

**“Coming Together”** © Rev. Dr. Karen Smith Sellers  
48th Annual Meeting Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ  
Texts: Acts 1: 1-9

Please pray with me. Come Holy Spirit to guide and inspire our speaking and listening. Embrace us and equip us, so that we may be faithful “witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth” and back, in Christ’s name, Amen.

What a joy and blessing it is to look out over this room! Throughout the year I begin pulpit greetings with these words: “Grace and peace to you on behalf of the 137 local churches and over 30,000 members of the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ – from Ada to Zumbrota, International Falls to Fairmont . . .” Now, here we have embodied in one gathered community: Ada and Zumbrota, International Falls and Fairmont.

Local church pastors have the privilege of gathering with the congregations they serve week after week. As Conference Minister I have this opportunity **far less frequently** – usually only once or twice a year. I cherish it.

The truth is that a conference is quite a different entity than a local church. Most days a conference is sustained more as a concept than as a lived reality. Hawaii Conference Minister, Charles Buck, is right when he says that we **need** to come together like this because it **makes real** our unity in Christ. To be united and uniting as a people and church is not something that happens in our heads or hearts or by our good intentions, but **only** when we live it out, practice it, and put it into action in the very real company and companionship of one another.<sup>1</sup> May it be so, Amen!

Most days it seems easier to be mindful of our **differences** – metro Twin Cities vs. greater Minnesota, large church vs. small church, religiously conservative vs. theologically progressive, growing vs. declining: you name the polarities. But as we gather this weekend we are reminded of our **common calling** to be Christ’s witnesses to the ends of the earth. And as we anticipate sharing Holy Communion we know that we are indeed **one Body**. Say with me, please, “Amen.”

As you likely know, The Book of Acts, whose opening verses we have just heard, comes to us from the author of The Gospel of Luke and is its sequel. Enthusiasts of the bestselling Stieg Larsson novels might view The Book of Acts as comparable to The Girl Who Played with Fire. And sometimes it seems equally implausible. It is, in fact, a book that tells of a **people “on fire,”** with a passion fueled by the Holy Spirit. As its title implies, it is all about **acts**: conversions; healings; trials; death by stoning; a shipwreck on a stormy sea; even an earthquake-assisted escape from prison! In the few verses we just heard, there’s one amazing act and the promise of another. Those closest to Jesus are told that something called “the Holy Spirit” will descend on them. Then, Jesus ascends into heaven! These are not exactly everyday occurrences.

In the midst of all these **extraordinary** activities, it is easy to overlook a less obvious **act** described right in the middle of the passage: **“When they came together.”**

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Charles Buck, Hawaii Conference Minister, in the Hawaii Conference newsletter.

I have tried to imagine that event. Where are the disciples? What does the scene look like? What picture is in your mind?

Think about the jumble of emotions that must have been swirling around! Eugene Peterson's contemporary language translation, The Message, renders the text: "When they were together **for the last time**," calling to mind the piercing feelings of a final farewell to a beloved family member or friend. Do you know these feelings?

Here was this motley crew – a few fishermen, at least one tax collector, and others with unknown occupations – who for at least a month have been on a spiritual rollercoaster ride. Said some, "We **had hoped** he was the Messiah," –**past** perfect tense – and then they encountered the living Christ: dashed dreams, renewed hopes. Another **doubted** Jesus' resurrection, thought the other disciples delusional and mad with grief – and then, put fingers in the nail holes of his palms and sides, and believed immediately: skepticism, then conversion.

It's worth remembering that the disciples' entire time together had been only about a thousand days. Let's be honest. In Minnesota, the land of God's "frozen chosen," where reception of newcomers comes with **glacial** slowness, the disciples would still just be getting to know one another! And take into account the way all of them had dropped everything to follow Jesus in the first place. There's clear evidence of their impulsiveness.

So, how are they handling this event? It merits being amazed that now, instead of arguing – which they often did, or threatening to bolt – which seems a reasonable enough option, **they hold fast to one another**. They **come together** and stay together.

In the action-packed book that is The Acts, this **coming together**, though easy to ignore, seems core. Again and again the disciples **come together**. In fellowship with one another and with those they baptize, they study and pray and teach and break bread **together**. Their energies, travels and writings are devoted to making new disciples and then to supporting and sustaining them as they come **together** in Christian communities. Read Paul's epistles!

It's equally amazing that we **come together**. We, too, have been on a bit of a spiritual rollercoaster ride – alternatively screaming or holding our breath through the ups and downs of navigating the route to a sustainable future for Pilgrim Point Camp. We, too, are enduring the stormy and uncharted seas of dramatic changes in the church. The truth is that these days United Church of Christ conferences – whose core identity and purpose involve coming together and staying together – swim against a cultural tide.

We live in a time when anger and fanaticism flourish. Indeed, this year columnist and commentator David Brooks has a single rule of thumb for who will win an election – the one with the most extreme position. Civil discourse is increasingly rare. Why else would Sojourners need to promote a "covenant for civility," signed by many religious leaders, including our own UCC General Minister and President, Rev. Geoffrey Black?

Astounding avenues of social networking notwithstanding, aloneness is on the rise. Forty years ago Philip Slater warned in The Pursuit of Loneliness that as we Americans sought more and more privacy . . . we felt more and more alienated and lonely. Just how alienated and lonely was revealed recently in the GSS findings that one quarter of American's surveyed reported that there is no one – **no one** – with

whom they discuss important matters.<sup>2</sup> We chatter incessantly on an endless array of technological devices, but we have fewer and fewer people with whom we can talk substantively.

Michael Sandel, Harvard professor and author of *Justice*, worries that privatization has another pernicious effect: “The rich and the poor,” he asserts, “live increasingly separate lives.”

The affluent send their children to private schools ... leaving ... public schools to the children of families [with] no alternative. Private health clubs replace municipal recreation centers and swimming pools. Upscale residential communities hire private security guards and rely less on public police protection. A second or third car removes the need to rely on public transportation. ... **The affluent secede from public places and services, leaving them to those who cannot afford anything else.**<sup>3</sup>

We live in a time when people claim to be “spiritual, but not religious” – where each individual finds her or his own pathway to God, and most prefer to avoid the messiness of faith communities where they would have to be in ongoing relationships with people they did not choose and may not particularly like.

In today’s world, *coming together* and staying together is – oddly enough – a prophetic act. To paraphrase theologian Walter Brueggemann, coming together involves evoking, nourishing, and living from a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.<sup>4</sup>

The heart of the faith of a Christian is life-in-community. Scholars tell us that the very word religion derives from *re-ligare* – ie., to bind together or connect. It involves *coming together*. For us, it includes gathering at font, pulpit and table.<sup>5</sup>

That the Desert Fathers of third century Christianity knew this is captured well in their saying, “If you see a young monk **by his own will** climbing up into heaven, take him by the foot and throw him to the ground, because what he is doing is not good for him.”<sup>6</sup> And contemporary Lutheran minister Heidi Neumark, who helps those in the troubled South Bronx of New York City bear the unbearable together, knows its continuing rightness. She rehearses to her beloved community this Hasidic tale. A disciple asked his rabbi the meaning of community one evening when they were gathered round a fireplace.

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<sup>2</sup> Jacqueline Olds and Richard Schwartz, *The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the Twenty-First Century*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Sandel, *Justice*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Garoux, 2009, p. 266.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2001, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Clyde Steckel, *New Ecclesiology and Polity*, Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2009, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> From Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 47 – quoted in Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, New York: Harper Collins, 2009, p. 89.

“The rabbi sat in silence while the fire died down to a pile of glowing coals. Then he got up and took one coal out from the pile and set it apart on the stone hearth. **Its fire and warmth soon died out.**”<sup>7</sup>

We **come together** to study and pray and worship and break bread because these keep the fire of our faith alive. We come together to study and pray and worship and break bread because these comings together push “vigorously against [our] pretense, ego, pride, self-serving . . . and all the other postures that come so easily to us [as] humans.”<sup>8</sup>

But *coming together* is not the last word, and the disciples knew it. Immediately they wondered, “What next?” Hoping for a predictable, long- expected future, they asked, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

The answer they received, the very last words from Jesus, made clear that things were not going to go as they assumed. Quickly they realized that they stood at the precipice of a bewildering future, that theirs was to be new exodus – into unknown territory, through a wilderness of uncertainty in fulfillment of a much broader mandate. Jesus said: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”

The disciples’ **coming together** was for a purpose. It was so that they could become agents of **the “great coming together”** – the re-gathering and re-uniting of the whole human family and the entire created order in[to] the great eschatological community.<sup>9</sup> That’s what The Book of Acts is all about. That’s why Luke writes about tax collectors and sinners, relationship with Samaritans, the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch, and the mission to the Gentiles.

And that’s why we come together. We, too, stand at the precipice of a bewildering future and are invited on an exodus into unknown territory. We, too, may expect to endure a wilderness of uncertainty.

To be sure, we come together to discuss important matters with civility. We come to study and pray and worship and break bread.

But ultimately we come together for the same reason Christians always have – to involve ourselves in dismantling every dividing wall of hostility, to proclaim that in truth there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female – for all are one in Christ Jesus.

We come together because for more than fifty years our forebears in the United Church of Christ have focused our attention on Jesus’ prayer “that they may all be one.” We come together because that’s what folks who are part of a united and uniting church do.

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<sup>7</sup> Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2003, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Noll, “Deep and Wide” how my life has changed, *Christian Century*, June 1, 2010, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching Luke-Acts*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000, p. 89.

That's why we will affirm a partnership with our sisters and brothers in the Philippines. That's why we care compassionately about and seek justice for our sisters and brothers who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. That's why we come to learn about global sharing of resources, faithful responses to climate change, how to be an anti-racist church, and ways to support comprehensive immigration reform.

If you followed Dick Fylling's wonderful weekly Annual Meeting e-blasts you know that he dubbed this "the *other* Great Minnesota Get Together." That it is, indeed. **But it is much so more.**

Thanks be to God who calls us together and gives us the gift of one another and this beloved community. May we respond in gratitude and praise, and may this be an occasion for our inspiration and fortification so that we will go forth from here to be witnesses to God's great coming together, in Christ's name. Amen.