

REL105
Elisa Henderson
12/20/2016
Religious Site Visit

For my religious site visit assignment I decided to visit the United Church of Christ in the small village of Monterey, MA. The choice of visiting such site came pretty easily to me as I had intended to do so for a while now. The pastor at the church is a friend, Revered Elizabeth Goodman. Liz is a good spirited, strong human being. She is eloquent and intelligent, compassionate and yet so combative. Liz always intrigued me, to my eyes she embodied the fighter for social justice, married with kids, who would also dress in religious apparel on Sundays. An image I could not quite frame as it clashed with my upbringing in Catholic Italy. Having grown apart from organized religions for a while now, I was very curious about observing Liz and her congregation. I informed her about my assignment and asked her if I could attend; of course I would be welcomed.

The United Church of Christ is part of the larger protestant tradition. Historically, Pilgrims had left England in order to worship Christ and the Lord, in opposition to the King, Henry the VII, who had declared himself Head of the Church; in fact, for the Separatist Puritans, in accordance with the Apostle Paul, Christ is the Head of the Church. They also objected the pompousness of the church, preferring a more direct and simple relationship with God.

The United Church of Christ is a simple white building which occupies a corner along the main street of Monterey. The wide stairway leading to the double front doors is white as well, and it creates a simple yet uplifting path towards the entrance. The classic round door knob is

minimalist and worn, a testimony to the many hands that have turned it to enter the church. As you come into the small vestibule, a little table holds the bulletin for the day, together with other informative pamphlets. There are also two bookshelves at each side of the table, where books are available to anyone who is interested in borrowing them. As you enter the church from either side you cannot help but notice the humbleness and simplicity of the decor. Large sides paned windows let the morning light in and make the light colored walls even more so luminous. The elements of nature come into the space through the wood edging of the seatings, the partial wood plank flooring, the simple lines of the wooden cross up front, in the proscenium. On the small elevated stage in the center, that can be accessed through three small steps, two plain wooden chairs are placed at each side of the Cross, while a small lecture podium stands in the front of it. Below the podium, at ground level, a small table holds the candles. On the left side, a beautiful organ with silver pipes is also elevated, while the grand piano on the right sits at the lower level. Artificial lighting appears through elementary lighting fixture scattered across the tall ceiling. A carpet flooring deafens the ambiance. Everything is very basic but also so pristine and inviting. Thinking about the vast Christian tradition, and the various worship places where such tradition is ministered, this environment really emphasizes, without emphasizing it, the message of humility and humbleness of Jesus. The differences with other sacred places are striking. No iconographic images, no distinctive divisions in the space, a sense of inclusiveness, no gold and sparkles.

I have attended two Sunday services at the Church. As the pamphlet for the day reveals, depending on the day of the month, the service varies a little bit in its unfolding. November 6th, 2016, was the first Sunday of the month and the Sacrament of Communion was being celebrated.

December 11th was instead the third Sunday of Advent; that Sunday, before service, the kids of the congregation participated in the Godly Play, which is a method of teaching the bible by actively participating in the reenactment of its stories through “. . . materials that simply beg to be touched, manipulated and interacted with.” (1. Monterey Church. United Church of Christ), thus creating an engaging moment of shared learning experience.

As people start to gather when the 10am service hour is approaching, everyone cheerfully welcomes everybody. They all seem to be wearing comfortable, everyday clothes. The crowd is not big, maybe 15/20 people. The people in charge of the music and instruments arrange themselves as music starts filling the space. As everyone takes their seat, Liz adjusts the paraphernalia around her. She is now wearing her graduate school robe with velvet details and red stripes on the sleeves, signifying her M.Div from her Divinity School at Harvard. Her laptop is open on the lecture stand, a “US Rowing” sticker tells us about her passion while her robe tells us a little bit of her journey; she is a spiritual guide, as well as one of the people. The music of a flute is playing, the ringing of the bell calls everyone’s attention, the candles are lit. All standing, the first hymn is sang together, accompanied by the piano and a mandolin. Music is such an important and vital part of the worshipping process, elevating the people to a mystical collective experience. A worship passage is recited by both the pastor and the people, who participate in the responses to it. While the moment of worship has a repetitive aspect to it, the Passing of the Peace that follows is instead very refreshing. As people make their way around the Church, shaking hands and passing the Peace, words of reciprocal interest are exchanged as well, and a great sense of community can be felt by all. I find myself part of it, and it is comforting to feel

welcomed among these strangers; the enactment of this Christian tradition of peace sharing is very much alive and tangible during this moment.

The prayer of Invocation follows; this is a prayer that is recited in unison by everyone. It is a call to God to be present and watchful over the people and for Him to provide His guidance, through His Son Jesus Christ. As the subject matter changes, so does the Invocation prayer, as it seems to be focused on different themes, depending on the events happening around us. During the service in November, the prayer focused on the desire of reaching a place of understanding within the people at large, due to the upcoming election, which had brought about “. . . the very worst in ourselves and others.” (2. Monterey United Church of Christ). The prayer of December 6th embodied the idea of the Advent, the coming of Christ as the Savior as “. . . our nations continue in chaos and our lives are too often ruled by turmoil .” (3. Monterey United Church of Christ).

In December, the lighting of the Advent Candles took place at this point and a young man was put in charge of lighting the candles, in a ritualistic way that still implied the meaning of the gesture, without being overly ceremonial . After the Hearing of Word, which is comprised of readings from the Scriptures, a Prayer for Illumination precedes the Homily of the Pastor and that of the People. In her sermon, Liz does a beautiful job revisiting the messages in the Bible by bringing them into the present. Through her words, scriptures come to life and concepts such as resurrection, repentance and metanoia are extrapolated and debated upon (4. Monterey Church. Rev. Goodman,). They become alive and a cue for reflection; a reflection that takes place during the Homily of the people, when everyone who feels compelled to is able to share their thoughts; this part is such a powerful moment to witness. Time seems to slow down, there is a tacit

understanding of who and when someone will talk, while everyone else, including the pastor, is both listening and contemplating the spoken words.

An hymn marks either the ending of the Homily, as on the December service, *O Long-Expected Jesus*, or introduces another phase. In November, the sacrament of Holy Communion was preceded by the hymn *As we gather at your Table*. During the re-enactment of the last supper, the symbolism of coming together with the body of Christ transpired by the involvement of the people from the congregation, who took charge of sharing the bread and wine, which had been previously blessed by the pastor; although I did not partake in the sharing, I was pleasantly surprised to know that it was my choice not to, as everyone is welcomed to participate.

It is time for the Pastoral Prayer and people again participate actively. Liz inquires among the congregation about the joys and concerns one might feel like sharing; this is an opportunity to know how your neighbor is doing, in the good and the bad, as well as what is happening in the world at large. Once the joys and concerns are shared, the pastor weaves them together into a touching prayer to the Lord; an invocation which transcends the space we are in and represents the idea of Providence, giving a reassuring sense that the Lord will take charge and make things right.

As we approach the ending of the service, offerings are collected, before we all gather to form the Closing Circle. Everyone stands up and joins hands with one another creating a circle across the central pews. One by one we introduce ourselves and make any announcement of upcoming events that might be of interest. As my turn arrives, I express my gratitude for letting me be a part of their community for that day. The service comes to an end with *The Lord's Prayer*, an hymn and the pastor final blessing.

The whole experience greatly embodied the Christian notion of being in communion with one another and with God. Moreover, the great participation of all involved, together with the pastor ability and willingness to dig into the Scriptures and make them so relevant to today's events, really emphasizes what the Lutherans claimed during the reformation, *Sola Scripture* (Scripture alone), *Sola Fide* (Faith alone) and *Sola Gratia* (Grace alone).

References

1. Monterey Church. United Church of Christ. FAQs. Godly Play
<http://montereychurch.org/faqs/godly-play/>
2. Monterey United Church of Christ. 26th Sunday after Pentecost
November 6, 2016 Bulletin - Attached
3. Monterey United Church of Christ. 3rd Sunday of Advent
December 11, 2016 Bulletin - Attached
4. Monterey Church. United Church of Christ. Sermons. Rev. Goodman.
<http://montereychurch.org/Sermons/Proper%2027,%20Year%20C--11.6.16.pdf>
<http://montereychurch.org/Sermons/Advent%203,%20Year%20A--12.11.16.pdf>