

Next week is a busy and exciting week for St. Paul's. In case you might have forgotten, next weekend is Labor Day. And Labor Day is such a fantastic opportunity for both the community and the church.

Over the past couple of weeks, I've heard various conversations about which part of Labor Day they look forward to every year: the Labor Day run, the fire department's chili diner, the car show, the Mason's dunk tank, the Lion's chicken dinner, and lunch at St. Paul's. It is great seeing so many of St. Paul's members are involved in the community participating in events other than helping at our food booth.

I think one of the more interesting parts about Labor Day is that it is the only time of year that people know who we are. They are the church that has all the pies. They are the only place that you can still get Carl's Conneys. They used to have a booth downtown by Doc Peters' old place and now they do it down in front of their church.

Those are great descriptions to get people to us for the food booth. But ask people who we are the rest of the year. I've heard people describe us as non-denominational. Obviously that isn't correct. I've been asked if we are Methodist. I've even heard us referred to as "that other Lutheran church".

But that isn't who we are. When I tell people what I'm doing now I often get asked, "What does that mean? What is the UCC?" It comes up a lot in my classes. The instructors don't ask us, "What does the UCC mean to you?", it's the other students in the class saying that they don't understand what and who the UCC is. And that is because many of them are coming from different backgrounds.

To be ordained in the UCC, you have to belong to a local church. You don't have to be a minister at a parish. You can work in different settings. Most of the people in my classes are already ministers in other faiths, but they serve as hospital or hospice chaplains. So, they go to a local UCC church and have become a member so they can better serve their communities. But they don't really know what the UCC is.

The national conference defines us as a church of first and extravagant welcomes. They quote John and Galatians. God speaks through us. And that we are the church where Jesus the healer meets Jesus the revolutionary. But what does that mean? That isn't any clearer.

I've had to answer the question, "what is the UCC?" a lot over the last couple of weeks. Yes, I know the technical answer: in 1957 the Congregational and the Reformed churches came together. But instead I think about how we start every service, "No matter where you are on life's journey you are welcome here." That is what the UCC is to me.

If you look around the church, we are all at a different place in life's journey. We have children that are starting their journey, teenagers that are figuring out how God fits in their lives, families

accepting God's grace and sharing it, or even people starting second careers and finding their places.

We don't worry about how you got here. What we care about is that you made it here. We realize that we are all God's children and that in his eyes that is what matters. We need to be humble and not place ourselves above others.

Pride is based in sin. In our reading from Sirach, we were not meant to be prideful. We were not meant to put ourselves above others. The Lord punishes those who are prideful and rewards those who are humble. He removes those in power, destroys nations, and erases evil from memory.

Today's gospel reading echoes this point. We see that Jesus is attending a dinner and notices how the other dinner guests place themselves around the table. He shares with them the parable of the wedding banquet. He tells them that they shouldn't sit in the position of honor, instead they need to be humble and sit in a lower position. Their host can come and tell them to move up the table and that would be better than for them to be told to move down to another seat. It is better to be exalted instead of embarrassed in front of others.

He also tells the host that when you throw a luncheon or dinner do not invite friends, relatives, or rich neighbors because you think they will repay you in kind. But that you should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, because they can't repay you, but you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

We can feel pride in what we do and how we do it. But we shouldn't make ourselves look better at the expense of others. In the eyes of the Lord, we do not have anything to prove. Our actions are more important than our monetary value or worth. It's what we do for others that matters.

The best part is that we can see how well we do this as a congregation especially next weekend. At one point or another, there has been at least one member from St. Paul's that helps out in all of the events that I mentioned earlier. I know this Labor Day, a number of us will be pulling double duty between here and somewhere else.

We continually show God's love speaking through us. We help others whenever we can, and we don't ask for repayment. We don't worry about who is there to see us. We do it because it's the right thing to do. We do it because that is where we are in life's journey. We do it because we care.