

A Declaration of Interdependence

A Sermon Preached on July 3, 2016 at the First Congregational Church
(UCC) of Winchester, Massachusetts

By the Rev. Dr. Ken Orth

“We must delight in each other. Make others conditions our own. Laugh together. Weep together. Always having before our eyes our community, as members of the same body.”

These words of John Winthrop, the first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony were spoken in 1630, nearly 150 years before the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776. Although these ideas were lived out in a flawed way, the vision held by Winthrop and those first Puritans were patterned after the words of Jesus when he prayed, “that they may all be one”, our motto in the United Church of Christ. (John 17)

Independence can be a wonderful thing. To be free of that which is holding you back, pressing you down, or oppressing you opens the world in incredible ways. Tomorrow we celebrate the wonderful freedom of independence here in our country.

We must also realize, however, there are limits to how good independence can be. We need to remember that underneath all there is a very real and essential interdependence. Human beings were not made to exist in isolation. There is always an impact from the other, a global interconnection made more evident in our recognition of the pollution of the planet or carbon usage affecting our global whole.

There is a movement in healthy living from dependence to independence. But that is not to be the end of the journey. There is to be a further maturing movement to interdependence. Here we recognize the “I/me/mine” moves on to the “we/us/ours.” The Lord’s Prayer does not say, “Give *me* this day *my* daily bread,” nor “lead *me* not into temptation, but deliver *me* from evil”. No, it says “Give *us* this day *our* daily bread” and “lead *us* not into temptation, but deliver *us* from evil.” We pray, we live, we hope for, we delight in the common good.

In order for us to recognize our unity instead of only our differences, we are asked to do the hard work of listening, of holding back on our blaming or scapegoating. We are to take responsibility for our own actions and behaviors instead of looking for someone or something outside of ourselves to blame. As the Prayer of St. Francis reminds us, we are to seek “not so much to be understood as to understand.” We are to find the Common Ground for our Common Good.

All this asks us to be ready to let go of our constant need to be “right” and to allow for others input so we may understand the complexities and realities of life. The great Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai puts it this way in his poem, “From the Place Where We are Right”:

“From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.
The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.
But doubts and loves
Dig up our world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.”

Our lectionary Psalm for this Sunday, Psalm 30, points us to a vision that helps us hold on when our lives seem to have fallen apart. When the ways in which we have been “right” have come to their limits. The pain of something old falling apart invites our soul to listen at a deeper level. The mystics describe this chaos as fire, darkness, death, emptiness, abandonment, and trial. Whatever it is, it does not feel like God. Here is when we need each other most, to offer patience, guidance and love. We need the freedom to let go instead of tightening our controls and attempts at certainty. We need to allow the “place where we are right” to be “dug up by doubts and loves” so new flowers will eventually be able to grow.”

Transformation includes a disconcerting reorientation. Change can either help us to find a new meaning. Or it can cause us to close down and turn bitter. The difference is determined by the quality and reality of our inner life, our communal life in the Spirit. The spiritual life attests to the reality of transformation as hope born again from the places of despair and loss.

As a community led by Jesus, we accompany one another through these times of insecurity and risk. “Shoulds” and “oughts” don’t really help. They just increase the shame, guilt, pressure, and likelihood of hiding out. It is the deep “yeses” that carry us through. The “Yes” of God, the “Yes” of another willing to sit with us in the silence, the “Yes” of focusing on something we absolutely believe in, we are committed to. These help us wait it out. Love wins over guilt any day. It is sad that we settle for the short-run effectiveness of shaming or scaring people instead of the long-term life benefits of grace-filled transformation. We are able to declare together that grace alone saves us. Looking in this rear-view mirror fills us with gratitude for God’s work in our lives. And we have the courage to take the next step forward.

In our Declaration of Interdependence we recognize the worth of all human beings, the worth of all of creation that God has given us along with the command to live together in peace.

So today we celebrate our unity in the Body of Christ at this table, where all are welcome.

Jesus has broken down all barriers by his taking into himself all of humanity—all of creation.

Here we are *free* to participate in that One Body.

Here we are *free* to stop seeing ourselves in isolation from each other or from God.

Here we are *free* to be embraced by a fierce and gentle Love, offering us the courage to live into a strong and immersive loyalty to all our sisters and brothers, indeed to our whole world of which each of us is a beloved member.

“We must delight in each other. Make others conditions our own. Laugh together. Weep together. Always having before our eyes our community, as members of the same body.” Amen.