

UCC Core Values: Changing Lives  
Luke 2:8-20

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Representation matters. It makes a difference when children have teachers in their classroom that represent their race or culture. It makes a difference when young girls see women in science – it makes a difference for the boys too! It matters for indigenous people of all ages to be treated by doctors and therapists who understand first hand what it means to be indigenous to this land and in this country. Seeing someone who looks like you or shares a similar background can open your mind and imagination to what is possible for your own life.

I remember the first time I ever met or saw a female clergy person. I was 10 years old and my dad was a minister in the United Church of Christ – he served a small church in Kansas. When it came time for him to take a sabbatical for the summer, the pastor who filled in while our family was away traveling was a woman. She stayed in our house, the parsonage, that summer because the town was so small there was not hotel or inn. The day she arrived at our house I was so surprised that this new minister was a woman – it had never occurred to me that it was possible! To make matters more confusing, her name was Tracy so when I heard folks talking about Pastor Tracy's arrival, I assumed it was the boy version of Tracy. That first day I stood at the doorway to Pastor Tracy's bedroom and asked, “You're a minister? A real minister? Just like my dad?!”

For the rest of the summer, whenever I saw her I would ask questions about what she did at the church, trying to verify that she was, in fact, a real minister like my dad and all the other male ministers I knew. I have an image of Tracy, this woman pastor in my head, but I don't remember much of anything else about her. Regardless, I am indebted to her for helping me

imagine what it might be like to be a female pastor and often evoke her spirit when I reflect on people that shaped my life. Getting to know her, even just a little bit, that summer is one of those experiences that I believe changed my life. It planted a seed that grew and grew until one day I wasn't just admiring women pastors, I was becoming one myself.

The United Church of Christ prides itself on being a church of firsts. First ordained African American pastor. First school for the deaf in the United States. First integrated anti-slavery society. First modern-day woman pastor. First ordained openly gay minister in a protestant church. First hymn book of a Christian church to publish gender inclusive language when describing God – that's our hymnbook, the New Century Hymnal. First Christian denomination to openly support same-gender marriage. Every time there was a first, it expanded someone's idea of who can serve in leadership and pastoral roles, who is welcome in the United Church of Christ, and who has a connection with God. It changed the lives of those people who represented the firsts, and it changed the lives of everyone who followed as our understanding of what the church looks like.

Our “firsts” is one way that the United Church of Christ lives out its Core Value of “changing lives.” Even though many of our firsts have been in place for many years, it is still common for folks to walk through our doors for the first time and describe worship as a life changing experience. For some of us, a UCC church is the first time we've seen a woman in the pulpit or a first visibly queer person as a pastor. For others it is the first time where we've experienced communion being open for all people regardless of age or church membership or the first time we've felt welcome despite who we love or where we are from or what our station in life is. The United Church of Christ is for many the first times we have heard God referred to as “she” and “her” or have had ancient Biblical stories placed in the context of our current lives and challenges. The United Church of Christ changes lives just by doing what it does each week and

welcoming in new people to come and witness, come and experience, come and join.

Our firsts, including people's first experience in a UCC church, light up that core value of changing lives, but it does not stop there. Our goal is not just to change someone's life once when they first arrive and be done with it. To really uphold this as a value, we have to strive to change lives over and over again. That means that beyond the expansiveness of language, images, and leadership – we seek to create life changing experiences of transformative relationships, deepening commitments to social justice issues, and an ongoing relationship with our Creator that brings changes into our life that empower, humble, inspire, and challenge us.

This means that yes, we can point to life changing experiences the first time we worshipped in a UCC church. But we can also lift up life changing moments doing community service in our local food bank or on a trip to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. We have life changing moments in soul-baring conversations around the campfire at Edgewood Camp or in book studies and movie nights that open our eyes to the perspectives of someone different than us. We have life changing experiences when our voices lift in song, the hairs on our arms stand on edge, and hope fills every crevice of our body, preparing us to fight against systemic injustice and to be a force for good in the world.

Life changes because of the friendships that form, because of the people who show up at your doorstep with casseroles and hugs in times of illness and grief, because of the relationships and care that follow us through the most difficult moments in time. The first time you walk into a UCC church has the potential to be life changing, yes, but there is also potential for your life to change over and over again the more you commit, the more you open yourself up to the people in this community and to the Holy Spirit in your life.

When thinking of what it means to be life changing, my mind kept wandering to the story of the shepherds in the field. They had no idea what their future would hold when those angels

appeared to them. They were the very first people outside of Jesus's family to hear of his arrival and the importance of his birth. Those shepherds hadn't heard rumors or stories of a life changing baby, they weren't expecting the Messiah, and they certainly weren't expecting to be the first to hear of any Messiah's birth. By appearing before humble, hardworking shepherds – the image of who God cares about and who God equips for ministry was radically transformed. The shepherds' lives were changed as the angels spoke to them. It all changed again when they met the baby Jesus and his parents.

What I love most is that the shepherds took these transformative experiences with them back to their towns and their families and they told everyone about them. They glorified God and hailed the arrival of the Messiah. I imagine that the people they met as they spread this news continued to change their lives. I imagine all the people that listened to the shepherds and felt their own lives shifting – shifting with awe that God would choose the simple shepherds to send a message through, that God would choose a little baby to be the Messiah, that God might choose one of them for greatness or goodness or love.

Before Jesus gathered the disciples together and sent them out in pairs, there were shepherds telling a story, sharing their experience, and changing lives the way their lives had been changed. They have two important lessons to teach us, lessons that still hold great relevance over two thousand years later. The first is that if we are open to it, God is poised to change the life of any one of us – it doesn't matter what we do for work, how dusty and dirty we feel, how overlooked we think we've been. God brings messages of hope and joy to all people, including the shepherds, including you.

The second is that the church is made up of people, and we have the potential to change the lives of others – new folks that walk through our doors, people we get to know or with whom we are in relationship with. The shepherds were life changers. They brought a message so

powerful that it became the first inklings of a movement that would launch thirty years later when Jesus was born. The shepherds were the seed planters in their communities, preparing people for what would soon come, preparing them for an experience of and with God that they had never before imagined. All they had to do was share their story of how their own life had changed that night in the fields.

The invitation from the shepherds, an invitation that is as powerful now in August as it is at Christmastime, is to share our stories. Tell your neighbors, your friends, the people stuck in line behind you at the grocery store about your life changing moments, the stories of how your vision of God and your belief in love deepened or expanded, the experiences that made you realize that there is room enough for you in the church, in the world, in the eyes of God. You're sharing your stories with words when necessary, but also through your actions and your movements towards inclusion and radical openness to all people. Share your stories as the shepherds did, glorifying and praising God, knowing that our stories make up the church that has the power to change lives.