

Statement on Ministry – Rev. Dr. Martha A. Brunell

In the United Church of Christ we don't have icons but sometimes we do have stained glass windows. Through them light shines upon us. Such windows often offer a visual way to tell the story. Many windows picture biblical scenes or symbols of faith. There are three particular stained glass windows that shed bright colored light upon the shape and substance of my ministry. Two of them have been with me a long time. The third made a recent brief appearance.

For seventeen of my thirty-two years in ordained ministry, in two separate seasons, I served as the pastor of Friedens United Church of Christ, at the corner of 19th and Newhouse in north Saint Louis city. One hundred and fifty years of stubborn, creative Friedens ministry emanated from that corner. In 1927 when the congregation was seventy, a powerful tornado roared down Newhouse Avenue and shattered the huge art glass windows. The next day, as the story goes, Pastor Paul led the flock into a sea of broken glass. There was a single small piece of glass intact, a head of Christ. The church was at its numeric and programmatic zenith then with several thousand members and hundreds of children in Sunday school. The windows were replaced. The head of Christ found in the broken glass was framed, backlit, and mounted on the wall behind the preacher's right shoulder. Life went on. Twenty five years later when the congregation was ninety-five, ecclesiastical experts encouraged them to move. The city was changing rapidly. The neighborhood was in sharp decline. Five years after that, when the congregation celebrated its one hundredth anniversary and the United Church of Christ was born, Friedens offered this simple statement: "Our call from God is to minister in this community indefinitely." And minister they did for another fifty years as the church's neighborhood was increasingly marginalized in the poorest zone of the city.

In October 2007 at the 150th Anniversary service, I preached about that window over my right shoulder. It reminded us of brokenness within our neighborhood. Everything was in short supply -- financial resources, jobs, hope, programs for kids, stable family systems, fresh fruits and vegetables, adequate schools, attention from city government, health services – the list was endless. In that deepening reality, the church stayed put and gave away all it had in difficult, imaginative, and renewing acts of presence. We listened for the steadfast light of Christ calling, intact in the brokenness. We sought to be reliable, to trust the shrinking enoughness of who we were and what we had, to place ourselves fully in the Spirit's keeping, and to be confident in the drawing near of God and God's right timing.

All those years while I was preaching with the head of Christ behind me, I was looking into the eyes of Christ in a huge window high on the back wall, one of the replacement windows from 1927. Windows like that one are common. It depicts Christ knocking at a closed door. While knocking, he is not turned toward the door but clearly toward us. If the small window fragment behind me told a story of steadfast light in brokenness, the huge window before me posed questions: Are you ready for me at the doorway of your life and able to cross its threshold? Will you be a doorway through which others may arrive face to face with gospel invitation? Will you recognize and affirm doorways

opening in the lives of friends, neighbors, and strangers? Like the story of steadfast love in the brokenness, these questions were for me, for the Friedens people, and for gathered communities of faith everywhere.

Two months later Friedens recognized its congregational life of welcome, worship, and service had drawn to a close. Before long I became the interim pastor of Open Prairie United Church of Christ in Princeton, IL. Open Prairie is a very young congregation in a small town on the prairie with no stained glass windows. However, at the spring 2009 Prairie Association meeting another window caught my attention. In an out-of-the-way country church was a window I had never seen before. I glanced up part way through that business meeting and realized we were seated beneath a large glass depiction of the women at the empty tomb. It wasn't a small panel framing a larger window. It was the main event window. Ah yes, the message of resurrection in the emptiness, the message of new life, surprising new life casting light on all we do and say. And the messengers, in this case the women, are often unlikely ones.

Icons are meant to encounter us in deep fundamental places. Similar to icons, these three windows encounter me. My ministry has occurred within local parishes, with women growing into new fullness and freedom after devastating abuse, with patients and families on hospice circuits, and with seminary students in class. I have been a pastor, an agency administrator, a chaplain, a teacher, and a writer. Across these different contexts, my ministry centers in our spiritual formation among friends, family, neighbors, strangers, those it is hard to love or like, and the breadth of creation. I wonder aloud: Are we learning and growing in spirit, expanding in love, and becoming more aware of divine grace and guidance. Do we understand our relatedness and connection in wider and wider circles? I seek courage and clarity with others about the light of Christ in the broken places. I hear with others questions swirling around the knock at the door. Holy and sacred spirit awaits there in an incarnation that will change, stretch, and complete us. Can we open the doorway, walk through the doorway, become the doorway, and celebrate the doorway in whomever it appears? I am drawn with others into startling emptiness that entrusts us with a resurrection message of new life. We each have stories to tell and saving voices to sound for healing, hope, resilience, promise, laughter, remembrance, accompaniment, and justice.

Howard Thurman, a prophetic African American voice from the last century, stated the resurrection message well. His words provoke all of us: Do not ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and do that. Because what the world needs is more people who have come alive!