

Why Choose THIS Church?

January 26, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Michael Solberg & Rev. Karen McArthur

Texts: 1 Thessalonians 3: 6-9, Matthew 18:20

Mike: Please pray with me:

Source of all truth and light, fill our hearts and guide our steps by the ancient and vibrant texts we are about to hear. In the message given and received, draw us into deeper discipleship, now and always. Amen.

Our first reading is from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, 3:6-9.

[Paul writes:] But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, just as we long to see you. For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?

Thanks be to God for these words of life.

Karen: In the gospel reading for this Annual Meeting Sunday – the disciples are asking Jesus about how to manage disagreement, difficulties, and discipline. That's when Matthew ends with this often-quoted verse, Matthew 18:20:

[Jesus said...] For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. Amen!

Karen: What a week it has been! I am so very glad to be able to gather together here in this community, to worship together, to sing together, to share a delicious meal, to connect with each other and our faith. This is a sanctuary – a safe place – not to escape the craziness of the world, but to trust that we are safe here to share our fullest and truest selves with each other, to learn from each other, to care for each other, and to figure out how we navigate as people of faith in a rapidly changing, and often polarized society.

What about you? Whether you are brand new today, or have been here for decades, what brought you here today? Why choose this Church? That's our question – as we continue our sermon series on "big questions" from the congregation. Last week, Mike explored a related question more broadly, about church in general: "In a time when religious life is diminishing in the US, why choose church?" This week's question is more specific. Why choose this church? Why join First Church?

We thought it would be interesting to explore the question from our different perspectives, Mike having a newcomer's vantage point on this particular congregation, and my somewhat longer perspective, since 2004, or even genetically through the centuries, as a descendant of the Rev. Thomas Hooker. We bring our different approaches, although you will have to listen to two midwestern accents for the next bit here!

Mike: (Karen, surely you know that Midwesterners don't have accents!) So, yes, why choose this church? What is, if not unique, at least highly characteristic of this place, the people gathered under the name First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC? Resist as I do the market-driven nature of this, the reality of the world today is that people "church shop." In fact, one of the new members in our meeting earlier used the phrase "church dating" (ugh, the pressure!). And if we can't offer at least a mildly persuasive reason people should choose this church, or stick with us for a long-term relationship, then, well, the future is going to be tough.

So, my first response would be that people should choose First Church because we put love into action in uncommonly clear ways. For decades the church has operated a shelter for men who were previously homeless. It is, to be fair, largely funded by our tax dollars through the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the City of Cambridge, but this ministry literally would not exist without First Church. To put it simply, money doesn't make a ministry, people do. Money can't offer compassion. Money can't treat you humanely. Money can't break bread with you. Money can't respect you. With such compassion, humanity, respect and community, First Church puts love into action in an uncommonly clear way.

I could eagerly say much the same thing about the Friday Café, and all the compassion, humanity, respect and community that is just an absolutely organic part of that program. For the past ten years, countless people have volunteered their time, their kitchen skills, and their hearts, to welcome people in difficult times. And many have found their way from Friday to Sunday, which brings me to my second reason to choose this church. It's the flip side of that "put love into action" coin.

There is real, and uncommon, spiritual depth here. In the last few months, I have discovered that for most people at First Church the social justice work, the progressive theology and politics, the comfort with being part of the People's Republic of Cambridge, does not arise in spite of Jesus, but because of Jesus. I've learned enough about the people involved to know that it goes back at least 50 years, and probably longer, but the people and the leadership of this church have always been deeply rooted in the Divine presence at the heart of it all. God is love, and love isn't an emotion, but a steadfast commitment to the wellbeing of others, so the spiritual and the practical, the love and the justice are always intertwined - well, no, they are in fact the same twine. That spiritual depth that motivates justice, is uncommonly clear here at First Church.

Karen: A spiritual depth that motivates justice may seem rare, but I have to say that the very best part of this week has been scrolling through my threads and bluesky feeds – and witnessing person after person post that people shouldn't be surprised about Bishop Mariann Budde's sermon from the pulpit of the National Cathedral on Tuesday, because their church was very much like this. If you aren't one of the 441,000 people who have listened to her full sermon, I commend it to you.¹

People who said they hadn't been to church since they were a child were contemplating going to church. A self-described mom in Montana wrote: "if you are a liberal, a leftist, or progressive seeking a community where you may find belonging that grows into a family-like bond, consider joining a church. I know this sounds counterintuitive, but many churches are revolutionary community spaces. I am grateful to have found significant intergenerational relationships through churches, including some

¹ <https://cathedral.org/sermons/homily-a-service-of-prayer-for-the-nation/>

of the bravest and wisest social justice advocates I have ever personally known.”² Revolutionary community spaces. Intergenerational relationships. Putting love into action. A steadfast commitment to the wellbeing of others. We know this to be what church is, and it’s nice to hear our good news being shared over social media this week.

There are many reasons that people join a church, and everyone has their own reason. Although perhaps the best one was relayed to me by a colleague who was greeting people at the back of his church after a Sunday service. A man shook his hand and said, “I’ve been coming to church here for a year and no one has ever spoken to me.” My colleague took a deep breath and was ready to apologize and say that they’d try to do better, but the man continued, “This is my kind of church. I’d like to join!”

For me, joining a church has also been about being a part of a community that cares for people in times of vulnerability. After seven years here, I joined the church a few days after my mother died in 2012, because in the midst of my grief, I realized that this is my church. You can hear a similar depth of gratitude in Paul’s letter: “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?” Watching you care for one another in times of difficulty is another reason why someone might choose this church, not just to be cared for, but to care. That care breeds a deep respect for each other, and that makes a huge difference.

As a minister and life-long church person, I’ve been a part of a lot of churches, and served on a lot of committees, but I can truly say it’s different here. Being a part of any group - a committee, a Faith & Life group, a planning committee, even Staff Policy is a true joy, taking time to check in with each other as our bylaws say, “to turn to this congregation for support in times of trouble and joy.” I bet you didn’t know that was in our bylaws, but it is an underpinning of our covenant with each other.

Mike: That makes sense – because my observation is that this congregation wears our institutional form lightly. Here’s what I mean: I have been a pastor for 35 years, and as those years have gone by, I have come to take the institutional church less and less seriously. By institutional church, I mean the committee structures, and budgets, and buildings, and regional and national bodies, and the bylaws, and well, all of that. (Anyone besides Karen going to come and push me out of here now??) To be clear, all of that institutional church stuff is absolutely necessary, and it is even important for it to be done right and well.

But I now think of it like this: say you are on a long bus journey, let’s even call it a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage by bus. The goal of the pilgrimage is spiritual growth, new openness to some experience, and perhaps most of all, connection with others. So you sit in the bus on this long pilgrimage and you talk, and share, and learn, and debrief, and maybe even pray and sing - you relate and you grow. The bus? It’s absolutely critical to get you where you are going, but it’s just a vehicle. It’s a means to an end. The fellowship created among the people on the pilgrimage, that’s the church. The bus is just something that helps make that possible. And First Church gets that. A lot of people here don’t have any idea of what’s going on with the vehicle. Maybe that’s a little too true, as a matter of fact, as our discussion of the budget at the Annual Meeting will show. But still, most people are glad it’s there, glad we have a bus, but just focus on the pilgrimage that is church, and that’s exactly as it should be. Trust me, I know a lot of congregations, and First Church wears our institutional form uncommonly lightly, and that’s a beautiful thing. (That said, come to the Annual Meeting and pay attention to the bus, and get a look under the hood!)

² jealousycellist on Threads, January 23, 2025

Over the centuries, and today, each and every week, First Church seeks to embody a way of inclusiveness, a way of welcome, a way of belonging, without walls, without boundaries, but with a magnetic center - Jesus Christ and the message of love and true life. This magnetic center draws people in, where we care for each other, and learn from Jesus and from each other, where we discern God's guidance in the sacred space we create together as we put love into action. Jesus has promised to be with us always, to the end of the age, and also promises that where two or three are gathered, he is in the midst of them. That love-centered community, with Jesus in our midst, is the essence of who we are, and is why I think anyone and everyone might choose First Church.

In the name of the living God...Amen!

