

This Community of Faith  
Stewardship Sunday  
World Communion Sunday  
October 4, In the Year of our LORD, 2009  
First Congregational United Church of Christ  
Gloversville, New York  
The Rev. Ralph S. English

John 1:14-16

From the first and last words of that brief reading from scripture, like bookends, we have the core and essence of a message about our call to be a community of faith that proclaims the Good News of Jesus Christ. The fourteenth verse of the first chapter of John reminds us of what makes our faith unique – that the Word of God, the reality of God are not words written on a page or even words spoken to a few or to many – but is something that became human.

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us.*

The Incarnation, the fancy word for God becoming human, may be but one of our Christian affirmations, but it is echoed every time we remember that we, too, are to share more than the written and spoken word, that we are the hands, feet, arms and legs of giving flesh, body, substance, action of Christ's church in the present age. Our newly refurbished church sign reminds us that to believe is to care and that to care is to do. We gather here in this upper room this morning to remember what we believe, about whom and what we care and what tasks we might challenge ourselves to do in the name of Christ and in the name of this community of faith. At the conclusion of today's gathering, when we recall how Jesus met with His faithful followers in an upper room to share a meal we now call the Last Supper and the Sacrament of Communion, we will celebrate all the more what it means to be *a* community of faith – and today, on World Communion Sunday, in the context of our role as part of the *one* community of faith that is Christ's church.

It is to, you, a community of faith to whom David and Chris will turn in a few moments to be in dialogue about what it means for us to be a people who celebrate who we are as people of Christ's way – in all that we believe and hold dear, in all of the ways that we care for persons in need and in particular the acts of mercy, grace and love we do on behalf of others.

First, a reflection on the last verse which we just heard read – one that many congregations of the United Church of Christ are using as a point of reference for this year's exploration of what it means to be stewards of God's grace and the Good News of Jesus Christ.

*From Jesus' fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*

Each of us can recount the blessings of God, the grace that is ours of our Creating, Redeeming and Empowering God. In so doing, we realize that God calls on us to be stewards of God's graces and ... to ensure that those blessings are available for *all* of God's people.

That message was echoed this past week every evening when Sally and I turned on the television to be enthralled by PBS' broadcast of Ken Burns' documentary "The National Parks: America's Best Idea." The history, photographs, conversations with past and current National Park staff – all of that was well worth the hours. However, the application to today comes from the affirmation that first and foremost, the concept of the National Parks was and is that someone needed to be stewards of what this incredible land had to offer in the way of natural beauty in order *to preserve it for generations to come*. Preservation was not going to occur on its own. Like the number of buffalo going from some 60 million to just a thousand before being allowed to repopulate the west, the lumber companies were going to destroy the virgin forests, people desperate for water in the west were going to dam every river (including the Colorado in the middle of what is today the Grand Canyon), companies would be allowed to mine, strip, and dig any and everywhere – you get the idea!

Were it not for a few determined individuals who recognized that without a purposeful, sacrificial, programmed effort, all too many of our natural wonders would virtually disappear. Yes, there was, and still is, a vigorous debate between preserving the land for future generations and *at the same time* making it available for current use and enjoyment – which translates into whether we leave the land alone or put roads and highways into every corner of our country so that people today can see them – knowing that roads in and of themselves can "ruin the look?"

When it comes to stewardship, to *our* commitment to maintain and preserve what is important to us, today is about taking a step back, about realizing what we can do with our time, energy, talent, ideas, beliefs, caring and yes, with our monies, to be stewards of the graces and blessings that are ours of our God.

In a number of instances, the only way to protect beautiful lands in this country was for those with the ideas to approach people of great wealth. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. donated *millions* of dollars to buy some of the land that is now part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the east and Grand Teton National Park in the west. Without his monies, neither of those parks would have come into being.

Few of us have as grand ideas as those who envisioned the National Park system. None of us have the money of "John D." But, without *our* ideas and without *our* resources, this community of faith will falter – and our presence here today suggests that we intend to be stewards of God's grace, that grace upon grace, enjoyed in and from this place in generations past might be evident in the generations yet to come.

Amen