

**“Faithful Courage”**  
**I Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49**  
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**San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ**  
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The very last question I was asked to affirm before becoming ordained was this one: “Will you promise to honor people of all faiths or people of no faith?” Last Monday night I along with 34 others had an opportunity to do just that. I want to say “thank you” to those who were able to join in our field trip to the mosque in Chino Hills. It was such a stimulating evening that I felt we needed time to discuss and reflect on the experience. I’ll begin that reflection with my words this morning, but I hope that as we gather as church, we will continue this discussion because it is an important one. Also, I’ll try to reflect on our shared experience and the experience of our church, The United Church of Christ, as we celebrate its 49th Anniversary today.

A few hours before Monday night’s event I called Tom at his office and told him I was scared to death. I had deliberately chosen *not* to write out my comments which in itself took me way outside my comfort zone, but I had made that choice because I believed that the single most important thing I could do was to be very present in creating relationship, and I knew that meant not reading from a written text. Also, I didn’t know exactly the frame of reference our hosts would be coming from, and I was guessing at what they would be most interested in hearing. It was kind of like a “first date” when one is barely getting to know the other.

"First dates" are very UCC experiences! From its inception the UCC has been about reaching out in *faithful courage* to “the other.” Sometimes it’s been asking the question: “What can we do together *with* brothers and sisters of other denominations? How can we respect others in the world who are so very different than we are? How can we live in peace within a whole world held within the embrace of a loving God.” Relationships are hard work. They take time. They require humility and forgiveness. Perhaps God’s hand is at work in our world which now forces us to step outside our comfort zone and be in relationship with many others who look, think, and believe differently from what we are accustomed to or understand. This takes *faithful courage*.

It was very clear that our hosts were grateful that we had come to visit them. It must be very hard to be a *progressive* Muslim in today’s world. Like Christianity, Islam has many denominations, and the ones we hear the most about are quite radical. Our new acquaintances wanted us to be clear that the Koran teaches peaceful coexistence, and their Islamic Movement is pacifist. Just like we share some common history with Christians who believe God tells them to kill doctors who perform abortions; they share common history with some Muslims who also do bad things. But just as not all Christians are the same, not all Muslims are the same.

One of the intriguing questions of the evening had to do with what I thought about the Trinity. I explained that the Trinity is not found as a doctrine in the Bible, but it is a later construct of the early church to help us know God. Afterwards, Stan explained to Topher and me how the Trinity was a metaphor that was well known in the ancient world. The actors would often play three parts with a mask for each of the parts. The Trinity is derived from a Latin word meaning “persona”. We talk about the Trinity not because we find the word in the Bible but because we

long to understand all about God, and it is a way to see the roles of God reflected in the persons of Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit.

On the way home from our field trip I worried that in some way I might have come across as minimizing Jesus in order to not offend our hosts. I want to be clear that for me, I find revealed through Jesus the God in whom I believe and from whom I learn how God wants me to live and to be in the world. One example of this became clearer as the evening went on and Babs, thanks be to God, asked the question of where their women were. The women were in a separate room behind us. They watched our discussion through a closed circuit television. They had no voice in the discussion. I don't believe Jesus would have stood for that! Jesus saw God's reign in its truest formation to be inclusive of all, especially those whom others would have separated out such as women the women of the mosque.

Their spiritual leaders are very respectful of women, and they've treated me with utmost respect, but it seems clear to me (at least at this point in my learning from them) that women belong in a special but separate category. For me this is an area in which I respectfully disagree. But *faithful courage* means we can be our own persons without putting the other down or insisting that they come to our way of thinking, post haste. Our self-worth comes not from the fact that "my beliefs are better than your beliefs" but my self-worth comes from God who calls me and all creation *beloved*. Children often engage in putting other kids down because they seek to form their identity and the only way they know how to feel good about themselves is at the expense of others. But we are grownups, and we don't have to go there. God calls God's creation *good*, and that is the source of our life and our hope. The best way that we can witness to the truth as we know it is not so much to proclaim it as to live it, and to openly model the reign of God for everyone.

The shepherd boy David took his slingshot and a few stones and defeated the greatest power of his time in the ancient world. It was his skill as a shepherd who empowered him to shepherd the people of Israel into the high point of their history as a nation. This story speaks to issues of true power. David refused the best military gear King Saul could give him. It was too big and too bulky. He couldn't move in it. He took a risk to be faithful the only way he knew how--with his slingshot and a few stones. The form of power that the UCC has tried to adopt is the power of relationships. It requires us to take risks in pursuit of being in relationship.

After 14 hours of travel and so many flight changes I can't remember how many, I made it home at 2 this morning. As I sat on the plane in Denver for the final leg of the journey, I knew I had to make some kind of arrangements to get from LAX home. So with the trusty cell phone (thanks be to God!) I called information and asked for Airport Shuttle Express and was connected to Hamer who gave me his cell phone number and said to call when we touched down. I was greeted by a nice looking young man, clearly a foreigner, with a new Lincoln Town car. I admit to being uneasy getting into an unmarked taxi with someone I didn't know, but I was exhausted, so I climbed in. There was silence the first few minutes, but finally I decided to engage Hamer in conversation. First I learned my driver was not Hamer but "Abe" and he was from Morocco. Hamer, his uncle, was tired and went to bed so he'd turned the job over to Abe. We had a pleasant talk between LAX and Claremont, and over the course of the trip I could feel myself move from fear to trust.

I believe that faithful courage in the life of our UCC means to participate in relationships that make the peace, the wellness, and the harmony of God's reign on earth become a more visible. We live *in the midst of new dimensions* any time we rise and stand with *faithful courage* to the still speaking God who is always leading us to where the eagles soar. May we take our place humbly, powerfully, and with *faithful courage* to God's vision of shalom, "the kingdom of God, which is the reign of God, which is God." AMEN