

The Rev. J. Lee Hill, Jr., Senior Pastor
Christian Fellowship Congregational Church (UCC)
1601 Kelton Road
San Diego, CA 92115
jhill@christianfellowshipucc.org

“HBCU Sunday 2014”

Hebrew Bible Reading: Psalm 147:1-11

New Testament Reading: John 7:37-52

Sermon Title: Thirsty

Pastor’s Note in Bulletin

In the fall of 2013 there was a rare gathering of six HBCU presidents at the United Church of Christ headquarters in Cleveland, Ohio. There to deepen and expand the relationship between the schools and denomination, Geoffrey Black, our general minister and president said the presence of these HBCUs “are tangible proof of the UCC’s continuing struggle for equality and education for all God’s people, a legacy that dates back to the Congregationalists and abolitionists of the Civil War era.” The American Missionary Association, an early abolitionist organization, established schools in the south to educate newly freed slaves. This organization is part of the rich legacy and history of the United Church of Christ. Walter Kimbrough, president of Dillard University said, “The history of the American Missionary Association is very important to the nation and the UCC should not only own this history but promote it...”

Today we heed President Kimbrough’s advice, and celebrate a visionary ministry that was dedicated to education and racial equality, founding eleven colleges primarily in the south, six of which continue to relate to the United Church of Christ:

- Dillard University, New Orleans, LA; www.dillard.edu
- Fisk University, Nashville, TN; www.fisk.edu
- Huston-Tillotson University, Austin, TX; www.htu.edu
- LeMoyne-Owen College, Memphis, TN; www.loc.edu
- Talladega College, Talladega, AL; www.talladega.edu
- Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, MS; www.tougaloo.edu

And two related HBCU Seminary/Divinity Schools

- Howard University School of Divinity, Washington DC
- Interdenominational Theological Seminary, Atlanta GA

May we stand with pride and celebrate the UCC and our African-American history!

† rev

Prayer: Lord, send you Spirit on this your people—and hide me behind the old rugged cross so that this waiting congregation see none of me and all thee. Weave my hand the gospel plow, and tie my tongue in Jesus name. Amen.

Sermon: There is a line in my fraternity hymn that begins with these words, “...College days swiftly pass, and the recollection slowly fades away.” My college years are certainly not that far removed for me, but the memories have begun to slip and fade over the years. I imagine that the same may be true for you as well—but then, there are moments when we push past the blurring and fading memories to see again the brilliance of color from years gone by, the brilliance of light from those years of youthful living.

Moments like today—
when we gather to give God thanks for those years
of shameless young adulthood.

Moments like today—
when we remember the foolishness of our youth, and laugh
—maybe even cry.

Moments like today—
when we wear our school colors, Greek letters and celebrate the witness of
our people “over a way that with tears have been watered.”

Moment like today—
when we consider the struggle and fight that our people endured just so our
minds could be free---and their thirst for education, equality and justice in
Jesus’ Name—quenched with living water!

There was within the lives of the nineteenth century abolitionists, particularly those who met at the Second Convention on Bible Missions, a real thirst for education and justice in Jesus’ Name. Many of them had stood in defense of the Amistad captives in 1839, and had realized that in seeking justice and standing on the side of what was right that “streams of living water” were able to flow” from the life of the believer. These folks, who constituted the American Missionary Association, who went on to found more than five hundred schools for African-American in the south, during and after the Civil War---they knew what it meant to be thirsty—and to have their thirsts quenched—in Christ.

WEB Dubois writes that these faith-filled thirsts for justice were a “gift of New England to the freed Negro; not alms, but a friend; not cash but character...[he goes on to say that] The teachers in these institutions came not to keep the Negroes in their place, but to raise them out of the places of defilement where slavery had wallowed them. [and that] The colleges they founded were social settlements; homes where

the best of the sons of the freedman came in close and sympathetic touch with the best...They lived and ate together, studied and worked, hoped and hearkened in the dawning light.”¹ *The Souls of Black Folks*, 1903.

To tell the story of the AMA is tell the story of liberal nineteenth-century theology which touched and impacted the lives of those who worked with their hands, prayed with their feet, used their minds for the cause of freedom and justice—and believed in the power of Jesus to give living water to all who thirst.

For the righteous thirsts of Theodore S. Wright, we give God thanks!
 For the righteous thirsts of Samuel Ringgold Ward, we give God thanks!
 For the righteous thirsts of James Pennington, we give God thanks!
 For the righteous thirsts of Charles Bennett Ray, we give God thanks!
 Early leaders of the AMA...

And for the countless educators who sacrificed....

Thirsting for justice, fighting insults and hatred.
 Thirsting for righteousness, combating disease and terror.
 Thirsting for racial equality, enduring hardship and poverty.
 Thirsting for life, living above one-room schools.
 Thirsting for salvation, willingly sacrificing their own freedoms for you and me...

These were men and women like Mary Kelsey Peak who “erected to herself a monument more enduring than brass or granite, by impressing her own image upon a group of susceptible pupils.”²

An image of promise,
 And image of grace;
 An image of love, endurance and hope—
 An image of a better life, not for her, but for generations she would never know...perhaps even the very embodiment of you and me.

These are the faithful—the saints of the church----who:
 Realized that their thirsts could be quenched in Jesus.
 Realized that their just longings could be satisfied in Jesus.
 Realized in a world of systematic oppression the real possibilities of Freedom---
 The AMA knew that education was not enough. Clara DeBoer writes that the AMA realized that “an educated amoral person was more of a threat to society than an

¹ WEB DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903.

² <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/blacks-and-the-american.html>

² <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/blacks-and-the-american.html>

uneducated one.”³ Sharing faith in Jesus Christ was as important as education—and so the AMA went on to build churches all through south as adjuncts to their school. It is largely known in the south that if a church is named First Congregational and was founded during Reconstruction—it is more than likely black and founded by the American Missionary Association.

Whether we wish to realize it or not, all of our lives have been touched and impacted by the righteous thirsts of Christian men and women who thought more of your life, than they thought of their own. And yet we live in a world today—where too often our thirsts are not grounded in lifting up people; or bringing others into freedom; or granting people liberation; or simply making somebody else’s world a better---no our thirsts are too often self-centered thirsts.

What monuments can we build to ourselves—for our ourselves?
 What lasting impression can we leave on others—to make us look better?
 What will we get out of it?—
 not how we might profit as a people; as a community;
 as the body of Christ.

When I was in college we called it Thirsty Thursday—some of you know what I’m talking about. Thursday nights, especially for those who did not have classes on Friday or at least on Friday mornings; we could get the Friday Night party started an entire day early—why wait till Friday when you could party on Thursday?

Thirsty Thursday—became a self-serving act of indulgence;
 Thirsty Thursday— became a self-serving act of stupidity;
 Thirsty Thursday— became a self-serving act of excess;
 Thirsty Thursday— became a self-serving act of immoderation;
 Thirsty Thursday— became a self-serving act of foolishness;
 Thirsty Thursday— became a self-serving act of senselessness;

And for some of us ---we have turned Thirsty Thursday into, Thirsty Sunday, Thirsty Monday, Thirsty Tuesday, Thirsty Wednesday, Thirsty Friday—and certainly Thursday Saturday---

There is never enough shopping.

There is never enough self-centered titillating activities in our lives.

And it was Bill Moyers, progressive commentator and proud member of the United Church of Christ who said: *Once you decide to titillate instead of illuminate . . . you create a climate of expectation that requires a higher and higher level of intensity"*

Sisters and Brothers, We have become too focused on what we, individually, are going to get out of our life’s work—

³ Clara Merritt DeBoer, "Lewis Tappan: Advocate of the Whole Gospel," AD. magazine, November 1977.

We have become too focused on what on ourselves.
 And as a result our communities are wasting away.
 Our people are perishing; men, women, girls and boys
 And our collective lives are deteriorating. FAST.

“The ultimate test of the American conscience,” said the Wisconsin Senator, Gaylord Nelson, is our “willingness to sacrifice something today for future generations whose words of thanks will not be heard.”

Sacrifice. Sacrifice. Sacrifice.

We call ourselves Christian, but we don't want to live the Christian life. Did you now know that this life calls you to sacrifice? The Apostle Paul says in the 15 Chapter of Corinthians, “I die every day, exclamation point”

Not I die everyday period.
 Not I die everyday common.
 Not I die everyday hyphen.
 Not I die everyday semicolon
 Not I die everyday ellipsis.

Paul understood the sacrifice that was needed.
 Paul understood the sacrifice that Jesus made.
 Paul understood the power of the living water that Jesus offers.
 Paul understood the power of the living water that Jesus gives....

Facing the unbelieving crowd, Jesus offers water to those who thirst.
 Facing the questioning crowd, Jesus offers water to those who thirst.
 Standing before a people who despise him, Jesus offers water to those who thirst.
 Standing before officials who want him dead, Jesus offers water to those who thirst.

With Religious leaders feeling threatened, Jesus offers living water.
 With temple police feeling intimidated, Jesus offers living water.
 Before confused Nicodemus-like believers, Jesus offers living water.
 Jesus says, “let anyone who is thirsty come...”

I don't know about you this morning, but I'm thirsty!
 I'm thirsty: Thirsty to see justice and liberation in the land
 I'm thirsty: Thirsty to see the school to prison-pipeline destroyed
 I'm thirsty: Thirsty to see hard-working families earn a Living Wage.
 I'm thirsty: Thirsty to see the gap between the rich and poor closed.
 I'm thirsty: Thirsty to see a real pathway to citizenship blazed in America.

Jesus says, “and let the one who believes in me drink...and out of the believers’ heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

Living Water: Quality Education!

Living Water: Real Equality—not that Arizona stuff!

Living Water: Workers Rights!

Living Water: Economic Empowerment!

Living Water: Racial Justice!

Living Water: Restorative Justice

Living Water: Soul Freedom!

May we find the strength, as the descendants of the American Missionary Association, to have our thirst quenched in Jesus—and freely give to all:

Black, white and brown

Gay and straight

Republican and democrat

Skilled and unskilled

Young and old

The life-saving Living Water that flows from the heart of God, and Her people.

Amen.