

May 5:1-16

Today's Saints: Rev. Dr. Roger Shinn

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The Congregational Church of Needham

This summer our sermon topic is Today's Saints, and each week we will be talking about someone whose faith changed the world. Our list of saints has included Desmond Tutu, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Bill Mckibbin, C.S. Lewis, Shane Claiborne, Rabbi Harold Kushner and Dorothy Day. If you missed the first



three sermons in the series feel free to check the website. Today I want to talk about Roger Shinn. Now, you are probably wondering- "Who in the world is Roger Shinn? Roger Shinn was a minister, a scholar, and an author of 15 books. A professor of religion and theology, Shinn taught at Heidelberg, Vanderbilt University, and became the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Seminary in New York City. He died last month at the age of 96. I chose him

because he played such a crucial role in forming the United Church of Christ in 1957 and fashioning the church we have become. So much of what we are today, we owe to Roger Shinn's genius. Officially the UCC began when two Protestant Churches merged – the Congregational branch of our denomination merged with the German branch. Shinn came from a small church in Germantown OH, but he was one of the key architects of this merger, and the author of our UCC Statement of Faith. We will be reading this eloquent document after the sermon; his words beautifully set the compass for our path as a people of faith.

The reason I chose Dr. Shinn was because his life offers us a window on what is best about the United Church of Christ. What can we learn from him about our church and our faith today?

**In the first place the UCC is a church open to everyone.** From the very first dream that Roger Shinn and others had of what this church would look like in the 1950's they envisioned a new type of church- not defined by who we kept out, but by our intentions to build bridges and make such a big tent that everyone was welcome. They dreamed of a church different from the others all around- one united and uniting people. It was to be a place where the members were so secure in their own faith that nothing threatened them about other people's beliefs.

In New England we see pretty brick sanctuaries on every green, and all our local churches trace their roots to some of the earliest settlers, the pilgrims and Puritans who settled in these town. Our history in these churches harks back to the founding of the commonwealth and the nation.

But if we look at our denomination more broadly, we are not homogeneous. In Chicago many UCC churches are full of African Americans and Caucasians coming to service are in the distinct minority. Our largest church is on the south side of Chicago. Trinity Church had a choir with 200 singers in dashikis and 14,000 members attending 3 packed services each Sunday. In Honolulu HI huge churches with 3000 members are packed with native Hawaiians. In Los Angeles, Texas, Miami and Lawrence Massachusetts Spanish UCC churches are popping up everywhere and growing, as a reasonable alternative to the Spanish evangelical churches. In parts of North and South Dakota, Pennsylvania and Missouri the UCC churches are packed with German immigrant families who still speak German at home and English as a second language. Roger Shinn grew up in one of those churches in Germantown Ohio. From this farm community he went off to Heidelberg University in Ohio- a college which was modeled on the school by the same name in Germany. While it might have been easier to be insulated and provincial coming from this background, Dr. Shinn came from a small ethnic church and envisioned a new denomination which was a big tent- radically open to everyone.

The place where you see variety of people in our church – from every race, ethnicity, and economic circumstance – is at the national meetings of our UCC Synod. This weekend our national church is gathered at such a meeting – the national synod - which is taking place this year in Long Beach CA. One of the conference delegates is our own John Allen. It was not until I attended such a convention six years ago that I fully appreciated the scope of our church, and what a grand experiment in inclusion had been set in motion by people like Roger Shinn in 1957. There is a huge two-day LGBT caucus that meets before every synod meeting. There is a huge environmental caucus that studies global warming and enables the UCC to be prophetic leaders in addressing climate change. A strong group at Synod supports commitment to public education and improving our urban schools. While I knew our denomination was diverse intellectually, it was not until I attended Synod that I fully appreciated what that kind of diversity really looked like. Check out the UCC website to see pictures for yourself.

We know locally what diversity looks like. Our Needham church has become known for the way we celebrate diversity, too. We celebrate the diversity in our pews- people who grew up Lutheran, Episcopal, Baptist, Jewish, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic or no particular faith at all. We celebrate our openness every week, when we proclaim that everyone is a gift to the world, and to this body of Christ. I am so proud of our reputation for openness. This week when the Needham times wanted a quote on the Supreme Court decision to strike down the Defense of Marriage Act, a reporter from the local Needham Times e-mailed me. We are known for our openness. We are known to be open to everyone.

**The UCC is a church where we celebrate our questions of faith as much as our answers.** We believe in God and recognize that Jesus was God's Son the Christ. We seek the healing power of the Holy Spirit. We take our faith seriously, but we are not dogmatic. Part of that is because of Roger Shinn. He was a wonderful scholar who was so smart that hard questions never threatened him.

As a young man he went off to Union Seminary in New York City, where he studied with some of the greatest theological thinkers of the last century - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich. When he was managing editor of the student journal, Shinn contacted Albert Einstein and persuaded the brilliant scientist to write an article on science and religion.

Dr. Shinn wrote 15 books, and his writing stood out among theological work because he raised more questions than he answered. The church he started is unique on the spectrum of churches, because we are not dogmatic or doctrinaire. We don't tell you what to believe, or how to think. We invite you to build a relationship with the Living God. We raise questions and strive to give you enough tinder to light a fire in you and spark a conversation in your soul.

**Compassion is at the heart of the United Church of Christ.** One of the things we are known for is that we strive to balance faith and action. Keeping that balance is not easy. Most churches tip to one side or the other. We all have met people from churches where the people are so pious that they become self-righteous but do very little for others. At the other extreme we also know people who are so engaged in activities that they believe will make a difference, and they have become so self-righteous that they don't seem to believe in any god bigger than their own causes. In the UCC we strive to discipline ourselves to keep the balance between faith and action – to wrestle with the creative tension between the two. That balance takes the ability to take our faith seriously, but without taking ourselves too seriously.

One of my favorite stories about Roger Shinn was that he enlisted in the infantry in World War II after he graduated from seminary. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge and was awarded the Silver Star for his valor. Yet when he returned to the United States after the war he became a college and seminary professor and during the Viet Nam War he began to offer counseling to conscientious objectors. It is so rare for a decorated veteran to do that- to accept people who make different decisions about going to

war and, on principles of conscience, refuse to serve. It is almost unheard of. The only people I have known who can reconcile such very different views have been people with big hearts. Somehow they are at such peace with their own decisions. The only people I know who do not need other people to agree with them and to confirm the decisions and sacrifices that they have made are people with real compassion. Their abundant compassion allows them to love themselves and others with a similar generosity of spirit. At our core our United Church of Christ is a church with a generous spirit.

**Finally, we are a forward-looking church. Our Church is ready for the future because of the groundwork he laid, and the people we have become in the last 55 years.** A true bridge-builder, Shinn left a German community and spent his life working with all people- Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Existentialists. But he went further He was one of the earliest people to consider that all faiths have such common precepts at their root. He said that one of the most fundamental principles of Christianity is the Golden Rule. Jesus is known for teaching that we need to treat others the way we would want to be treated. But he goes on to say that this is at the heart of all world religions and points to evidence in Hinduism, Jains, and Taoism that they also share this fundamental teaching which is in essence The Golden Rule. Today in a world where multi-faith and inter-faith dialogue is so crucial to the world's future,

One of the most inspiring groups at synod is the young clergy. Ministers in their 20's attend with spiked hair and tattoos, and children in tow, and they often wear t-shirts that say "This is what the clergy look like". Their presence is a great blessing. Churches that have become insular and backward don't have such a bright future. Churches that build walls and fences instead of bridges don't have such a bright future. Churches where everybody looks the same are losing members not looking to the future.

Why did I choose a man that very few of us have heard of today? Because I believe that more people should know about Roger Shinn, and I think he was a man of remarkable faith, a real inspiration.

But I also chose him because his life reminds us that one person can make a huge difference in the world. I also chose him to remind us all that our United Churches of Christ is a small enough denomination where individuals really count. Our church depends on individuals like you and me to bring our best ideals, our sacred dreams and our faith to shape and mold the faith communities we love- the churches we attend every week.

The real reason that Roger Shinn was able to question so effectively was because he had a solid faith to begin with. Never one to float from place to place intellectually, Shinn knew he believed in God with his whole heart and soul and mind. No questioning could shake that. In 1966 the Boston Globe interviewed him and the reporter asked him Dr Shinn "Is God dead?" He replied that the old ideas of God have died repeatedly. "But it is not God who is changing, only our own concepts and broadening cosmic horizons."

Let us rise and read his words, our UCC Statement of Faith.....

Today we celebrate our UCC heritage- We begin with the Serenity Prayer- written by one of the founders of our church and one of its most prominent theologians. – Reinhold Niebuhr

Let us settle ourselves to come into God's presence-

God, give us grace to accept with serenity  
the things that cannot be changed,  
Courage to change the things  
which should be changed,  
and the Wisdom to distinguish  
the one from the other.

Living one day at a time,  
Enjoying one moment at a time,  
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,  
Taking, as Jesus did,  
This sinful world as it is,

Not as I would have it,  
Trusting that You will make all things right,  
If I surrender to Your will,  
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,  
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.

Amen.

#### Pastoral Prayer

O God giver of all good we pause to reflect on all the ways that you pour your goodness on us this day.

Throughout history and in the history of our own lives we see so many signs of your faithfulness.

We praise you for the order and constancy of nature: for the beauty and bounty of the earth, for day and night, seedtime and harvest, for the varied gifts of loveliness and usefulness that every season brings.

We marvel at the mystery of our lives, and the way that you lead us on winding roads that so often baffle us and then come round right.

We remember before you the sorrow of those who grieve the necessities of the homeless, the sorrow and rage of those in prisons of the state and prisons of their own making. We ask you to draw near to the needy.

Eternal One, Silence from whom our words come;

Questioner from whom our questions arise

Love of whom all our loves are hints

Disturber in whom alone we find my rest

Mystery in whose depths we find healing and myself

Enfold us now in your presence

Restore us to your peace

Renew me through your power

And ground us in your grace. Amen

(Prayers from the UCC New Century Hymnal)