

Covenant is a Love Story Without End

By Rev. Dr. Mary Susan Gast

Covenant, we learned at Annual Meeting, is a road we walk together, bound to one another with flexing ligaments that connect us as we walk together in all God's ways—known, or to be made known to us.

Covenant, Leomyr de Jesus reminded us, is a love story. It began in that most ancient call to relationship, "I will be your God; you will be my people."

Covenant, we noted, is a record of commitments made and promises kept. "The Almighty, your God, is a merciful God, and will neither abandon you nor destroy you; the Most High will not forget the covenant with your ancestors..." [Deuteronomy 4: 31]

Jesus says, "The cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." And right about here, when we start with the blood talk, I begin to experience some spiritual queasiness. And when we get into the accounts of Jesus' torturous death, made

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more horrific by the awful fear that he has been forsaken by the very One who's been striding around the heavens all these ages saying, "I will never abandon you" I'm left gasping to gain some sense of balance on the tightrope of theology. The questions give me vertigo. How is this Good News? Or, as Alan Kelchner might challenge us, how is this news?

Jesus came. In a massive and magnanimous materialization of covenant the Almighty walked around among us, "wasted" time



with children, addressed women as full and competent moral agents and theologians, healed the unclean, said outlandish things like you poor folk—you're blessed; you who make peace are blessed; love one another; love your enemies; you must lose your life to gain life. And Jesus meant it. God meant it.

Jesus' life was a tornado of covenant, swirling us up to dance with the Most High. A rushing outpouring of love that knew no boundaries; that refused to categorize people as enemy or alien, that sought to liberate all people from their bondage.

Jesus Christ died for us—Jesus Christ dies with us—because he knows us in our pain. He knows us when we feel insignificant, he knows us when we don't have enough money to buy food at the end of the month and our children are hungry. He knows us when we lose our jobs. He knows us when our households tear apart at their straining seams. He knows us

when we face the chilling words, "you have cancer." He knows us when we sit along in impenetrable isolation after our beloved dies. He knows us. He's been there. Afflicted and bitter.

Linda Ronstadt's voice, comes drifting in with Van Morrison's lyrics, "You give me love, love, love, love, crazy love. And this is crazy love. Extraordinarily nutso. By any rational standard. And this is news. Late-breaking. Just in. Live, not pre-recorded.

"The cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." It is not the covenant of law. It is not chiseled in stone, nor encased in bylaws, but pulses through your body and mine in the diastolic and systolic rhythm that means life. Drink of this cup, Jesus says, drink of this cup that contains my life. Live as I have lived. Collide with the mighty. Collude with the needy. In league and in love with this hodgepodge humanity. It's the new covenant. It's good, and it's news.

Embracing the dangerous love of Jesus

By Rev. Jerry De Jong

"There is a name I love to hear, I love to sing its worth; it sounds like music to my ear; the sweetest name on earth. O how I love Jesus, O how I love Jesus, O how I love Jesus, whose love has first found me."

It's Saturday afternoon at the Annual Meeting and I need my Jesus. I'm always surprised that in a denomination called the United Church of Christ we spend so little time talking about Christ. I'm always surprised we spend so little time in Bible study or placing our discussions in Biblical context. The Bible is our testament to faith and we are disciples and followers of Jesus.

I've wondered sometimes in our liberal denomination if we have forfeited Biblical language to our conservative brothers and sisters and at the same time I wonder how we can ever hope to dialogue with those who differ from us if we don't speak a common Biblical language? The Bible really is a good book folks, there is much within its pages to challenge us, heal us, sustain us and save us. It is spiritual food for our journey.

I met someone the other day whom upon discovering I was a UCC pastor said, "Oh, that church is really liberal." I said, "No, we're really loving."

In the recent issue of the Christian Century there was a story about how one of our seminaries is offering a self-defense course

for United Church of Christ members besieged by conservative reactions to our denomination's liberal social positions on gay rights and other issues.

A self-defense course! We don't need a self-defense course. We need a course in Christ and his teachings. You see I've felt for a while that it is time for us to reclaim Christ. Christ is the standard bearer of our faith and of our social actions, the Anointed One who ate with tax collectors and sinners, the Messiah who healed lepers and the blind, the Savior who spoke with the woman at the well and called Mary Magdalene and other women to his side, the Christ who preached the Sermon on the Mount and the Christ who gave us the two greatest commandments, the Messiah who lived and died and rose again to teach us that evil, death and suffering will never have the last word in the Kingdom.

So by Saturday at the Annual Meeting I hadn't heard much about Jesus or the Scriptures. Heck, I was about ready to head to my car and try to find a Joyce Meyers broadcast. Yes, the woman can run right off the track, but she sure loves Jesus.



Rev. Jerry De Jong exhorts the crowd during Annual Meeting. Photo Renie Stamm-Kirk

Then I started thinking about the sin of pride. I must be a better Christian than many of you cause I want to talk about Jesus. We have many wounded people in our denomination, folks who been hurt mightily in the name of Jesus. Of course, none of us were really hurt by Jesus, but we were hurt by those who proclaimed His name. As I've heard Rev. Glenda Hope say, "I'm not sure some of my fellow brothers and sisters in ministry are reading the same Bible I am."

Sunday morning at Annual Meeting I got my Jesus. The Sunday morning worship was filled with Christ's love and light and as always the joy and promise of the ancient sacrament of Holy Communion filled my soul and heart.

Christ was with us in that place.

I always tell my congregation that our faith is dangerous and transforming. Dangerous because as Christians, as followers of Christ we are asked to live in an upside down world, a world where the last shall be first. A world where the meek not the strong, will inherit the earth. A world where the lion will lay down with the lamb, swords will be beaten into plowshares and nations will no longer go to war, a world where we are asked to pray for those who persecute us and turn the other cheek. We can only live this way when we live in Christ. And when we live for and in Christ we are transformed. Transformed because in Christ we discover our need for repentance, and in Christ we are offered forgiveness, salvation and love.

We're a long way from the Kingdom. I'm a long way from the Kingdom, but I sure want Jesus to walk with me. So at the next Annual Meeting let's get together and talk about Jesus. Let's share the Biblical verses that challenge us and humble us. Let's get what Anne Lamott calls "all Jesusey" and share the Good News of Christ with one another and with the world. Who knows, maybe they'll know we are Christians by our love.

The Rev. Jerry De Jong is the pastor of Suisun-Fairfield United Church of Christ, Suisun City. <sfucc@msn.com>

July 30-Aug. 5

Cazadero Senior High Camp, Tamarack Junior High Camp, Barbara Broadbent, 510-247-8996.

Aug. 7

Sequoia Executive Council, College Community, Fresno, 7:15 p.m. Stephanie Bingham Doss, 559-687-2012 <shortbingham@sbcglobal.net>.

Aug. 10

Mountain Valley Association Clergy (UCC and DOC) Chapel, University of the Pacific, Stockton, Noon. Joy Preisser, 209-932-0648.

Aug. 18

Committee on the Ministry, Section A: Hillcrest Congregational UCC, Pleasant Hill, 8:30 a.m. Jackie Kortright, Chair; Susan Hamilton, Scheduling <revsusan2@juno.com>

Aug. 18-20

NCNC-UCC Youth Leaders Network Retreat & Training, Keynote Speaker Rev. DaVita Carter McCallister. Camp Cazadero. Wade Zick, 408-377-7121.

Aug. 22

South Bay Association Clergy, United Church of Christ, Hayward, Noon - 2 p.m., Kathryn Schreiber, 510-889-7048, <haywarducc@earthlink.net>.

Sept. 2-4

Cazadero Community Camp, Barbara Broadbent, 510-247-8996.

Sept. 4

NCNC office closed for Labor Day

Sept. 13

Mountain Valley Association Executive Council, College Avenue UCC, Modesto, 6 p.m. Dave Hoberg, 209-576-2703, dash-tobr@ainet.com.

Sept. 14

Mountain Valley Association Clergy (UCC and DOC) Chapel, University of the Pacific, Stockton, Noon. Joy Preisser, 209-932-0648.

Sept. 15

Committee on the Ministry, Sections A and B: Hillcrest Congregational UCC, Pleasant Hill, Section A 8:30 a.m., Section B 8:45 a.m. Section A: Jackie Kortright, Chair; Susan Hamilton, Scheduling <revsusan2@juno.com>, Section B: Melinda McLain <revmelinda@earthlink.net> and Kevin Manz, Chairs. <kevinkmm1@netzero.net>, Cherie Marckx, Scheduling <cmarckx@comcast.net>.

Sept. 16

Forums for the Future, Forum 2: Youth & Young Adult Ministry—addressing the realities and calling forth the gifts of young people. Congregational Church of San Mateo, co-hosted by Kalavaria CCCSA UCC. 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. Barbara Broadbent, 510-247-8996 <bbroadbent@ncncc.org>.

Sept. 23

NCNC Board of Directors, location TBD, 10 a.m., Roy Mosley, 510-777-9736.

Sept. 23

Overview Board for Justice & Witness Ministries meeting, 10 a.m. - Noon, Arlington Community Church, Kensington, Allan Essex, Chair, 510-559-9793, <abge@comcast.net>.

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