

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
At First Congregational Church of Glendale UCC
With MCC/UCC in the Valley – Gospel Music Sunday
Fourteenth Sunday of Pentecost/Ordinary Time – August 14, 2016
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

The Gospel of Matthew 5:13-16

For Reflection

“Everybody has a little bit of the sun and moon in them. Everybody has a little bit of man, woman, and animal in them. Darks and lights in them. Everyone is part of a connected cosmic system. Part earth and sea, wind and fire, with some salt and dust swimming in them. We have a universe within ourselves that mimics the universe outside. None of us are just black or white, or never wrong and always right. No one. No one exists without polarities. Everybody has good and bad forces working with them, against them, and within them.”

PART SUN AND MOON by Suzy Kassem

— Suzy Kassem, Rise Up and Salute the Sun: The Writings of Suzy Kassem

Suzy Kassem, born in Toledo, Ohio (December 1, 1975), is an American author, filmmaker, philosopher, cultural critic, essayist, and poet of Egyptian descent. Her first book, Rise Up and Salute the Sun, amassed a cult following shortly after its release in the US market (2011) and Egypt (2010). The book was described by Publisher’s Weekly as “a mix between Khalil Gibran’s The Prophet and Paulo Coelho’s The Alchemist.” <http://www.suzykassem.com/bio.htm>

Godspell Gospel

Growing up I always felt like a “weird kid.” This could be because my mom used to say things like, “You are such a weird kid.” I wasn’t THAT weird. I was born cisgender, hetero, white and middle-class. Where we lived – that was considered normal. On the other hand, our family was LIBERAL and practiced social justice rather than group sports, put out mailings together and walked picket lines together – instead of making popcorn and watching t.v. together. The years we lived in hyper-conservative Orange County amplified the feeling of “outsider-ness” for all of us.

But the move back to the more-moderate City of Pasadena didn’t rid me of the feeling of being weird. I liked to climb trees and ride bikes and was called a “Tom-boy” – hated wearing make-up and the color pink – would rather watch action thrillers and read Moby Dick instead of romance novels. Rather than join the cheerleading squad, I joined the Fungus Federation (dedicated to the growth, discovery, classification and consumption of our fungi friends) – and felt very much at home there. I had found my people

And – at some point during my teen years – our family went to the Mark Taper Forum and saw “Godspell.” It was a life-changing experience. It pulled open my Sunday School Jesus image and poured in life and salt and heart and possibility.

It reimagined FOR me a Jesus that was an outsider, a weird guy who loved hanging with other outsiders, affirmed people in their singularity and uniqueness. He was kind of funny looking and completely loveable and the guy could SING! This Godspell Jesus created a beloved community that fit in nowhere and everywhere – and then sacrificed himself for his friends – including me. (My theology has evolved a bit from the sacrifice model to the murder model – but that was eye-opening for me at the time.)

What happened over time was that I began to CLAIM my weirdness and seek out others who were unusual and interesting and outside the NORM – which I found to be rather boring. I began to create my own village of village people – friends who shared values and were willing to think creatively about life/work/faith/family/politics – redefining what each of those things meant.

And I discovered – eventually – that the faith community of my family – the United Church of Christ – is actually a repository for weird people. Not everyone or every church – but I'm telling you – the UCC is, for the most part, a counter-cultural network of deeply interesting individuals with a value system that defies social norms. The language used by our organization gives us away – phrases like “Radical Inclusion” and “Extravagant Welcome” – mottos like “Never place a period where God has placed a comma,” and “Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey – you are welcome here!”

Some of you know I went to the art festival known as Burning Man last August – and was only mildly astonished to find that they used similar language to describe the guiding principles of that event. They practice:

Radical Inclusion and Welcome

Gift Giving Economy rather than capitalism

Radical Self-expression – the freedom to be who you are

Communal Effort – we don't do this life alone

Civic Responsibility and care for each other – especially the stranger

Leaving No Trace – environmental responsibility

Not just Observation but Participation – room for everyone to share their talents and strengths

I came home from that event convinced that Jesus would have been a Burner.

And I came home from that intense camping experience – very much like a Godspell experience – with the groundwork for a metaphor for today's Church that has only recently been articulated by members of Mt. Hollywood UCC and I want to share it with this village here this morning.

Church is a Base Camp – a place of rest, renewal and resourcing for meeting the challenges of the rest of life. It is the beginning and returning place for adventurers

climbing the Everests of the world – getting through this election cycle for one – trying to work and raise kids and survive in a culture that continues to champion gun violence, police violence, gang violence, economic violence, racial and gender violence, mental and emotional violence. Base camp is a water station and place of shelter and support for our migrants who, like monarch butterflies, have to move in order to find work and peace and life itself. And like the Hebrew people in the wilderness who pitched their tents in the middle of nowhere (a nowhere very much like the Playa where Burning Man takes place) – a 40-year camping trip of Biblical proportions – we pitch a tent in the center – God’s tent – a tabernacle to remind us whose we are and who has our backs.

Church in our day and age is no longer shackled to a cathedral or a hierarchical institution that supports the status quo and goes to war to conquer the world in the name of the Prince of Peace. Church in our day is what is being called an Emerging Church – small groups and communities of people meeting wherever it is easiest and most natural to meet. (Think ancient House Church.) Bible studies are going on in bars and coffee houses. Laundry Love ministry is going on in laundromats helping the working poor get their kids school clothes in order for the month.

Mt. Hollywood has a plan to film a PSA about bathroom equality – in the restroom in THIS facility. We’ve got the actors and script – you have the set. We had communion and a time of renewal the other night in a bowling alley in Montrose. One of my son’s Little League friends and his family were there – and now they are wondering if they’d be welcome on a Sunday to worship with us... (Ummmm – YES!!!!!!!!!!)

UCC people from all over the L.A. Basin find strength and inspiration once a year in Griffith Park – although last year we found it here in the gardens of First Congregational UCC Glendale.

More and more we are cutting ourselves loose from the responsibilities of facility management and maintenance – some by hiring facility managers – some by turning the buildings over to their denominations – some by selling to other groups. We are rediscovering the power of perching temporarily in the gardens of the world – to “get our salt back” – to restore our souls for the daily struggle to reimagine and recreate the world in God’s image.

South Bay Christian Church gave their building to the Region – who then opened a seminary on the PCH property (The Hatchery) – for clergy wanting to found Emerging Churches.

Mt. Hollywood UCC sold their building five years ago and has some stories to tell about who they are now – light on their feet and focused on “BEING the change they wish to see in the world.”

MCC/UCC in the Valley is considering how best to do ministry WITH OR WITHOUT their “EXTREME GREEN” building.

We keep returning to THIS space for events that demand acoustics and larger galleries. Your ministers (all of us half-time church employees by the way) met this week in your grotto to explore ways in which our three smaller villages might act as a network – have an impact to shift culture in a positive direction – be stronger and more vital together.

We were reimagining (i.e. JUST TALKING and EXPLORING) – reimagining this building as a Spiritual Center for the UCC – a place for various congregations and networks of individuals to hold retreats, meditate, conspire to end hunger in Southern California, regularly worship en masse once a month, have art festivals to share our creative spirit, recognize our best selves and strengths as a United church, this village we represent today.

It would take much creativity to fund and maintain and facilitate a Spiritual Base Camp in such a place as this – but with the power of many and our imaginations – it could be done. Just a thought.

Our Biblical text today was a lively tune in the Godspell sound-track – “If salt has lost its flavor it ain’t got much in its favor...” Most churches are feeling salt-reduced – if not salt-less – in these dire times. But there are many ways to get our salt back and the Emerging (not Dying) Church is finding them. This is the Gospel – the Good News.

You may know that eating salt all by itself is not really what salt is about. It is a seasoning that brings out the flavors of OTHER ingredients. It enhances only when it is combined with something else.

Getting our salt back would mean organizing and measuring our lives differently – looking at how our ideas and energies and spirits influence and lift up the lives of others – measuring the depth of our spiritual growth and social justice commitments rather than the number of people in the room – counting the places (including online places) we have had a positive impact rather than counting the empty chairs in the room.

Suzy Kassem, born in Toledo, Ohio in 1975, is an American author, filmmaker, philosopher, cultural critic, essayist, and poet of Egyptian descent. And she has this to say about salt – and a bunch of other ingredients:

Everybody has a little bit of the sun and moon in them. Everybody has a little bit of man, woman, and animal in them. Darks and lights in them. Everyone is part of a connected cosmic system. Part earth and sea, wind and fire, with some salt and dust swimming in them. We have a universe within ourselves that mimics the universe outside. None of us are just black or white, or never wrong and always right. No one. No one exists without polarities. Everybody has good and bad forces working with them, against them, and within them.

PART SUN AND MOON

She points out that each of us is a miniature version of the universe – with all the ingredients of the universe within us. And it is in our encounters with one another that these particles are enhanced and reshaped and become a force to be reckoned with. It is in our going out and our coming back together – repeatedly – that we discover our purpose, find our village(s), bring in the Kin-dom – which my Dad will tell you is definitely the KINGdom – that Jesus was talking about.

Jesus had salt – people. And he never sat around in a synagogue wishing for things to happen. He went to places where people existed already and stirred things up. He restored himself by withdrawing with his Disciples – or alone – to a remote place – and then came back – to the city, the town, the countryside – where people lived their lives and longed for spicy miracles.

Our three churches – when we meet and conspire together – we are full of spicy miracles. The Law of the Power of One indicates that we can accomplish culture shift wherever we are – change lives – improve conditions – bring meaning and depth – keep the planet alive – one person, one tree at a time. We may be tired – but when we come together with God’s tabernacle in the center of Camp – we will be restored and readied for the next challenge.

A suggestion for today: as we gather for our potluck – try salting tables with a mixture of people from different churches. Sit and eat with people you’ve never met before – and think up ideas for how we might Be the UCC together rather than separately. It’s just an idea. Let’s see if we come up with some spicy miracles – all of us together – with God camped out among us and Jesus singing his heart out.

Scripture Reading for Sunday August 14, 2016 – Pentecost 14 – Year C

The Gospel of Matthew 5:13-16

13 ‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

14 ‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.