

Remember, Restore, Renew by Sharon Hammill
Sunday, September 7, 2008 – Elon Community Church, UCC

Remember when??? Gas was 50 cents a gallon? The movies were 35 cents and 6 Pepsi Bottle tops? (maybe cheaper if you were before my time!) All the stores were closed on Sundays? Church was a center of both spiritual and social gathering place? Remember when you use to go Sunday School on Sunday Morning before worship...If you were a child, you sang songs like Jesus Loves Me or The B-I-B-L-E, read Bible scriptures, acted out those great stories of the Bible like Joseph and the Coat of Many Colors?

Remember when the tradition of Rally Day started if you are in the tradition of the Congregational Christian or United Church of Christ? Rally Day is tradition that gathers or rallies back into church after the summer filled with warm days, beach, lake, or mountain vacations. Rally Day which we now call Celebration Sunday in this congregation is a time to restore our traditions of church of the past, and renew our commitment to the programs of the church.

Our Old Testament scripture is about remembering, restoring, and renewing. For you see, God wants Moses to get the people out of Egypt. He sends those plagues and nothing seems to work to get Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. God then sends this 10th plague which is the worst. Kate Huey recalls in her reflections on this scripture of the time when she was a child and saw the movie “The Ten Commandments.” She says “A vivid memory from childhood television viewing is the scene that always terrified me during my family’s annual viewing of the classic movie ‘The Ten Commandments’ the angel of death passing over Egypt, killing every firstborn, bringing tragedy to every Egyptian household, including Pharaoh himself, but leaving the Jewish people untouched. The young son of Pharaoh, a little boy, lying dead on a bier, with a father over him, a broken man....You knew that finally, the great king (the fearsome Yul Brynner) would listen to Yahweh’s demand, delivered by Moses (the formidable Charlton Heston) to ‘let my people go.’ With this kind of material no wonder it’s a classic film” How many of you remember this scene? I know I do. It really was quite brutal for those first born children of Egypt. I think the scene that Kate describes is one where I probably hid my eyes or covered my ears for the sound of death that followed of those being killed by the angel of death. (Huey, 1)

Our text today, however lays out the way the Israelites are suppose to prepare to leave Egypt. Instructions are given on when --on the tenth of this month. Each household is to take a lamb without blemish and if a household is too small it joins with another household. Instructions are given on how to prepare the meat—roasted not boiled or raw. The blood is to be put over the doorpost and in the lintel of the houses. It is to be eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Eat it hurriedly and what is left in the morning is to be burned. God then reveals why they are to this because he will Passover the homes that have blood but will kill the firstborn of both humans and animals in the land of Egypt. God goes on to tell them that this will be a day of remembrance for them and for generations to come.

This text is one that many scholars and commentators describe God or Yahweh as the Redeemer of the people of Israel. He brings them out of Egypt and away from the gods of Egypt that they have been subject to while in slavery. One commentator says

“Yahweh’s liberation of the Israelites is understood by the text to be a liberation of the people from the power that which pretends to stand in God’s place.” (Huey, 2) God takes them to a new place to help restore their relationship, faith, and trust in God.

Of course in our Christian heritage we remember the significance of the Passover Meal. Jesus gathered with his disciples that one last time at Passover and shared the bread and cup as a remembrance of his time on earth and how he is still with us today.

Remember, restore, renew...How does the Israelites struggle for freedom, that important Passover Meal, and its remembrance speak to us as church today? What can we possibly get from this text? We are not Jewish..

God teaches us it is important to remember the past. Today is Christian Education Sunday as designated by our church calendar. So it is a time to remember our past. Now if you are visiting with us today, are relatively new in the church, you may not be aware of the “past” of this church as I wasn’t since I have only been here since last November. So this week I asked the guidance of a former Christian Education Director, read up on some “history” from a book of “100 Years of Elon Community Church” and got some interesting facts about remembering our church’s history. For you see, students who are with us today, that this church actually started across the street on the campus of Elon College. It started in the administration building that housed a chapel in 1891 where it was called Elon College Christian Church. In 1923, the building burned and the church met at a Masonic Hall and the public school building until Whitley Auditorium was completed in 1924. The congregation felt it was important for the community to understand they were invited to be part of the church so they included “Community” to their name. Services were then held in the auditorium. I asked members Kay Elder and Jean Toms what they remembered about Sunday School. They said they remembered having to go to Sunday School in the Religion Building which was the Mooney building. They remembered Pilgrim Fellowship which was the name of the Youth Group. When I asked Louis Wilkins who was a Christian Education Director in the church, he said that Elon had a Christian Education Major and that the Sunday School Classes were set so they were a practicum for the Christian Education majors.

Once the church obtained the Parish House, Sunday school classes were held there. There were four rooms upstairs set up for Sunday School. They held Rally Day in the fall as time for folks to celebrate coming back to church after summer vacations and activities grew to a close. In 1959 this sanctuary was built and in 1976 the Education Wing was built. When looking at this history book I also saw huge Vacation Bible Schools in 1968 and 1969. I discovered that music ministries have always been a part of this congregation. This church has a rich culture and heritage.

I asked Louis who were some of the memorable teachers and he said Lois Bost, Mary Louise Boyd always kept nursery, Gene Lankford was longtime Sunday School Superintendent, and Biff Brafford was another notable teacher. I am sure if I poll some of you longtime members, you too can name someone who was instrumental in your spiritual growth in this church. Not to mention Rev. Bill Andes who I say in these photos of this book appears to be a much younger man. Saints present and saints gone before us who were instrumental in our spiritual growth, in our Christian Education and Christian formation...Teaching us what we are to be in renewing our hope, our faith and our love of God who delivers us each day from the distractions of the world around us.

Remembering where we came from as a congregation. We came from across the street to this location. We came together ever ready to grow and to change as the need arose. Restoring our faith in God that God would lead us through the next phase in each of our moves. Gerald Janzen writes concerning our scripture for today and its message concerning the unleavened bread: “We commonly understand that the people were to be ready to leave quickly, so there was no time for the bread to rise. But the unleavened bread also relates to the Israelites who now understood themselves to be a people both “new” and yet still “deeply rooted in their social and religious past.” First, Janzen explains how yeast works, with a ‘seed’ element that carries over from the old reminds the people, including us today, that there are ‘respects in which new can become the new only if it brings forward no element of yeast from the old.’” Janzen provides challenging reflection for the life of each local congregation and the United Church of Christ as a whole. As we move to the future, knowing ourselves a people formed by God, descended from a people of faith, it is imperative to be careful about what we bring with us on our way, not to allow ‘old jealousies and animosities to contaminate new communications.’” (Huey, 2)

So remembering is good, restoring our relationship with God is where we need to go, but we also need to renew who we are as a people of God, as community of faith working to show the love God to all we meet—in our congregation, in our community, in our workplace and in our world. Taking that “new” element ready to meet the challenges of a changing world, a changing economy, a changing society, and planting new ways of spiritual growth and using our calls, our ministries to plant new seeds of God’s love and hope throughout the world. I know in my home church, and I have not run into it as much in this church, the popular line was “We have always done it that way, we can’t change” or “Back in the 60’s we had 50 young people here for Pilgrim Fellowship” I know what worked in the past, worked in the past, but remember my opening, when I said “remember when Church was the spiritual and social gathering for families.” Well folks unfortunately it’s not anymore...it’s time to renew and become a new element for Christ. The conversation continuing for this new building, the Spiritual Life Center, on this property with all its great potential for new programs—an expanded drama ministry, alternative style worship services, possibly a new playschool for the community...new opportunities for more spiritual growth and Christian Education and formation opportunities, not just for this congregation for but for this community. What a great way to renew our relationship with God and our Faith in God!

So as I close I want us to remember our past, where we have been and who has helped shape our spiritual growth and how our faith has been shaped. I want us to restore our faith, hope and love and God. I want us to take this time to renew our spirit. What can we do “new” to renew that spirit—join a new study group in the church, participate in one of the ministries, join a board or committee when asked later this year, or just be committed to worshipping with us on Sunday morning...let’s celebrate in renewing our love God through Christ in all we do!

Works Cited:

Huey, Kathryn Matthews. “Sermon Seeds, Twenty Third Sunday, Ordinary Time, September 7, 2008” www.ucc.org/worship/samuel