much bigger than the number of candles on a toddler's birthday cake.

So it shouldn't surprise us a whole lot when we disagree.

On faith, on politics, or on the intersection, the "coincide-ence" of the two.

What can we make of it when we find that fundamentalists and near-Buddhists, farm owners and farm workers, McCain and Clinton and Obama supporters are all clustering around the same communion table?

What can we make of it, except that Jesus has called each one of us to be here — in the church and in the world? That the Creator loved the universe into being with lavish and tender attention to all manner of diversity?

How can we live with our differences, not merely tolerating them but cherishing them, except by reminding ourselves that The Almighty has created each of us in the divine image? That's life beyond the bandwagon. It's Gospel.

## Spin

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Hatred is not a patriotic virtue

"This week, I heard an echo of Christ calling, calling us to a broad vision of the world, calling us to oppose the hatred that so frequently becomes a patriotic virtue, especially at election time.

I hear Christ calling us to engage in acts of compassion and justice rather than stirring pots of suspicion and hatred.

And I hear Christ calling our denomination, my beloved United Church of Christ, into deeper acts of boldness and truth-telling on behalf of people of color.

I hear Christ calling us to stand with our sister church, Trinity United Church of Christ, a church that has stood with the poor and needy in an attempt to raise them up as God's people of hope and love.

Today I hear Christ calling us out of tombs of our own doubts and fears into new life and new hope on behalf of all God's children, but especially those who are poor, desperate and attempting to survive in war-torn parts of the globe.

Jesus lives. Jesus lives wherever the spirit of love is alive and death has lost its sting.

I hear this affirmation not as a brief sentence of an experience that took place once and for all, but as an ongoing celebration of the presence of God in the midst of an aching world. Jesus continues to be experienced after his death in radically new ways. He is no longer flesh and blood, but a sure reality, present with us, in jail cells and dark dungeons, on battlefields and at high school dances, in conflict-



Happy friends at Annual Meeting: Above: Mary Susan Gast, Tauoa Head, Kyle Lovett; right: Roy Mosley and Eppie Encabo.

torn Kenya and at the world-class university across the street.

Today God says, "Yes" to the world. The powers that killed Jesus have not had the last word. Today, God has sided with Jesus against the domination systems of the world and the cross is vindicated. They do not have the last word. God does and the word is "Yes." — **Rev. Patricia DeJong, First UCC, Berkeley, from her Easter sermon.**

Politics ignores the claims of the blessed poor and meek

"I have a strong hunch that during the next six months it may be unusually difficult for us to remember who, and what, Jesus Christ regards as "blessed." And that is because we're entering a presidential election season, a season of particular urgency, passion and desperation.

As you know, we have cur-

rently under way a deepening recession, a financial meltdown in the vital home mortgage sector, rising unemployment, an unpopular foreign war in the Middle East as well as a smoldering cultural war in our own country, an immigration crisis, a continuing threat of terrorism and state-sponsored violence, an escalating bill for food and gasoline, deficit budgets for infrastructure, education and social services, and a looming environmental calamity of unforeseeable consequences.

The challenges, anxieties, angers and intensely conflicting opinions attending each of these issues pretty much guarantees that we're all in for a very rough ride ahead.

What troubles me is that in such circumstances as these our national political narrative tends to veer so recklessly in the opposite direction from the Sermon on the Mount. In the months ahead we



are likely to hear and see a great deal that celebrates the significant — but limited — virtues of power, might, forcefulness, strength, readiness to command and take charge, protection of our way of life, security, toughness, readiness to fight, leadership, self-reliance and certainty.

What we are not likely to hear is much at all that recognizes or affirms the claim of the poor, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted, or those who mourn, who hunger and thirst, who are persecuted and reviled for the sake of righteousness: those very qualities that Jesus said were "blessed," those very people that Jesus said would "be comforted and filled," would "inherit the earth, receive mercy and the kingdom of heaven, and be called children of God."

In this anxious and angry election season it will be essential for our community of faith — for

people like you and me — to remember who we are, and where we have come from, to keep the blessed of Jesus in the picture, to broaden and deepen the political dialogue by recalling and retelling the stories of our faith as we have received them in the gospels and renewed them through in our own spiritual experience with Jesus Christ who still says, "Blessed are they: the poor, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted, or those who mourn, who hunger and thirst, who are persecuted and reviled for the sake of righteousness."

Indeed, with Christians of every time and place, may we yet again "rejoice and be glad" with them, "for their reward is great in heaven." — **Rev. Frank Baldwin, Community UCC, Orinda, from a sermon on the Beatitudes.**