

Today, I'd like to do something a little different in this sermon time. Maybe it's a lot different. When I finish, you might even say, well that was interesting but it wasn't a sermon. I'm willing to take that hit because it is true, but I think it's worth it. On the day of our Annual meeting, when we talk about and decide what Union Congregational Church's future will look like, I'd like to take a long view back. I want to talk about the rise of Christianity and its theological and philosophical progressions. I want to do this by using the metaphor of the human body.

The first thing to realize is that Christianity did not rise in a vacuum. It rose in the Roman Empire. The major intellectual system was 'Hellenistic thought,' which was out of the great Greek philosophers, primarily Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle but also contained other philosophies. The Bible and its teachings were in some ways, an answer to the Greeks. There was a debate that went on for many centuries that was referred to as the Athens-Jerusalem debate. Jerusalem disagreed with Athens a lot, but it had Greek thinking in it.

So, let's think of Christianity standing on two legs. The right leg is the stronger leg. Not me, but most people are right handed and right legged. Let's call the Bible and the church as the right leg or the

Jerusalem leg. It is the more conservative leg, professing to have the answers to life's persistent questions.

Let's call the left leg, the Athens leg; the great hero of whom was Socrates, who taught by asking questions. The Greeks gave western thought logic. By questioning and maybe adjusting your thinking, it is more liberal, more uncertain. So, the right leg is the more certain, more solid leg, the left is more uncertain. You want both, but Christianity leaned more heavily on the right leg.

What do the legs support? The torso. The torso is the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages is often called the Dark Ages. This was not a time of great, if any, intellectual advancement. The priests and clergy basically told people what to believe. Monasteries cropped up and were the sight of contemplation, but not great learning. There were exceptions but thinking had a sameness to it. The Greek thought was somewhat lost in the Middle Ages. Interestingly, Islam was the agent of bringing Greek thinking back into the Christian world. That's an interesting story that I don't have time for here.

So, the large torso of Middle Age's Christianity, was a time of little intellectual advancement in which the priests basically told people what to believe. A popular phrase of the Middle Ages was 'faith in search of understanding.' The seat of government in the Empire was in Constantinople (modern day Istanbul). Government control was weak

to say the least. The church stepped in and became the government in Europe. In fact, a monk was recruited to become Pope. He didn't want to do it. He wanted a life of contemplation. But, they made him Pope anyway. He was Gregory I or Gregory the Great. As it turned out, he was good at governing. He kept the aqueducts in good repair and what little order there was intact. So, during the Middle Ages, the church ruled. It told people what to believe and it was the government.

Okay, on to the arms. Let's call the arms the Renaissance and the Reformation. For the lack of intellectual advancement in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance made up for lost time. The Renaissance was a boom period for science, art, and learning. There was a major revival of Greek and Roman thought. The Greek language was taught in schools.

The church still had a central role in people's lives. If you look at the art of the Renaissance greats like Leonardo di Vinci, Michelangelo and others, you will find that their themes were largely Bible based. So, the Renaissance is the arm that reached out of the Middle Ages doldrums.

They say that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The church, with its absolute power, became corrupt. It was selling indulgences. That is, if you give money to the church, it will absolve you of your sins. There were plenty other dirty tricks that the church was pulling.

A priest by the name of Martin Luther recognized the corruption and took action to stop it. He started a movement that we now call the Reformation. The Reformation lives on to this day. It reached out from the established church of the day (what would become the Holy Roman Catholic Church) and created the world of Protestantism. Great theologians, most notably Calvin and Zwinglie, developed Protestant thought. Our church, as you may know, is in the Protestant tradition.

The Catholic Church discouraged Bible reading among the flock and wanted to tell people what to believe. The Reformation encouraged Bible reading, allowing individual interpretation of Scripture.

So, the arms of the Renaissance and the Reformation reached out in very different directions from the monolith of the Middle Ages.

So, onto the head. The head we can think of as modernity. That would be us. We are very much in the Christian tradition but we are able to process the information that has been passed down to us. We have much information to process. We also have many tools with which to process. We have theology, philosophy, science, economics, and history among much else to work with. An earmark of modernity is that it moves the church into the secular world.

For centuries, the church told people what to believe. How many times have you heard me say that my role is not to tell you what to

believe but to walk with you as you come to your own beliefs? As each of us looks down at our feet (easier for some than others), we see the arms and the torso. We have the history of the church to look at and past to see to our beginnings. We then let our eyes look up and look into the future. As we've said, we have much information to process as we try to become the people that God wants us to be.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention a few more things. We rarely think of and hardly ever mention our Christian twin separated in early childhood. That would be Eastern church or Orthodox Church, which has grown very differently than Western Christianity.

Then we have the older brother looking at Christianity with an at-times painful look on his face. I speak of the Jews. Christianity grew out of Judaism but has often been an unruly younger sibling. Jews, when living in an environment often dominated by Christianity, at the very least, need to decide about how much assimilation if any is appropriate.

Then we have the (mostly) silent sister. With a few exceptions in the Middle Ages among the mystics, women were mostly ignored by the Christian church establishment. Modernity is changing that but at an uneven pace.

Why did I present this at this time and in this way? I think it is important to step back and look at whence we came. We are living

within the ark of Christian history. It is our responsibility to pass it on to the next generations in the best shape possible. We are in Union Church in the early stages of the 'Church Vitality Program.' Part of its goal is to assure that our church will be vibrant for the next generation.

Now, I go back to Jesus Christ himself. No matter how the world of Christianity has grown in his name, and no matter how Christians have sinned in his name, he and his message remain the same. If we stick with Christ and his message, we will become the people that God wants us to be. AMEN