

Embodying Love

July 20, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Amos 8: 1-8, 11-12; Luke 10: 38-42

It's a timeless dilemma: how to balance doing and being, the intellectual and the practical, the intangible and the tangible. There was a headline this week in a Newsweek article: Church Accuses Donald Trump of 'Domestic Terrorism'. The piece published on Thursday noted that the "public denunciation marks one of the strongest rebukes of President Trump's immigration enforcement by a major US Christian denomination." So which church was this? That would be ours. The United Church of Christ.

In our polity, the way we organize ourselves, the UCC doesn't tell individuals what to believe or what to do. This vote doesn't require us to agree that the current federal government's policy is domestic terrorism. But our polity does allow the General Synod or a Conference of the UCC to speak out on an issue and to direct groups within our denomination to consider various responses to the issue. In our polity, we then trust each individual member and each local church to prayerfully consider God's word, and to act accordingly. As a denomination, we understand that people may have different beliefs, and different interpretations, but we come together in a covenant – an agreement to travel together in this collective faith journey of ours, and that we come together as churches and as a denomination in the same way: respecting the process of listening, praying, and considering how God is calling us to respond to the issues of the day. The way I was taught in Confirmation class was that we are not a church that recited a creed and required our members to believe certain things, but we were a covenantal church. We agree, with God and each other, to journey together in faith.

When the General Synod of the UCC meets, our delegates to that meeting discuss and debate and vote on various resolutions, similar to our own process for congregational meetings, like when we crafted our Land Acknowledgement or committed to becoming an anti-racist church, or voted to be an Open and Affirming congregation. Those discussions are the heart of what we do together as a church, and they help to guide our priorities for our ministries in our local churches -- not because we are

required to respond in a certain way by some top-down authority, but because of our trust that when we meet together, pray together, and listen for God's word to us, that the decisions we make are guided by the Holy Spirit.

Last week in Kansas City, at the 35th General Synod (every two years since the UCC was formed in 1957), there were 740 voting delegates and another 1,200 visitors from across the country, representing our 4500 churches and 700,000 members. There were 11 resolutions this year, each started by a local congregation or Conference, and then discussed by a Committee of 50-100 people at the Synod who discuss and refine the wording for presentation to the voting delegates.

Some resolutions were about how we organize ourselves and relate to other churches: four Pennsylvania Conferences merged into one, and full communion relationships were formalized between the UCC and churches in Puerto Rico and also in Germany. Other resolutions encourage and celebrate various ministries that our congregations are engaged in: celebrating 25 years of the Our Whole Lives sexuality education for our youth, or supporting vital mental health ministries.

And then there are the issues. Past general synods have spoken out about the environment, marriage equality, and a whole host of global issues. This year, there were resolutions supporting Philippine Human Rights, responding to Christian Persecution in India, and ending the genocide in Palestine. The resolution responding to the federal government's attack on immigrants, migrants, and refugees resolved to affirm that "all people are made in God's image and should be afforded basic human rights, including the constitutional right to due process." The resolution calls on the various groups within the UCC to reaffirm our commitment to "protect, advocate for, and serve our immigrant, migrant, and refugee neighbors" and to prioritize divestment from private for-profit detention businesses. The resolution passed, 627-8, with one abstention.

What's interesting is the evolution of the statement. Originally the wording was that we "denounce all violations of the constitution, federal law, and international human rights law committed by the current administration." As the committee discussed the resolution, they voted to add the word "weaponization" and the phrase "denouncing domestic terrorism carried out by ICE agents working

without uniforms, wearing masks or refusing to identify themselves.” It was that phrasing that made the Newsweek article.

Another footnote is that in addition to the resolutions, there were three bylaw changes. Two passed without discussion, but in what turned out to be a 45-minute discussion, the General Synod rejected one of the proposed changes that would have changed the way that we choose our Associate General Ministers of the denomination, making them appointments of the General Minister and President, instead of being elected by the Synod. Although the delegates stated that they had confidence in the Board of Directors and the General Minister, there was not support for consolidating power in an executive branch. Like democracy, and New England Town Meetings, our congregational decision-making may not be the most streamlined and efficient, but we value the process and the input of the membership. The bylaw amendment failed with 407 against and 241 in favor.

There is power in a room when people of faith meet together, committed to listening for God’s word and responding. Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. We join the many people of faith who are speaking out and acting out their faith. A Catholic bishop in California accompanying people to court. Another Catholic bishop excusing people from attending Mass if they felt it was dangerous to do so. Speaking the truth to power.

Sometimes we think that the issues we’re facing as a country are unprecedented. I don’t know if I feel comforted that other people in other eras have faced extreme injustice, or if I’m frustrated that history continues to repeat itself. “Never again” should mean never ... again.

But clearly things were not smooth sailing in Amos’ day. He was a little older than Isaiah and Hosea, living in a world where some people were accumulating wealth at the expense of the poor. He was a regular guy – apparently a shepherd and a fig farmer before he embarked on his prophetic mission. His claim to fame is that he was the first of the prophets to write down the message that he received, so that they could be passed along to other communities.

Today’s message is direct and forceful. “You who treat the poor as less than nothing”, using them, and then when they’re used up, you discard them: God is angry. Through Amos, with a bowl of

ripe fruit, God calls out the arrogance of those who presume that they can hoard wealth, or treat others without fairness or empathy or compassion. I'm not quite sure how the fruit fits in, but the earthquakes, the floods ... the devastation is all too easy to imagine.

What do we do with all this? The news, the crisis in our American democracy, the disparity of wealth, the abuse of power? We don't face it alone. And we won't fix it alone. This summer, we are reciting together our Covenant Testimony, written 35 years ago by our congregation. The words call us to the core of who we are as a congregation – seeking peace through justice and equity for all people, preserving the environment, and supporting each other. We do all this, we will say together, “that we may embody that love which overcomes fear and death.”

And here is where I started these reflections for today, before I came upon the Newsweek article on Friday, in a question of grammar. After several years of preaching, someone in one of my churches called me out for my misuse of “that” and “which”. I had been using them pretty much interchangeably, but that's not correct. I had no idea. And in fact, using one or the other can change the meaning entirely.

I finally learned it this way: the apples, which are in the bowl, are red. That means that there are apples and they are all red, and they are all in the bowl. I can remove the phrase that begins with the word which – which are in the bowl – and not change the meaning of the sentence. The apples are red. However, if I say “The apples that are in the bowl are red” it means that there are red apples in the bowl, but there may be apples of a different color that are not in the bowl.

So, when I think about our covenant testimony “that we may embody that love which overcomes fear and death,” we've got two thats and a which. Written no doubt by a committee of people who knew their grammar. Using “which” means that we can remove that phrase without changing the meaning. We believe that our covenant with God and each other calls us to all these things, “that we may embody that love.” And doing that, embodying that love, will overcome fear and death.

Now if it said “that we may embody that love that overcomes fear and death” it would imply

that there is some love that overcomes fear and death and some love that does not. But the chosen word is “which” and that makes all the difference. The way I read it is that the act of embodying love overcomes fear and death. Love is not some philosophical idea to be talked about, but it is a way of acting in the world.

Being the church together is all about embodying the love of God, and that means speaking out against injustice. It’s all about embodying the love of God, and that means sitting at Jesus’ feet and learning the gospel way of loving our neighbors as ourselves, and then going out in the world and doing just that: loving our neighbors as ourselves. Christianity is not just talking about an idea of love, but embodying it, doing it, the feeding, the healing, the embracing. Showing up where it matters.

So go out into our sometimes frightening and maddening world and know this: other people in other times and other places have faced similar difficulties. We do not face it alone, and we believe that embodying love will overcome fear and death. In Jesus’ name and for the love of God. Amen!

