**Interfaith 450th Commemoration**

**September 1, 2015**

**First United Methodist Church**

**St. Augustine, Florida**

Good evening. It is an honor and a joy to share this event with my sisters and brothers of various faith traditions … especially tonight on the 25th anniversary on my wedding to Caren Goldman. Happy Anniversary Caren!

Orange is the New Black is the edgy Netflix production about inmates in a women’s prison. One of the characters, Norma, does not speak, but she does a lot of listening. Other inmates gravitate to her and she offers an understanding, compassionate and sympathetic ear … always engaged … just never responding with audible speech. Women bring her their troubles and leave feeling accepted and affirmed … even blessed … and eventually a small cult begins to build around her. One morning they see her image on a piece of toast, and it validates their growing faith in all things Norma. However, when the group gathers in the prison chapel they are driven out because they are not part of a “formal religion.” So they start their own religion with Norma as its central figure. That gives rights to the prison chapel … the prison chapel which has a door that opens and shuts. Soon they start making rules … and the rules begin to define who is in and who is out. That is the moment things start to fall apart. They have institutionalized the Religion of Norma, and with it come all the needs of an institution.

That is really the history of most religions. They get started when one wise soul begins to make sense of some of the nonsense in the world. Then, at some point, someone comes along and makes an institution out of it. There is a world of difference between the faith exhibited and lived by a genuine and authentic person who is relating to what they know as the sacred, and, on the other hand, the institutions that have grown up around those holy people.

This is a quote that I found recently:

“It is not necessary to believe in God to be a good person. In a way, the traditional notion of God is outdated. One can be spiritual but not religious. It is not necessary to go to church and give money … for many, nature can be a church. Some of the best people in history did not believe in God, while some of the worst deeds were done in God’s name.”

Now, as I said, these are not my words. Believe it or not, they are the words of Pope Francis. Let me repeat what he said. “It is not necessary to believe in God to be a good person. In a way, the traditional notion of God is outdated. One can be spiritual but not religious. It is not necessary to go to church and give money … for many, nature can be a church. Some of the best people in history did not believe in God, while some of the worst deeds were done in God’s name.”

A couple of days ago someone asked me how many different religions were going to be represented at this interfaith service. I thought for a moment, then realized that, for me at least, it was the wrong question. My question is what do all these faith traditions have in common that brings us together to commemorate the 450th anniversary of the founding of the nation’s oldest city?

This really isn’t about a variety of institutional religions meeting for some conference. This service is the gathering of people from a number of faith traditions expressing our common values in this community in the context of this community in 2015.

When Pedro Menendez stepped foot on the shore of what is now St. Augustine he had 800 sailors, soldiers and civilians with him … all Catholic. But there is little doubt that some of those were converted Jews and Muslims … and not necessarily willingly converted. Thus, as the first Catholic mass was celebrated on these shores there were at least four faith traditions present … Catholic Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and the faith of the native indigenous people. Within days, after seizing Fort Caroline from the French, and after the massacre at Matanzas Inlet, the few prisoners captured by Menendez’s soldiers were brought to St. Augustine. These prisoners of war were Lutheran Huguenots … Protestant Christians. The multi-faith community of St. Augustine had an early start.

In 1738 Fort Mose was established for those who escaped slavery from the British colonies. Although they were required to swear allegiance to Spain and join the Catholic Church they also added the African indigenous faith traditions to the mix. And in 1777 the Minorcans from New Smyrna brought with them their Greek Orthodox faith.

St. Augustine’s history is rich in its multi-faith presence, even if its tolerance for all these different expressions was not. Pedro Menendez, and all the Spanish explorers, acted under the authority of papal bulls … papal decrees … from the 1400s that condoned the conquest of the Americas and other lands inhabited by indigenous people. These papal decrees required the native indigenous people to convert to Christianity, and if they did not, it authorized their enslavement or killing. The papal documents led to an international norm called the Doctrine of Discovery, which dehumanized non-Christians and legitimized their suppression by nations around the world, including by the United States.

St. Augustine was settled on the site of a Timucua village that may have been occupied for as long as 1,000 years before Pedro Menendez “discovered” it. The indigenous people who spoke the Timucua language lived in what is the northern part Florida and southern Georgia and may have numbered as many as 200,000 persons. Because of epidemics of infectious diseases to which the indigenous people had no natural immunity, and the killing of the Timucuas in skirmishes and named wars with the Spaniards, by 1700 their population was only 1,000. And the Timucua people … the original residents of what is now St. Augustine … were extinct by the time the territory became the 27th state in 1845.

We all live with the consequences of the Doctrine of Discovery today … most significantly the Native Americans. I could spend an hour saying more about this issue but I won’t. However, I will let you know that there is a premier showing of a documentary on the Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking the Domination Code, at the Corazon Theater on Labor Day at 1pm. Copies of the flyer about the showing will be available following the service.

So, again the question, what brings all these people of many faith traditions together tonight 450 years after this city was founded? For one, I believe that all our faith traditions have in common a reverence for, and a sanctity of all life … specifically our natural environment … earth, winds and waters, and all that lives in them. Secondly, our faith traditions have a respect for all humanity … we strive to treat others the way we want to be treated. When one suffers we all suffer. These two values … common to our faith traditions … are enough to transcend any differences we may have at the level of institutional religion.

Some say the world is divided into two kinds of people, those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those that don’t. Hindu, Muslim, Native American, Catholic Christian, Buddhist, Transcendentalist, Jewish, Protestant Christian, Unitarians, and more may all have their differences … and those difference divide the world into those like us … and all those who are not like us. And then there are the people here tonight, who for the most part see each other as fellow travelers on a faith journey … just following different paths that sometimes intersect.

The past is the past. Some of it is worth celebrating, and some of it needs redemption. This faith community gathered here tonight is a sign of hope for our future. When we can put aside that which divides us … when we can agree to disagree about our differences … and focus on what we share in common, then we can move forward to change the things that need to be changed so that no one is suffering in our midst. We can be a force for redemption. When our spirits find room to connect to the spirit that unites us all we can envision … and work for … a natural environment that will be enduring for our children, and grandchildren … and our grandchildren’s grandchildren. When we see each and every person on this planet as a sister or brother then we will work for a world that treats even the least of us the way that we ourselves want to be treated … in this generation and for generations yet to come.

Finally, I am one of those old hippies who has worn out too many bumper stickers that say, “Think globally. Act locally.” I want the best for this world. I think we all do. But look around you. How many people of color are with us tonight? Fifty years after St. Augustine was the watershed point for the Civil Rights Accommodations Act this community is still divided in many ways by race. The African Americans of today are the descendants of those indigenous people of Africa that were enslaved, at least in part, because of the Doctrine of Discovery that dehumanized non-Christians. We cannot undo history, but I can do something now, in this community, to bring redemption for the past, and hope for the future. This afternoon I called one of my African American colleagues who lives in West Augustine and invited him to begin a conversation about what more can happen in the nation’s oldest city that may indeed be a legacy of unity for the future. I encourage all of you to find your place to “act locally” to bring redemption for the past, and hope for the future.

I’ll close with a quote from a blog by someone who often attends St. Cyprian’s … and she probably attends some of your gatherings as well: “The bottom line is that I just love God! I love God so much I couldn’t contain it to just one WAY of loving God. I want to chant like a monk, I want to meditate like Buddha, I want to pray like Jesus, I want to melt into Mother Nature in the ocean like a Native American, I want to sing hymns in a Black Gospel choir, I want to dance like a Sufi. I want to shout out God, Allah, Lord Jesus Christ, Shiva Shiva Om! I want to praise God in every way humanly possible. I love God in all religions and I see God loving us through all religions.

God’s love is so immense … to think that God would constrain herself to only love us through one prophet or one savior at one point in time at one location on the planet doesn’t make any sense at all.”

We may be people of different religions. But I believe that were are people of many faith traditions that share some common values. When we all come together to care for our natural environment, and treat every other human being with dignity and respect, our one voice transcends anything that could possibly separates us.

Amen.