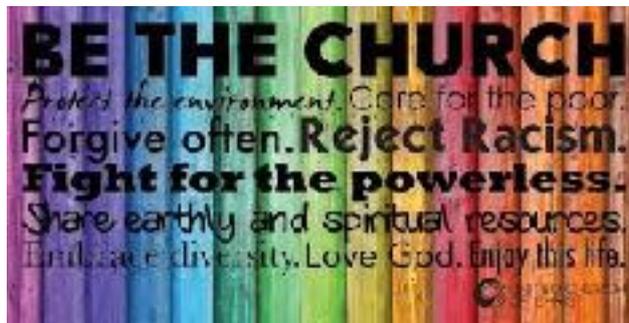


Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, November 10, 2019
Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
“Gifts in Open Hands”
The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
Hebrew Scripture: Joel 2:28-29
Christian Scripture: II Corinthians 9:6-15

Eight of eight in “Be the Church”
and
Two of Four in “Give Us This Day our Daily Bread”



Today is the last sermon in our eight-week series “Be the Church”. And so I am a bit sad. I don’t know about you, but I always find myself melancholy when good journeys conclude. And this has been a lovely journey for me; I pray for you as well.



My sadness is somewhat tempered because we are already in the midst of a new series that focuses on our church’s finances. So, welcome to the *second* of four sermons dedicated to our Stewardship Campaign entitled “Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”!

Now, it is quite understandable that you, being the clever people that you are, are a bit suspicious that I am using euphemisms to deceive you. “Ah- ha!” Jim Bedard says, “Scott’s not taking talking about ‘bread’. He’s talking about ‘bucks’! Scott is preaching, ‘Give him this day, his monthly salary!’” And Judy Palmer has perhaps concluded, “He not talking about sharing ‘resources’. He’s talking about ‘Ponying-up the bucks to paint the sanctuary ceiling!’”



Well, truth be told, I have to do a *mea culpa* and say to you I am speaking about ‘bread’, as we broke it and ate it at this table last

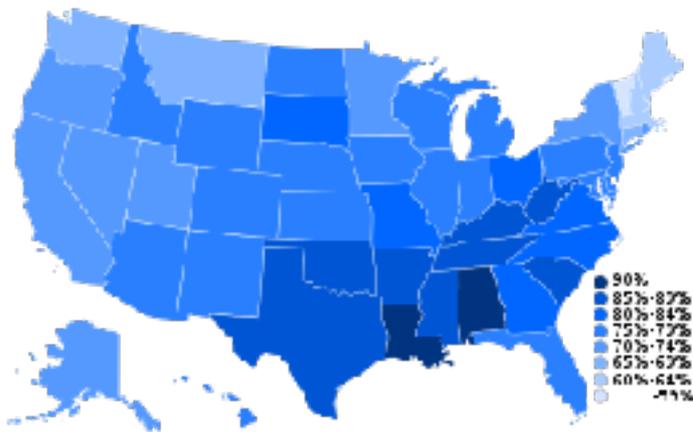
week, *and* I am speaking about this Sunday's offering. And yes, I am preaching about 'spiritual resources' *and* about your tithes and pledges. I trust all of you are sophisticated thinkers and will hold 'bread' and 'resources' together with 'dollars and cents' this morning.

On Thursday and Friday, I attended the most wonderful and inspiring conference entitled "Vermont Vision for a Multicultural Future" sponsored by the Vermont Partnership for Fairness & Diversity.



Vermont Partnership
FOR FAIRNESS AND DIVERSITY

I am very proud of the fact that the denomination to which Centre Church belongs, the United Church of Christ (UCC), was a financial sponsor of this conference. One might ask why a Christian denomination, the minister of Centre Church, four members of the Guildford Community Church (UCC), and Duncan Hilton of the St. Michael's Episcopal church would attend a conference that could cynically be perceived to be about 'political correctness'. The answer lies in great part due to demographics. One, Vermont is the most secular state in the union. By percentage, fewer people attend worship here than in any other state in the union.



Two, Windham county is the fastest aging population in Vermont.

Three, due in part to a lack of business and industry, the economy struggles to attract people to Vermont. And last but not least, this state is very pale, perhaps albinic.

| THE WHITEST STATES BY PERCENTAGE (2010 CENSUS) | |
|---|------------------------------|
| State | % white alone (not Hispanic) |
| Maine | 94.4% |
| Vermont | 94.3% |
| West Virginia | 93.2% |
| New Hampshire | 92.5% |
| North Dakota | 90.9% |
| Iowa | 88.7% |
| Minnesota | 87.8% |
| Kentucky | 86.3% |
| Wyoming | 85.9% |
| South Dakota | 84.7% |

You bring all of these things together and the decline of our state, town, and church accelerates.



I proudly attended this conference because I know that our state, town, *and* church have a far better chance of surviving and thriving by welcoming and including a diverse population. If people feel that their physical, intellectual, cultural, linguistic, and spiritual gifts and resources are valued here, then people will come and circulate life-giving air and water to our society. If we remain older, whiter, and mono-cultural, we will be like a stagnant body of water unable support life.

What I speak of is not borne-out of political correctness ethic indoctrinated in me by the UCC and CNN. I need look no farther than my own daughter, who is a Black South African high school student, to learn a lesson about 'closed hands'. My daughter, though she loves me and would like to be close to me, does not consider Vermont a place for her to attend college because there are a precious few people who look like her and can identify with her.

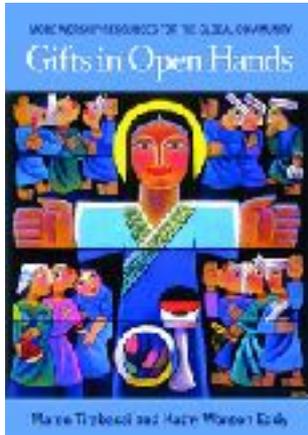


Friends, as a leader of a faith community that attended this conference with police, politicians, civil servants, educators, and business leaders, I learned that our state and town only benefits by yearning for, being intentionally welcoming to, and attracting a more diverse and equitable society.



In fact, it is not just that we will benefit, but our town's financial wellbeing is dependent on a more fair society and diverse population. And so is our church's wellbeing and continued existence dependent on the aims and objectives of Vermont's Vision for a Multicultural Future. What is a societal imperative for us, is also an ecclesiastical imperative - for we are all interdependent, imbricated.

I have a multicultural vision for our church. For example, can we deny that the spirituals we sing in this church, such as today's "I'm So Glad, Jesus Lifted Me", only enrich our worship services?



The resources I often use to plan our services (for example a book entitled *Gifts In Open Hands* from which I entitled this sermon) include prayers, liturgies, and perspectives - that is, 'spiritual resources' - from all around the world. I hope you are pleased that Duncan Hilton brought an Episcopalian perspective and cultural to our proud Congregational ones. I pray you are proud that your minister attended the Catholic mass this morning. [In fact, it was Father Justin who reminded me that I needed to homiletically include Veterans Day in my message this morning. So, thank you to our military veterans who sacrificed so much to serve this nation. And we are thankful that our military is diverse. African-Americans have been fighting for this nation since the revolutionary war.



Native Americans served as Navajo Code Talkers.



And even gays and lesbians are serving, for example, Pete Buttigieg.



We heard from former-Ambassador Peter Galbraith on Friday that half of Kurdish army and its generals are female!



The armed services benefit from increased diversity.) I would hope that we in the Congregational fold can learn from our Quaker brothers and sisters the art of meditative prayer. We don't lose our identity when we welcome others; we enrich our identity.



Our Hebrew scripture reading from Joel prophesied about the dissemination of the Holy Spirit. For the Hebrews, the explosive dissemination was to come during what was called 'The Day of the Lord'. This 'Day of the Lord' was something to be celebrated on one hand, and dreaded on the other. The 'Day of the Lord' was to be a day of great reckoning when God would brutally eliminate injustices and impose a great spiritual and financial levelling. Christians reinterpreted this day of levelling to be Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13).



After Pentecost, no longer would a select few monopolize earthly and spiritual gifts. Instead, all would, through the Spirit, become egalitarian. On Pentecost, the church was born and all possessed spiritual resources and all financial resources were held in common (Acts 2:44-45).



As I saw in the movie “Harriet” last night at the Latchis theatre, God distributes spiritual resources to even the most marginalized, even to Black female slaves.

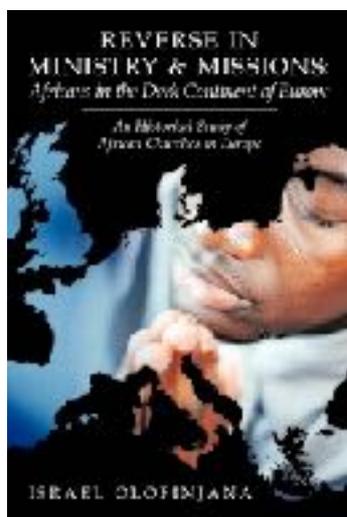


I spoke this month at a Vermont Conference Board meeting of recruiting African ministers of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa to Vermont. Why? The churches in New England and in the western world are dying. We are losing our salt. We, perhaps, are no longer inspired by the Holy Spirit. And I say this not to be judgemental, but rather honest: we perhaps need to be evangelized! The Christian church in Africa, and indeed the Congregational church in southern Africa is thriving, not declining. For twenty years as a Global Ministries mission co-worker, I learned from Africans what it meant to be a thriving church and I so wish for them to come here and be missionaries to us! We in Vermont, from where Congregationalism was sent to southern Africa in 1835, are in need of our African brother and sisters' spiritual resources!



To the Vermont Partnership for Fairness & Diversity and to the Vermont Conference of the UCC, I pledge to try use whatever skills and resources I have to bring three African ministers to Vermont. It is my prayer that our part of the world can facilitate the coming of missionaries to us - not for the sake of political correctness, but a means by which to survive and thrive.

So, the irony of this morning's message is not so much that I am specifically asking us to share our 'earthly and spiritual resources' with others, but that we have open minds, hearts, and hands to *accept* the 'earthly and spiritual resources' of others.



I propose we engage in 'reverse mission'; I propose that we yearn for, seek, welcome, embrace, and celebrate others' resources so that we too might benefit from their spirit. But in order to accept with open hands the spiritual gifts of others, we need to share and invest Earthly resources (your tithes, offerings, pledges, - your bucks!) in planting the

seeds of diversity, inclusion, and fairness within our country, state, town, and church.



The apostle Paul promised that if we do so, we “will be made rich in every way” (II Corinthians 9:11).

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, “Amen”.