

Why, and Where?

January 1, 2012
Call to Worship: Matthew 2:7-12

Joanne Reynolds
1 Peter 2:1-10

A bit more of an introduction is in order to help you understand where I'm coming from before I begin. For those of you who don't know me, I'm a long-time member of this church. I don't worship here all that often, just a few weeks in spring and fall, because I spend the rest of the time in our home in Colorado or staying with family in Boston. However, before I made that change, I was very active and served four years as Moderator.

Being Moderator of a Congregational church is a peculiar job. It's not like being a President, Chairman or CEO. It's more like being the mother of a fractious family. Historically, the Moderator's job was to preside at congregational meetings at which all of the business of the church was conducted. As the title implies, the task was to see to it that everyone who was prompted by the Spirit to speak got the chance to do so. I'll talk more about that process in a minute. The reason I say it's like being a mother is that once your mothering days are done, you still hold the concerns of the church very close to your heart, which is one of the reasons I'm speaking to you today.

Today is the start of 2012, a brand new, shiny year, full of possibilities, rolling out in front of us. Don't we just love to think about change in the coming year from the perspective of the first few days of it? It's resolution time when we promise ourselves we'll make big changes in order to have a more satisfactory life. But just behind that resolve is a very human fear of change itself. We want the change, but when we're in charge of changing our own bad habits, there's a real reluctance to do so underlying any resolution. That's why we need the Spirit's help. We trip ourselves up when we are the source of the plan to make serious, life-effecting change. How many resolutions last beyond the first month?

Today I'm going to talk about change and what it might mean for our church. This comes on the heels of Laura MacKinnon's Team and the Vocatio Survey. (A quick aside—the report is available this morning on the patio. I strongly recommend that you take the time to look at it.) It may have seemed odd to you that the survey was framed in terms of the church's vocatio. Thinking about our future together in terms of a calling or vocation is perfectly appropriate for us. Some of you who come from the corporate world would think in terms of strategic planning with mission and vision statements,

goals and objectives. While that is appropriate out there in the world, here in the Body of Christ, we consider ourselves set apart, so we approach such things from a different point of view. Our way of determining our future and any changes that might need to be made is through discernment of the Spirit's guidance. Surveys only get you so far; we need the Spirit to make any real change. Our understanding of that idea that idea flows out of who we are now, and reaches back to our spiritual forebears of the 14th century.

On New Year's Day we are also in the season of Epiphany, the time in the church calendar in which we give recognition to the birth of Jesus as Son of God. Epiphany season is the culmination of the Christmas event, and it means that we acknowledge that God has come among us in human form, that the Light of God shines out from within a lowly human being. The purpose of the season, which runs until the start of Lent, is to help us recall that God is constantly and continuously present, that his light has come into our world, and has not left.

An epiphany is a sudden flash, the recognition of the true reality of something. They are those Aha! moments. This morning, I want to talk about an epiphany I've recently had, as opposed to THE epiphany of the Magi that we heard as the Call to Worship. Mine is more based on the passage Barbara read from the First Letter of Peter so it concerns how willing we are as a church to build ourselves into a spiritual house. Understanding my flash of recognition depends heavily on holding in mind the Jesus epiphany—that the Light has come among us and changed everything. THE Epiphany means we shape our lives in response to the Light, always moving toward it and away from darkness.

My little-e epiphany also requires that you understand a bit of Congregational heritage and history, because that's who we are and have been for the past 70 years—originally as a member-church of the Congregational Christian Church, and now of the United Church of Christ. But I'll get to that history, the recent history of this church, and a wee bit of my story in a minute. I want to cover that ground before I suggest a change that you might want to think about together. Please know that this is offered not with the intention of generating controversy and division among us. Instead, I offer my idea with love, and in the hope that you will

hear with open hearts, which lead you to the process of deciding where this church goes from here in following Christ, our Light.

When Bruce Van Blair arrived at this church, he introduced the Christian disciplines, concepts that are grounded in Church history, but in some ways quite new to us. His list had six items on it. I've since discovered that there can be as many as a dozen. But all have been used by Christ's followers since the days of the Apostles to build their individual relationship with our Lord. One of the things Bruce had us do was recite the statement that we have named The Recall.

Please join me in saying it now:

"We recall that it is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day, to study some portion of the Scriptures each day, seeking in grace and praise to discover God's will for us on a daily basis. As part of our discipleship we work to increase our love for one another. We tithe to our church so the kingdom may increase its resources. For the same reason, we tithe our time and our conversation. Finally, we hope that our faith and love and discipline will increase until they flow beyond our fellowship and become a blessing to others."

Have you ever wondered why we say it? Take a look at what it says we do—we pray and study Scripture every day to find out what God has in mind for us to do. Or as the letter of Peter says, we do this to remind ourselves that we are God's own people so that we can proclaim what he has done in our lives in leading us from darkness to light.

Over the years, I think we have learned well the lesson that we can't build a relationship with the Living Christ—we can't walk out of the darkness and into the Light—without using these tools on a daily basis. So use of prayer and Bible study have become the defining culture of this congregation. If I were to give a descriptor of our church today, I'd say we're a church that practices the Christian disciplines. Set that thought aside for a moment while we delve into Protestant history. It explains a bit more of the "why" of our Recall and how it played an enormous part in the founding of our denomination.

Just out of curiosity, how many of you were Congregationalists before joining this church? I'm offering a quick bit of history here for those who may not have come through the Congregational Christian Church into the United Church of Christ, and to refresh the memories of those of you who have.

At the turn of the 20th century, the UCC existed as four separate denominations—Congregationalists, The Christian Church of America, The Evangelical Synod of

North America and the German Reformed Church in America. By the 60's, all four merged, through a process of mergers, to form the United Church of Christ.

All of this merging came about in part because of a shared foundational theology that's known as Pietism. It originated in a period before the Protestant reformation when two men, John Wycliff and Jan Huss advocated individual religious freedom, and individual responsibility for relationship with Christ, rather than dependence on a church hierarchy of priests and bishops to describe what that relationship had to be. They had many followers and, of course, were opposed by all the powers of the day. Wycliff, who was English, was judged by authorities as a heretic, but was allowed to retire from his pulpit and died quietly at home in 1384. Huss, from Bohemia in the modern-day Czech Republic, was burned at the stake in 1414. His death occurred more than 100 years before Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenburg Cathedral. Both Wycliff and Huss translated the Bible from Latin into their native languages because they so strongly believed that God could reach through its words to transform the lives of individual believers. Their ideas were the foundation stones on which much of the later Protestant reformation was built.

Pietism itself developed in the years that followed the Reformation as an understanding that there is a "priesthood of believers," meaning that each individual alone has the right and responsibility to build her or his relationship with Christ based on their own personal practices—hearing the word preached in sermons, through Bible study, and in prayer. No one may interfere in that relationship by force, coercion or enticement.

This idea was profoundly important to the Puritans and Separatists who found themselves at odds with the Church of England in the opening years of the 17th century. They are our Pilgrim forebears who came to Plymouth and the Massachusetts Bay Colony 100 years after Luther's Theses. They wanted to live out their beliefs without interference or fear of oppression. For them, the Spirit of Christ was present when they studied, when they prayed and most particularly when they gathered, or congregated. Thus the name Congregationalists.

A key piece of their understanding was that just as each individual is free to build a relationship with God through Christ, so, too are the gathered companies of believers free to do the same. Churches, as we now call these gatherings of believers, are as autonomous as the individual members within them. And that's really significant to the way in which we operate here in Community Church. We are not governed by anyone but ourselves. We are the royal priesthood of Peter's letter.

We call pastors to preach and teach and provide a ministry of care, but we—the gathered believers—are in charge of our own destiny. All power in this church rests with the congregation. The church council exists as the operating arm of that power, not as a board of directors, but as the representative of the whole congregation. The council itself is a modern contrivance. In the days of the Pilgrims and for a couple of hundred years after, everything was done in congregational meetings, the place where these people knew that they could discover the will of the Spirit for them and their church. Thus the importance of the Moderator in those meetings.

Here's what the author of "The Congregational Way" says about how this belief governed their meetings:

"The church meetings grew out of the conviction of the earliest Congregationalists that if Christ really meant that 'Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them,' then it was in the gathered company, meeting in love, that He could most directly, powerfully, and personally govern His Church...Their conviction was that if the people of a local church gathered together in a spirit of prayer, honestly seeking to know the Lord's will for them, He would come into their midst and guide their minds and hearts in such a way that they would all know what He intended them to do and would furthermore be made of one mind in the determination to do so."

Friends, our forebears from the 17th to the 19th centuries did nothing if the vote wasn't unanimous, and they would keep meeting and praying on an issue until there was unanimity. This process made for remarkable resolve, and for great gifts to Christ's kingdom as a result of that resolve. Think about the Congregationalists who were led to missionary work in Hawaii and the South Pacific, and to become leaders in the anti-slavery movement early in the 19th century. Congregationalists were very active in the de-segregation movement of the mid 20th century. These folks listened for God's call and responded as individuals and as congregations.

So now it's time to come back to our church's history along with my personal story. Please keep in mind that what follows is not me bragging, but a demonstration of my credentials for talking to you this morning.

With my husband, Paul, I became a member here in the late 70's. I've served on and chaired every committee except Mission and Memorial, taught Vacation Bible School, worked with the children's choir and bell choir, and sang in the Chancel Choir. I co-chaired the committee that created our existing by-laws and I served on the search committees that hired Rodger and Chip.

More than a dozen years ago I began using the practices in *The Recall*. In the process in 2004, I was called by the Spirit to serve as singing leader in a very small church in Crested Butte, Colorado where we have a home. That calling lasted for 18 months until the little church went out of existence. There have been other vocations that I've discerned, such as my work with family caregivers and writing hymn texts. I've learned that discerning and following a call from the Spirit requires time and patience to get it clear; needs support of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and is a surprisingly dynamic process that can change over time.

My history with this church gives me an insider's perspective. I've been here through a lot of ups and downs. But I'm also an outsider now. I'm here for a few weeks in spring and fall. The outsider's perspective is one of the big picture, rather than day-to-day operations, which is the insider focus. I see how this church fits in with the experiences I've had with other churches, like the one I was called to serve, and with the other congregational-UCC churches with which I worship in Colorado and in Boston.

I believe that the insider/outsider perspective helped fuel my recent epiphany. Another part of it was fueled by the Vocation Survey. The survey posed a question that I couldn't answer on the spot, which had to do with what I needed from the church. It was in pondering that question that I had my epiphany, which is this: Our role as the Church That Practices Christian Disciplines has become an end point, rather than a part of our process, our pilgrim journey. If you think of our work as a church in terms of a trajectory, we've flattened out a bit recently. Peter's letter says we are called to proclaim the mighty acts of God. But as practitioners of Christian Disciplines our greater focus has been inward for a while, as I believe it has needed to be.

Now, maybe it's time to shift that focus outward. I think that this place we find ourselves in as a church feels flat and uncomfortable because we're being poked at, prodded by the Spirit to get going. It's time for us to move out into what Jesus has in mind for us next. One of the many reasons I see this is in the report from Laura MacKinnon's group. The church council decided that instead of sending it to all the members, and friends—and certainly to those 68 who participated-- they would make copies available. That's a board-of-directors approach, controlling information. A church council, which represents the congregation and is tasked with helping us discern what the Spirit would have us do, would ensure that the information was sent to all the members. There are other examples, and they all point to my belief that we

are stalled. Let me also say that Chip has been pointing this out to us for a while, but I'm not sure we've really heard him. It's his job to speak the word of God to us; it's our job to perceive our own destiny or calling as a congregation.

I want to give you a visual image to illustrate what I'm seeing. Imagine a pathway that gently climbs a mountain, weaving along the side of a ridge, then rolling back into a shallow canyon before rising again. We're traveling along that pathway, all of us, and we've made good progress and arrived at a wide spot. We've paused here to catch our breaths and admire the lovely view. Some of us have set down the tools we've been carrying and are taking a break, but others have moved on up the path a little ways. Others are moving back down toward our starting point. What I want you all to know is that we are called to find the path that leads us further up this mountain, but called to travel whatever the path may be together. If we keep moving, there will be many more beautiful sites to see, many wider and broader views to enjoy. The thing to remember is that while we need to stop and catch our breaths, we don't want to get stuck admiring this one view. It's merely a limited version of what waits for us if we continue our climb. So friends, pick up your tools of prayer, study and worship, and in fellowship with Christ's Holy Spirit, let's continue our journey up God's glorious mountain, together.

So that's my epiphany: we need to consider a change and that would be the process of determining our path, our collective calling or ministry as a church. Perhaps more foundationally, we need to decide that we will move up that mountain together. I'm seeing divided loyalties develop that are more indicators of that flat place we're in. It makes me feel very uncomfortable that we have members who participate in this church and in our former pastor's online church at the same time. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ warns us that nothing good comes of serving two masters, or in our case two churches.

On the other hand, if we work together to build ourselves into a dynamic spiritual house for our Savior, the process might unfold like this: as a body, we decide to do the discernment. The next step would be create the plan for how to do it. Then would come doing the work of that plan. Once the calling has been discerned, live the results. I hope you'll want to discuss—and pray on—these ideas as a congregation, in the church council, and in your small groups. My hope is also that we will hang onto our Recall and the disciplines that it represents, because we need to use them to move ourselves onto whatever Christ has in store for us next.

If you are a bit puzzled by the idea of a church calling, ministry, or *vocatio*, think of it as the blessing we talk about in the last line of The Recall. "Finally, we hope that our faith and love and discipline increase until they flow beyond this fellowship and become a blessing to others." Another way to name it is the overflow. The necessity is to move beyond our current culture of practicing the disciplines and get into the overflow of blessings phases of that statement. Do you recall Bishop Patrick Okobe's sermon on the first Sunday of Advent? He called us live beyond ourselves in following Christ. I think that sermon was prophetic for us in this church. Bishop Okobe was calling us to live and embody the overflow.

There are lots of ways that could be embodied here. We might become a teaching church in which we actively and intentionally encourage, support and train people for ministry. Do you know that in addition to Laura MacKinnon, there are a total of four current or former members who are either in seminary or have been ordained and are serving the church right now?

We might become a mission church, actively seeking out opportunities in our own community and beyond to serve the Lord by serving our neighbors. Yes, we're doing that now, but what would it be like if everyone of us found a mission to participate in, and supported one another in that work?

Maybe we become a church-planting church, moving beyond the help we've given the Marshallese congregation that shares our facility to help them or others start new churches.

Perhaps God is calling us to become a ministry of support to individuals in finding and living out their vocations. Individual callings always need support and encouragement, not just from Chip, who has supported and encouraged many of us in our calls. A *vocatio* church would mean that we would support one another in discerning, planning and living our individual calls, ministering to one another.

I don't know what this change from working on disciplines to finding and living a calling would look like in practical terms. I do know that the process won't be short, and that it will require significant levels of humility, patience and trust from all of us—humility to set aside our personal agendas and grievances, patience with the time such a process will consume, and trust in one another and in the Spirit's willingness to guide us. We'll need all of that, and we will need to continue to practice those disciplines that we value so highly.

Why do we say the Recall? To remind ourselves

to daily build our relationship with Christ. In that task, we are called into work on behalf of his Kingdom—to be built into a spiritual house for him-- as individuals and as a church.

Where do we go from here? Up that mountain, wherever the path leads, traveling together, following the Light of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Closing Prayer:

Dear Lord, we come before you to ask for gifts of your grace: humility of heart, and boldness of spirit; patience and trust that you know and hear us. May we find the wisdom, courage and strength to live our lives as your followers in this world. Lord we ask that you knit up the wounds that weaken us; that you break down the barriers that hinder us, and that you remove the burdens that distract us so that we may see and follow you, wherever you lead. Encourage us through your Holy Spirit to live beyond ourselves for your kingdom and the light that shines so brightly from it. We ask all of this in Jesus' name, who taught us to pray together, saying...

Opening Invocation: From Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

Holy Life Giver,
 Doctor of the Desperate,
 Medicine for all wounds,
 Fire of love,
 Joy of hearts,
 fragrant Strength,
 sparkling Fountain,
 Protector.
 In you we contemplate how God goes looking for those
 who are lost
 and reconciles those who are at odds with Him.
 Break our chains!
 You bring people together.
 You teach those who listen,
 breathing joy and wisdom into them.
 We praise you for these gifts,
 Sound of joy,
 Wonder of being alive
 Light-giver,
 Hope of every person,
 and our strongest Good.
 Amen

