

## **“Ready, Set, Go!”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
June 18, 2023 - Third Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 6

[Genesis 18:1-15; Matthew 9:35-10:8](#)

I am happy to report to you all that I was fortunate enough to spend yesterday in Worcester at the annual meeting of the Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ, which was the first in-person meeting of this new conference, formed four years ago from the historic Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island conferences of our denomination. It was a pleasure to represent the church and to meet with hundreds of other delegates from congregations across our region, spending time together in worship and in fellowship. Many of our 600 other conference churches, with their 100,000 members, were represented, and it was wonderful to be together with so many others to celebrate together with joy that we can come together and work together as a diverse but united community of faith.

While together, we celebrated our shared mission, we offered words that demonstrated our respect for one another, and we communicated that we trust each other, demonstrated most clearly as we voted to merge our endowments from our historic conferences, thus finalizing the coming together of our conference to form one family, whose members will faithfully care for one another and protect the resources that we now share.

Something that was provided to all of the delegates in attendance were these little pocket-sized quilts that one of the members of our conference lovingly made for everyone, which reminded us throughout the day that we are like a quilt, formed together into one body from a variety of sources. Indeed, our new conference is made up of three historic conferences, which is made up of many congregations, which is made up of many members, and we are all stitched together now as one new quilt that joins with many others to form larger tapestry of the United Church of Christ.

As I sat through the meeting yesterday, which was full of life and joy, I was reminded of some scenes I saw earlier in the week of another Christian body that also gathered for their annual meeting. The largest of the Protestant denominations in the United States gathered this last week for their annual

meeting, which was not as joyful or uplifting as our gathering in Worcester. In fact, it was sad to see some of the sorrowful and dividing actions of this body, including the expulsion from membership of some of its congregations because they had a woman serving as a pastor. It was a very different scene yesterday as I witnessed our denomination and conference's celebration of inclusion. I was really struck by how very different these two scenes were.

I was struck by seeing our leader of our conference, the Reverend Darrell Goodwin, who is a gay, Black person (and who was leading a program here in our sanctuary just a couple of months ago), leading this time as we celebrated our identity as a united and uniting church of Christ. I was also struck when hearing words offered by the day's keynote speaker, the Reverend Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson, who is a Black woman and immigrant, soon to be voted in as our new president and general minister of the United Church of Christ. It was a blessing to hear from these gifted leaders and to recognize their calling, that they are gifted by God and called by God just as they are and because of who they are, pastors representing marginalized communities. And so it was a celebration that those who have historically had been marginalized are now called to lead in our denomination. People of all kinds are recognized, welcomed, and celebrated in the United Church of Christ.

It should be noted that as Congregationalists, we are spiritual descendants of the Pilgrims and Puritans, who were not renowned for their welcoming or inclusive ways. We should also recognize that it was Congregationalists, as they responded to God's still-speaking voice calling to them to grow in their faith and away from their exclusive ways, were the first to ordain an African American person, which they did in 1785. They were first to ordain a woman, Antoinette Brown, in 1853. They, now in the UCC, were the first to ordain an openly gay person, William R. Johnson, in 1972. These are but a few of the firsts of the Congregationalists and UCC, and our increasingly inclusive ways are something to give thanks to God for and to be proud of, that in a world where so many are still excluded because of who they are or whom they love, that we could act upon our belief that all kinds of people are called by God and empowered by God to lead.

This is something we celebrate in this season of Pentecost: We recognize that we are a Pentecost people and that the one Spirit of God has come to all of us. The Wind of God blows around all of us, the Breath of God is in each of us. God

enables us all. God calls us, prepares us, and equips all kinds of people for all kinds of ministries, including those set apart to serve as pastors and teachers. God calls and sends Peters and Andrews, Jameses and Johns; God also calls and sends Petras and Andreas and Jamies and Juanas. And the church is better, and the world is made better, because of the diversity of our witness.

Yes, all kinds of people are called to be pastors and leaders, and this church has called all kinds of pastors and leaders. I am grateful that you have called me to this unique role here. But more than pastors are called by God and the church to serve. Certainly God calls us all to unique ministries, whether we are called to be teachers, leaders, servers, carers, singers, organ players, piano players (or a singing organist and piano player such as the very talented Nare!), feeders, healers, helpers, and strugglers for justice. However it is that God has called us, we need to be active in this world, never content to leave the world as it is, but to recognize that God has enabled each of us and sends us out to do work that moves our world closer to becoming the world God desires for us to enjoy.

God equips us for these ministries, just as we are. God equips us when we gather together, as we are this morning, coming together as a unique quilt, knit together by God's uniting love. We come to this safe space where we can grow closer together as a family, where we can offer extravagant hospitality to each other, just as Abraham and Sarah offered extravagant hospitality to their unexpected guests, the divine and angelic visitors who were blessed by them. And just as Abraham and Sarah responded to the unexpected visitors by offering an extravagant hospitality, God enables us and calls us to do the same with one another, not just the world outside these walls, but right here with each other, so that we can prepare one another, through loving hospitality, to go and serve outside.

God prepares us just as we are, even if we think we're unworthy, incapable, or that our best days are behind us, just as laughing Sarah and old Abe had thought. But God had big plans for aged Abraham and Sarah. Although they were up there in years (around 100), God didn't let them retire quietly. No, God told them that they were just getting started! Indeed, it was in their ripe old age that God used them to fulfill a plan to bless all the people of the earth.

Friends, God has a plan for us today as well. For each of you, no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, God has a plan. For those of us who have no church home, God has a plan. For those of us who need strength, who want to follow Christ, have doubts, or do not believe, God has a plan. God has a plan for grandparents, mothers, fathers, and single people. God has a plan for people of all colors, cultures, abilities, sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. God has a beautiful plan for all old and young believers and questioners and questioning believers. Now, a big part of that plan, one that we all share, is to welcome everybody, and so that's what we do here as well as outside of these walls. So as we gather together, whenever we do so, and we say our words of welcome, let us not just say them as part of a ritual, but as an active statement of who we are and who we are becoming, as a statement that is also a guide for our behavior, not just on Sundays, but every day, that we would become a people who are more welcoming and inclusive of one another so that we can continue to build each other up and prepare one another to go and serve.

In this world, where there's so much violence and so many words that are hostile and exclusive, let us offer, instead of hostility, hospitality -- extravagantly -- with one another. Let us be united and uniting, here and in our conference and throughout the United Church of Christ. Each Sunday, let's come together so that we can get ready to go and serve the world together. Let's come together to the starting line, so that each week when we say that final amen, it can be like a starting blast that sends us out to go into the world, ready and willing to serve. So let us come together, let us get ready, let us get ourselves set, and let us go out into the world and be a blessing for a world in need of a blessing. Amen.