

**United Church of Fayetteville  
310 E. Genesee Street  
Fayetteville, NY 13066**

**May 17, 2009  
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**Epistle Lesson** Romans 12:5-18

So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually, we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

**Charge to the Seekers “CHOOSING COMMUNITY” Romans 12:5-18**

Among the many, many questions I was asked this week about this morning's service was, "Where did I want the seekers to sit during worship today – in a group together, or with their families?" Today, seekers, you are making a choice, possibly for the first time in your lives, to enter a community of your own. Because I want you to literally enact that decision when you walk forward in a few moments for the ritual of reception into membership, I opted for you to sit with your families -- households you did not choose, but of which you are a part, by the grace of God.

Choosing community is not a simple act, nor is it one that comes without preparation. As one of you noted in your statement of faith, today is the culmination of your movement from one end of the church school hallway to the other, from pre-school classes, through church school grades, choir practice and worship experiences downstairs and upstairs, Biblemania and mission trips. You have also engaged in a specifically designed seeker process for the last two years to help you discern and articulate your faith; and your readiness to become part of Christ's body in the world in a new way.

Your leaders will talk about some of their activities over this period of time, but I'd like to reflect in another way on this developmental experience. While the curriculum, the information about church history, about the Bible, about our historic faith and contemporary issues and challenges, as well as the experiences of prayer, service and worship are all very important, so too was the underpinning of the whole design – a program built on two pillars: to create for you a safe place in which to ask your questions and explore your faith; and to create an experience that would enable you to form a community of mutual support and challenge. That was as important as any knowledge you acquired or any other experience you had. It is a model for ministry, not for your sakes alone, but for the sake of the whole church, and indeed the whole world.

Throughout the two years, you were exposed to other faith traditions, to Christian faith and theology, to the history and witness of UCF, and to the faith journeys of your parents, your mentors, your leaders and others in the congregation. You read the Bible and you learned the different ways that people read the Bible. In that time, you heard a variety of opinions, strong convictions and passions, questions and doubts; and you learned to express your own. You discovered that: no one knows everything; people have different faith experiences; and no matter how old or young, people have doubts and questions; their faith that has changed over time and is still under construction.

One result of that experience is your extraordinary statements of faith, reflecting our shared historic faith, your own God-given creativity, concerns of our contemporary world, your certainties and your doubts. You may remember that, along with all that variety, I told you that there was only one thing I, as your pastor, expected to see on each and every one of your statements – and that was the date you created it. (Don't worry – Mr. Sweder filled it in:-) The date serves to remind you that your faith will continue to evolve as your experience and your continued involvement in the life, worship and study of faith continues. In the life of faith, confirmation is not a destination, but a departure point for the next leg of your Christian journey.

(And by the way, the seekers' statements of faith, which include essays, art, original photography, blueprints, new text for an old hymn and a flow chart, are displayed in Fellowship Hall and I encourage you to really look at them. Adult Education has invited me to lead some events next year on spiritual growth and our seekers have given me great ideas about what those events will look like – and with whom I'd like to share leadership.)

There is another outcome of your seeker experience. Contrary to popular opinion, “community” isn't a romance story that happens when people are in the same space over a period of time. To create community is to choose to be intentional about working at human relationships. Throughout your time, together you were listened to carefully and you learned to listen to one another: to respect the varied importance of different elements of faith and the differing images that have power for you. And they were quite varied. For some of you it was prayer; some of you mentioned sin, the Virgin Mary, and miracles; for others a burning bush and the commandments came to mind; for some the trinity appeared in words or shapes; for some how Jesus lived was important and for another why he died; for some the care of creation is a powerful call to serve the world; for others being part of the congregation, or considering a relationship with God, and therefore how we relate to others is central. You chose words, shapes, images, music and drawing to express your faith most authentically for you right now. No one among you included all these things, but all of you find your faith in the living stream of Christian belief.

As you worked, studied, discussed, shared glads and sads, you also learned not to judge one another to be more or less Christian, more or less faithful, more or less intelligent, more or less compassionate because of those different convictions, doubts and experiences. Along the way, there were undoubtedly, misunderstandings and disagreement, hurt feelings and confusions. Yet you have survived those things, indeed been made stronger by them. In some ways, you are bound together forever by your experience of these past two years. You have learned by doing that community is created where there is safety to explore ideas, mutual respect and regard, careful listening, a notable lack of judgment, freedom to make mistakes, the grace of forgiveness, and the hard work of reconciliation. That work is not done either.

In choosing community, specifically in choosing to affirm your faith and become part of the body of Christ in the world, you are indicating that your life of faith lives, grows and is nurtured in a community of mutual responsibility and care. Faith is not a thing lived in isolation – not just a “me and Jesus” thing. Further, in specifically choosing to express that faith, witness and ministry through the life of this congregation, when you step forward in a few minutes, you are enlarging your community once again. You have learned and grown together, but you make this decision as individuals. You are pledging to continue the work you have begun, expressing gratitude for your inheritance of faith, continuing to grow in your understanding of who God has created you to be and what Christ calls you to do, and to be active participants in creating a community of safety, regard and respect for all people, whatever their gifts and in the varied expressions of their faith. As has been done for you, now it is your turn to do for others.

This chat is titled a “charge to the seekers”. It is, in fact, a reminder to them of their preparation for this day and, of course, an invitation to all of us for a way of being together in community. Beginning here, beginning now, as we choose community again and again, may we all be instructed by our seekers' experience and witness, as we move forward together with them, in faith, joy, and service.