

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, August 14, 2016
Rev. Howard K. Bell
A Cloud of Witnesses

Foremost in my thoughts today is an overwhelming sense of gratitude to this community and to each of you who make up this community. I will cherish the memories of each of you and of our time spent together. These nearly 16 months together have offered me great meaning and great pleasure. I am saying farewell to you with a sense of accomplishment for all the ministries that we have participated in together during this Interim Ministry Time.

In today's lectionary we heard read these words: "*We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.*" (Hebrews 12:1) What might this phrase mean? For me, it means that all of us are affected and influenced by other persons of faith in our lives. It also means that the church is affected and influenced by those who came before, by those who are engaged in the ministries today and by those who are coming. We each – members and pastors have our roles to play, but the faith community known as Edina Morningside Community Church continues even when pastors move on, or even when members move on or even when we experience other challenges and transitions. Thanks be to God for Edina Morningside Community Church, United Church of Christ.

Who do you think of when you think of the great cloud of witnesses surrounding us today? I believe our "great cloud of witnesses" includes those who founded this faith community, all those who have been members, and all those ministers who have served this community. It is also might include all those whose lives have been affected by our ministries such as those served through Loaves and Fishes, Meals on Wheels, Families Moving Forward, the Daylight School in Kenya, and other outreach ministries through the years.

On a more individual level, our cloud of witnesses may include family members or others who have brought us into the Christian faith and/or those who led us into this faith community. Think about who those people are in your lives. It might also include each one of us gathered here today or currently engaged in some capacity with this church since we may have inspired one another through our prophetic witnesses this summer, through our wisdom and care in the past, and even through our shared struggles and challenges to live up to what God might require of us as faithful members and participants in this church.

I asked those of you have EMC t-shirts to wear them today – and I am wearing mine – to represent not only this "great cloud of witnesses" from this church but to also represent the "great cloud of witnesses" that surrounds us today known as the United Church of Christ (UCC). A prominent feature of the church's logo on these t-shirts is the United Church of Christ "comma". Since we do not have a specific logo for our church, Gwen Williams designed this one. Thank you to Gwen. The comma represents the witness of the "God is Still Speaking," initiative that was begun in 2004 and continues today. It represents a

powerful witness of extravagant welcome to all people, even people who have a variety of theological and biblical understandings.

One of the Interim Ministry tasks is to strengthen the tie between the local church and the wider UCC denomination. Today, I want to emphasize that I personally feel deeply indebted to the denomination and extremely grateful for all the resources and support that the denomination has provided to me and to us during this Interim Ministry Time.

As part of my “privilege of call” that led me to authorization within the UCC, I took the “UCC History, Theology and Polity” course through the United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. One of the deep impressions this course left on me was the clear message that even though the UCC was only founded in 1957, the UCC proudly claims the “great cloud of witnesses” from the predecessor denominations: The Congregational Church, the Christian Church, the German Reformed Church and the German Evangelical Church. This means that we consider our cloud of witnesses to extend back to the Pilgrims and even across the Atlantic Ocean.

A second impression embedded in me during that course was that the United Church of Christ and its predecessor denominations have made a powerful impact on our country for justice for those not empowered to speak for themselves. Sometimes we get caught up in our small size compared to other larger denominations, but here is a list of “firsts” that you can read more about on the ucc.org:

1620 Pilgrims were first to seek Spiritual Freedom from the control of the state.
1700 First Anti-Slavery Pamphlet distributed
1773 First Act of Civil Disobedience: Boston Tea Party
1785 First African American Pastor: Lemuel Haynes
1839 First effort to free the slaves on the Amistad
1853 First woman pastor: Antoinette Brown
1959 First time air wares declared to be public through court case initiated by the UCC
1972 First Gay minister: William Johnson
1995 First Inclusive language hymnal – the New Century Hymnal
2005 First denomination to support Marriage Equality

Our scripture continues...*“Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”* (Hebrews 12: 1b-2a) I hope that this list of firsts and the long history of the UCC working on behalf of justice for those who were and are enslaved, for those who were and are oppressed, and for those who were and are discriminated against have established the parameters of the race that is set before us. Even when we question ourselves as to what a small church with limited financial resources can do to address these issues of justice, may we see new ways to work within the United Church of Christ to form important partnerships, to tap into broader resources and to increase our impact on our world.

From the beginning of the UCC in 1957 and from the beginning of each of our four predecessor denominations, all of the “great cloud of witnesses” have looked to Jesus.

Looked to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. As I reflect on what it means for Jesus to be the perfecter of our faith, I think it means that - through Jesus – we who choose to follow him, are empowered to bring into community those who seek to be embraced by the all-encompassing, everlasting love of God. The Still Speaking God is still calling us today to also look to Jesus to bring us to better understanding of the root causes of injustice; to end the spiral of violence in our communities, to become peacemakers in the world, to eliminate the devastating effects of poverty and racial prejudices, and to form deeper communities of care and support for one another so that we might persevere in this race.

I am ending my ministry with you by sharing the mantra written by Alla Renée Bozarth that was read today as our contemporary reading. It is titled:

Love Mantra for Letting Go.

I bless you
I release you

I set you free
I set me free

I let you be
I let me be

One of the reasons that I love this mantra is the sense of mutuality. You have blessed me and I bless you. You are releasing me as I also release you. By releasing me, I am free to move on in my ministry. By my releasing you, you are free to form your new relationship with Rev. Oby Ballinger. You have let me be me in every aspect of our ministry together and I now let you be the faithful members of Edina Morningside Community Church, United Church of Christ, running the race set before you with perseverance. May it be so. Amen.