

Sarah Gallop
FCCW 7/11/2021

The Evolving Word of God?

Psalm 85:8-13

"Prayer for the Restoration of God's Favor"

*Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.^[a]*

⁹ *Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.*

¹⁰ *Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.*

¹¹ *Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.*

¹² *The LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.*

¹³ *Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.*

The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians 1:3-14

"Spiritual Blessings in Christ"

³ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ just as he chose us in Christ^[a] before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵ He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight⁹ he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹ In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,^[b] having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹² so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were*

marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴ this^{is} is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Good morning everyone!

Thank you, Christine and Taylor, for your lovely reading of today's lectionary.

It's a thrill for me to be a part of our summer worship service today. I'm so grateful to our church for lifting up the voices of lay members in this way, and I hope that many of you will keep in mind this annual opportunity to share spiritual reflections with the congregation. All are welcome to preach during the summer and we would love to hear what you have to say!

Lately, I've been very interested in how the English language evolves and changes. I'm pretty sure my interest started when I found out that the Merriam Webster dictionary had added "irregardless" as an official word. What? That's not a word – it's a double negative which makes it mean 'not regardless', right? For heaven's sake, let's get back to basics and use our beautiful language properly. Right 🙄?

Well apparently, it doesn't matter what I or other "stodgy grammarians" think (that's what an NPR story called those of us who took offense to the addition of irregardless). Merriam Webster says they're just lexicographers (the people who compile dictionaries) whose job it is to record usage, spelling, pronunciation, and origin. They don't adjudicate correctness, they say — they merely capture the evolution of our language so we can all be up to date. I guess I have no choice but to get over my old-fashioned sensibilities in this regard. But really, harumph 🙄.

Of course, the English language is revisited and scrutinized for lots of different reasons – some words just fall out of use (like ambidexter, which is a person who takes bribes from both sides) and some words become archaic (like houppelande, which is a common medieval cloak).

And on a more serious note, our society has been taking quite a close look at the origins and meaning of words that might work against our collective ideals around equality and inclusivity. Phrases like paddy wagon, peanut gallery, Hip Hip Hooray, and the verb to gyp are disrespectful to Irish people, Black people, Jewish people, and Romani people respectively.

Sometimes I feel that these linguistic observations are obvious and overdue. Other times, I feel that I've learned something new and am grateful to be educated. And sometimes the jury is still out for me, like with the word jimmies, which is either named for James Bartholomew who operated the first sprinkle machine or is a racial slur. Etymologists (the people who study language, as opposed to entomologists who study bugs — my team missed that at the WFEE Spelling Bee one year) are actively working to reveal the truth about the word Jimmies, and I will readily fall in line when they reach their conclusion.

But whether a word has been used incorrectly for so long that it's now accepted by society (irregardless), or an old phrase no longer has any bearing on modern times (houppelande), or, more importantly, words and phrases have come to be understood as reinforcing systems of oppression, classism, ableism, or misogyny — I guess that's all part of the dialogue around social norms and political correctness that is taking place throughout our country and in other parts of the world. We could spend hours talking about our various perspectives in this realm — and it is interesting and important. But let's save that for another day 😊.

Instead, I'd love to focus on the use of language in our UCC denomination. I hope the person who came up with the UCC motto "God is Still Speaking" got a promotion or at least some kind of recognition, because that is a powerful sentiment. God is not only alive, God has something to say, and God is saying it to us. It feels very impactful to me.

Now, I won't do this the whole way through my sermon, but can I just say that impactful is one of those controversial words among language devotees — some refuse to validate it because it feels illogical and clumsy. But Merriam Webster says it's the real deal. I like it...

Over the course of my faith experience to-date, I've come to understand the Bible as a living and breathing document. It took me a while to grasp how a 2,000-year-old collection of stories could possibly have anything relevant to say to modern society. The writings may be ancient, but they are not archaic (although one could argue about some parts of the Old Testament).

Our church helps us to pull themes of biblical language through to our current lives when we examine scripture in worship, participate in the weekly bible study, or attend educational offerings on specific sections or topics within the bible.

The opening line of today's psalm, "Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people" feels like it could have been written yesterday. I get it and

resonate with it. Paul's letter to the Ephesians reminds us that when we recognize the spiritual blessings found in Christ, we will hear God's "word of truth". I can buy into that. That speaks to me. Thank God that God is still speaking.

Let's take a look at the words and phrases that ground our faith, here at FCCW.

First, the UCC (United Church of Christ) uses:

- Statement of Faith (closing sentence): God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.
- Vision Statement: United in Christ's love, a just world for all
- Mission Statement: United in Spirit and inspired by God's grace, we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.
- Purpose Statement: To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves

Now I don't know how a committee ended up deciding that the UCC needed a statement of faith, a vision statement, a mission statement, and a purpose statement, but there it all is.

Next, let's look at the Southern New England UCC (our conference):

Of course, the SNEUCC uses, and is grounded in, the UCC statements that I just read, but our conference also adds a:

- Covenant, which simply says: Living the Love and Justice of Jesus.

Now, here at FCCW, our church starts with the UCC Statement of Faith and then adds:

- Purpose Statement: Our purpose is to be a Christ-centered, nurturing community; growing in faith; serving in love; welcoming all with joy.
- Covenant: We, the members of this church, covenant and bind ourselves to strive to know the will of God; to walk in the ways of the Lord, made known and to be made known; to exalt the worship of the one true God; to work and pray for the progress of knowledge, the promotion of justice, the reign of peace, and the realization of human community.

- Open and Affirming Statement (pledge): We pledge ourselves to follow Christ's call to love one another to promote justice, to bring relief to the oppressed, and to walk humbly with our God.

I hope every now and then you might re-read the UCC and the SNEUCC statements along with the three statements that specifically guide our church. It feels very reaffirming to me to do so. These words are our guiding principles.

When I take in all of these phrases and statements, I don't notice any that are no longer in common use or that are archaic – and I certainly don't notice anything offensive (that would be counter to the UCC's very existence).

Rather, I find the words to be beautiful, poetic, peaceful, inspiring, comforting, and impactful 😊.

I notice that there's not one word in the past tense and all of the verbs are active (just like we were taught to put on our resumes): unite, trust, love, promise, welcome, forgive, live, pray, serve, and grow.

The sentiments are all relevant to modern life and times, and to us personally as human beings and seekers.

Here's something that really struck me:

In these foundational belief statements – the very guidance that grounds our faith, the words God and Love appear the most (6 times each) and after that comes Christ, spirit, faith, worship, peace — they appear anywhere from 1 to 3 times each.

God and Love at the top – of course. That doesn't surprise us. God is love and love is God. I've learned that from all of you.

But here's what I didn't expect, the word Justice also appears 6 times.

God, Love, and Justice appear the same number of times in the foundational materials for our denomination.

So, what does Justice mean? Its origins are in the 12th century where the meaning is both the assignment of reward and punishment, and the quality of being fair and just, including moral soundness and conformity to truth. I feel like *that* could have been

written yesterday. But, it was first recorded 900 years ago and doesn't feel archaic. It feels relevant.

So, if God is Love and Love is God, which I believe, is God Justice and Justice is God? Is Love Justice and Justice is love? I think I need to go to a bible study meeting.

I'm going to leave you (and me) with these questions and close by simply expressing gratitude for the beauty and power of language past and present, and how it propels us into dialogue and reflection, and how in our spiritual lives, it serves to spark and deepen our faith understandings.

Amen.

Benediction

As we go out into the world today, I hope we will listen for God's words. God is still speaking to you, to me, and to all who desire to hear. God's words lift us, strengthen us, and empower us. In our daily lives, I hope that we will actively seek God, love, and justice as we bear in mind the spiritual blessings found in Christ, where we can hear God's "word of truth". Amen.