

The United Church of Christ has created a library of videos where people tell their personal stories of being saved when they found a UCC church practicing unconditional and inclusive love.

Sean from Connecticut tells of a friend who had gone through a painful divorce only hear that his church did not accept divorce and he would have to leave. Being told he was no longer welcome began years of deep hurt and rejection by the church and feeling distanced from God. At a time when he most needed strong spiritual support, this rejection compounded the pain he already felt from his divorce and he stepped away from church for many years.

Finally, one Sunday he went to Sean's church. Sitting in worship tears began to run as he said to Sean, "Is it always like this? Am I just here on one special Sunday? Is the welcome always this warm?" Sean replied, "No, today isn't special, this is how our welcome always is." That provided an opportunity to welcome back one who had been deeply distanced from God. Sean closes the video saying, "knowing he was welcome healed my friend."

In another segment, Bruce begins, "I was a poor black man, living on the streets and into drugs." The UCC showed me God's unconditional love. They didn't look at my clothing or whatever, they just showed me I can't do it alone. I need God, and with God's help I have been clean for 7 years." The church didn't focus on my shortcomings they just kept finding new ways to show me how God loved me unconditionally. God put me in the right place and if we listen, God will put all of us in the right place."

In Thessalonians today, we hear Paul speaks about the suffering he has overcome to continue in his work of sharing the good news...

He writes, "but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition..." he continues, "... But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become so very dear to us."

It is as if Paul is saying, no matter what we face, God expects something better of us than simply allowing our circumstances to dictate who and what we become. We hear this in Sean's story when his friend finds the courage to give church a try again after such pain, we hear it in Bruce's story of overcoming addiction and poverty. And we hear this in Paul's story, he could have easily given up when facing such mistreatment.

This idea of sharing not only the gospel, but ourselves, is at the center of Christian Stewardship. Today is Stewardship Commitment Sunday. I am deeply grateful to those of you who have made a commitment to God through our annual pledge drive, and I am grateful to those who will do so today, and in the weeks to come. I pray we all consider how we might make a commitment to God, to share ourselves with one another, the community and world around us.

But, each year, as Commitment Sunday nears, I always find myself pondering a question. How does a person move from thanksgiving to God, to the kind of deep commitment such as Paul is speaking about? How do we move from gratitude to God for saving us and redeeming us from rejection, from sin, from wasting our gift and turn that into a steadfast commitment throughout a year, or a lifetime? I think it has something to do with sharpening our spiritual edge...

When I hear of Paul's strength to claim the good news in the face of such hostility, I think of developing our spiritual edge. You might recall a daily devotional from the UCC, written by Rev. Anthony Robinson, called "Being Convicted." The author speaks of the experience a worshipper has of being "convicted." It's a description of those times we leave worship thinking, "you were talking about me, preacher. You got my number." And it doesn't only happen in worship. Being Convicted is an act of the Holy Spirit as God's word tunes itself directly to our personal, current circumstances. Preachers experience this as well as we all stand together under the power of God's word.

Rev. Robinson writes, "Simply standing up every Sunday saying, 'God loves you' over, and over, and over, while it is true, can dull our spiritual edge."

Being Convicted is an important, though sometimes difficult experience. It may call us to big changes in life, call us to repentance, call us to forgiveness, call us to vulnerability, call us to make peace with an enemy or more. But Rev. Robinson reminds us our spiritual edge sharpens sharp when, at least occasionally, we hear "God loves you so much that God expects something better of you."

Psalm 116 describes the spiritual edge well, I can picture ancient people singing this in worship, "I'm striding in the presence of God, alive in the land of the living! I stayed faithful, though bedeviled, and despite a ton of bad luck. I stayed faithful despite giving up on the human race, saying, 'they're all liars and cheats.'"

What can I give back to God for the blessings poured out on me? I'll lift high the cup of salvation...I'll pray in the name of God; I'll complete what I promised to do, and I'll do it together with God's people... Oh, God, here I am, your servant; set me free for your service!"

Amen