

What is Truth?
March 20, 2008 Blog Entry in UCCNY Crossroads
By Regional Conference Minister Rick Cowles

On this Maundy Thursday night of celebration amidst gathering shadows, of doubt, betrayal and trial, Pilate's question of Jesus (John 18:38) begs continual consideration.

I've been thinking about the truth a good deal lately and how it is being played out in light of national events regarding the UCC.

And so, I've been thinking about the UCC, about racism, about our covenantal responsibilities and freedoms, about our duty to preach the gospel even and especially when it's not popular or comfortable to hear.

I've been thinking about one of our UCC pastors, Jeremiah Wright, and one of our congregations, Trinity UCC.

I've been thinking about the ignorant, innocent and not-so-ignorant distortions of our denomination, and of all churches for that matter in the media, in pulpits and in the halls of Congress. And I've been thinking about how to respond, how to set the record straight, how to help pastors and our people in the pews to respond.

I've been forwarding various statements, speeches, newspaper articles and editorial comments about all of this in blog postings and emails. Yesterday I received an email asking what my thoughts were. Well, here goes. My thoughts! I want you to recognize that what I am about to say are my thoughts. They don't represent any official resolution by any UCC church body. They're my thoughts.

Pilate asked Jesus about the truth in response to Jesus' own assertion that he had come to testify to it and that those who belonged to the truth would be able to hear what he had to say. In my more cynical moments I wonder whether (with apologies to Jack Nicholson's character in the movie "A Few Good Men") if any one can stand the truth or listen to it!

Still, I know that people have been wondering about the truth. Is Jeremiah Wright a racist? Is he a hater? Was Barak Obama present when Dr. Wright made any of his most inflammatory comments? Regardless of whether he was present or not, did he have occasion to proclaim his disagreement with his pastor? Is the UCC and John Thomas doing enough to support both Trinity UCC and Jeremiah Wright through the barrage of negative stories in the media?

My answer to each of these questions is, "I don't know." My guess is that Jeremiah Wright is not a racist. He has strong opinions about race and racial justice. No doubt. I am not comfortable personally with some of the language that he used from the pulpit. I don't think that I have ever sworn while preaching (although I do admit to screaming an expletive or two when I've hit my thumb with a hammer or when I've hit "delete" without

saving first). But I get the point of what he was saying. And, I understand the truth of it.

"What!" you say. Yes, I understand the truth of what he was saying about our national "chickens" coming home to roost. And, I also understand what he was saying as he shouted God's views of events. I think that he was too lurid and over the top. I think that he left himself wide open to the criticism that has been leveled against him. It sounds absolutely unpatriotic to say what he said. Yet, what I say is that it may be and it may not be.

From the standpoint of present day versions of patriotism where "God Bless America" is sung in the place of "Take me out to the ball game" during the seventh inning stretch it is very unpatriotic. But from the standpoint of people of faith who desire to hold our country accountable to the truths that we hold to be self evident, it may be the height of patriotism.

In thinking about the news clips that have been shown of Jeremiah Wright's sermons I hear the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Dr. Wright's namesake, Jeremiah. These prophets pulled no punches when it came to commenting on the political, diplomatic and religious events of the day. They understood that when something bad happened to Israel it was usually due to Israel's faithlessness in relation to the covenant that they had with God.

Read through the first 12 chapters of Isaiah. You'll come across several passages that are full of promise (the ones read during Advent). More you'll find rantings and railings against Israel's faithlessness.

"Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the LORD, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged! ...When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." Isaiah 1:4,15-17

Later in chapter 10 Isaiah called Assyria the rod of God's anger against Israel. This is treasonous stuff to many, to those that can only see the interests of the nation. Yet it is the height of faithfulness for all who desire their nation to follow the precepts of God. Jeremiah is even more blatant in his condemnation of Israel. Even Jesus knew how our behavior as individuals and as nations and cultures can come back to haunt us in real time.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate." (Matt. 23:37)

Was Jeremiah Wright being prophetic in this way? I think he was trying to be. I think he seeks to place himself in this tradition of speaking out for the justice that God wants for all of God's people. I think that he has succeeded in being prophetic and in calling out for justice. It's not easy to hear such a message. We probably wouldn't want to spend an afternoon tea with any prophet of either the Old Testament or 21st century variety when they're on one of their tirades. But I find that I need to acknowledge that the tirade as it is of God has truth in it.

The truth comes because the tirade is a call for repentance. When we have sought our own interests over the interests of God's justice, when we have promoted our own good over the common good, we are in need of repentance. God's prophets call us to repentance.

I've also been thinking about the lies that have been fomented, knowingly or unknowingly, about Trinity and the entire denomination. Some syndicated radio talk show hosts have stated that Trinity is an independent, cult not affiliated with any denomination. Of course, this is absolutely false. Trinity is a full member of the United Church of Christ, the largest of our churches in terms of membership and in terms of giving to Our Churches' Wider Mission.

And, I've been thinking about our covenant as a denomination. I hope that every one has been praying for the Trinity United Church of Christ, a part of the fellowship, ministry and mission that we share as members of the United Church of Christ. I hope that every one has been praying for our brother, Jeremiah Wright. No one deserves to be vilified as he has been vilified, especially as he has been faithfully fulfilling his call to ministry on behalf of the whole Church.

Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (Jn. 8:31-32)

Knowing the truth comes from living and speaking up for the truth. What is truth? Perhaps it is this simple: that God loves us, and wants us to love each other as we love ourselves.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. (Ps. 51:10-12)

Blessings,

Rick Cowles