Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the reflections of our hearts be true, whole, and hopeful in you, God, our creator, compassion, and sustainer. Amen.

As progressive Christians in the United Church of Christ, we can learn so much from our own reading of Scripture, our personal conscience in our Congregational and Reformed heritage, but we also learn about our present existence by also looking at the lessons of tradition, community, and from the complicated history of the Church. While the history of the Church hopefully does NOT hamstring or confine us or cause us to not look forward with new vision, we should pray that it might also help to inform us.

While we might popularly think of the ancient/early Church as a unified or cohesive group, this is far from the truth. Every generation likes to imagine that it is living in the most complicated time of all time. Isn’t that the truth? If we rewind, however, some 1,700 years, we find that things…were almost as complicated as they are today.

The year 325 was particularly confusing. It was then 300 years since the Crucifixion and Assentation of Jesus Christ, and the church was undergoing the painful and complicated transition from being a movement into becoming an Roman Empire recognized institution with never before seen religious and political influence. With this new and overwhelming power came increased pressure for the growing institution of the Church to define what it stood for and what it believed. The Church wasn’t so sure what it believed on the whole, so the leaders of the ancient church gathered the First Council of Nicaea, and by 325 approved the Nicene Creed. Sixty years later, in 381, the church would reaffirm this creed (statement of belief) in what was called the Constantinopolitan Creed to form the full Nicene Creed, as we know it today. You all think that you two year board or committee appointments are long, imagine sitting on a committee for sixty plus years to complete one document! Now that is what I call an appointment.

Now, in the United Church of Christ, since 1957 at our inception as a modern denomination, we decided to agree to give the creeds standing without giving them deciding power over our lives of faith and belief. We say and believe in the United Church of Christ that the creeds are testaments to our faith rather than tests of faith. We claim in the UCC that, quote, “The UCC has no rigid formulation of doctrine or attachment to creeds or structures. Its overarching creed is love. UCC pastors and teachers are known for their commitment to excellence in theological preparation, interpretation of the scripture and justice advocacy. Even so, love and unity in the midst of our diversity are our greatest assets.”

Even so, today, we can learn something, as a testament of faith rather than a test of faith, from what the Nicene Creed was concerned with. The creed, in 325, was a response to the Arian Controversy that questioned if Jesus was both human and divine. In the end, the goal of the creed was to affirm the wild and magical idea that we still hold in one way or
another in the UCC that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. Of course, since
this is the UCC, even in this congregation what we understand that to mean and when in
the Jesus story he functions as divine and human varies wildly even at Plymouth, and that
is a good thing. Fully human and fully divine… what a strange and wonderful idea.
Here is the important part for today about all this. The church in 325 was in transition
from being a decentralized movement without concrete structures into an institution with
untold power and unity. Today we are moving from institution back into a movement. In
that moment of crisis and transition it makes this radical claim about Jesus and God-
Jesus is both fully human and fully divine.

The struggle of the Church in 325 was to maintain the Divinity of Jesus in the face of
Arianism. The struggle of the church at that time wasn’t with the fully human part of
Jesus, but with the divinity of Jesus: Fully human and fully divine.

What is the struggle of the church and the world today? Our struggle is to understand what it even means to be fully and truly human. The difficult part of this idea (Fully human and fully divine) isn’t the part about Jesus being, at times in the story, fully Divine. The difficult part today is this idea of being “fully human.” We don’t know what it is like to be Divine (or… at least I don’t…some of you might…), so we can understand this fully Divine business. Or if we can’t understand it, we accept it as part of Christian tradition.

The question for the Church and maybe… as I see it… the call of the Church in 2016 is very different from the question and the call of the church in 325. The question today is how do we become, like Jesus, fully human? The mystery of the Church that we bring to this modern world is a Christ who is fully divine and yet fully human in a time when we are all dehumanized. There is a relentless call in our days, in our work, in our relationships to become mechanized, to imitate and to keep-up-with the competition of machines and computers.

We are no longer keeping up with the Jones family. Metaphorically, the Jones family tree died off sometime in the 1950’s along with the Jetson family. Today we are competing with the Apples, Sony, Intel, and Google’s… as if they were humans. In the face of this competition and technology, our daily lives and relationships in 2016 are experiencing social distancing and mechanization even in how we relate and show love or pain with each other.

As a young minister, I am often asked what the purpose or the future of the church might be in today’s world. The church today has the antidote to this social distancing in a Jesus Christ who is, yes, always fully Divine (that is no longer the question it was in 325), but who also a Christ who reminds us, in ways that we are no longer able to remember on our own, how to be fully human! The Nicene Creed has come 360 degrees to mean something new. How can we remain fully human in 2016, 2026, 2316, and even to the year 3,000 and beyond? The antidote is held in the vaults of the ancient church and it is called being fully human by imitating and remembering the compassion of the Christ.
Compassion is the antidote to losing our humanity and thereby our interrelationship with the Christ and thereby God and each other.

Our Gospel reading for today is from Luke 7:11-17, and it is a remarkable passage that shows Jesus, fully Divine and fully Human showing us what compassion looks like. It is most commonly referred to as, “Jesus Raises the Widow’s Son at Nain,” but even 30 years ago scholar William Barkley renamed it, “The Compassion of Christ,” and emphatically said that, (quote) “In many ways this is the loveliest story in all the gospels. It tells of the pathos and the poignancy of human life… There is all the ageless sorrow of the world in the austere and simple sentence, ‘He was his mother’s only son and she was a widow.’ Never morning wore to evening but some heart did break. To the pathos of human life, Luke adds the compassion of Christ.”

In the Gospel passage for today, Jesus has just healed someone in another town and proceeds on his way surrounded by a joyful and jubilant crowd when the large crowd following Jesus encounters another large crowd coming from the other direction. This second crowd is experiencing a deep and overwhelming feeling of sadness and mourning for the death of a widow’s only son. “Soon afterwards (after a healing), he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her….”

Two large crowds meet in a clearing, and both feel the fullness of human experience as they are brought into unity and the fullness of human life with Christ. Life lived and felt from the gut of sadness and life lives and felt from the miracle of hope are both present here in Luke 7.

It is so easy to live in our own crowd today and to pass the feelings and sadness, pain, morning and loss of others in the other crowd without even noticing. So consumed with our own elation, our own Facebook pages or demands of work and email that we don’t feel the reality and the pain of those around us. Even with those whom we claim to love and claim to know, sometimes we shrink from giving-up our own emotional security and superiority (efficiency) to feel what they are feeling with compassion.

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Not having compassion is, make no mistake, extremely efficient (machine-like). The demand today to proceed efficiently, to imitate machines, to compete with computers has overcome the need to be fully human. Slowly but surely, the artificial competition of machines is making it harder for us to remember what it feels like to be fully human and filled with compassion.

Yes, the purpose of the Nicene Creed was to get a church that was going from a movement to an impenetrable institution to offer consistency of message, but what does it mean for us as a church going from institution to Christ movement again? What can these words mean now for a Church, the realm and outpost of a compassionate God, in a world that is trying to turn us from compassion to efficiency:

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
tru God from true God,  
begetten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
and became truly human.”

The question for the church of 2016 is very different from the challenge of the church in 325. How does this creed speak to us today as a testament rather than a test of faith? This is how: We now must ask how do we remain truly and fully human with Jesus? The church is our hope and our strength to remain compassionate beings. The church and Jesus remind us that when our crowd of joy encounters another crowd of sorrow, we are not to pass by and remain two separate crowds…. But our call is to become one crowd united in compassion and thereby fully and truly and totally human in pathos, love, sorrow, and compassion… from this day and forevermore. **Efficiency is not the same as Christianity.** The human heart cannot be a machine if it is to remain whole and completely human. Our concern is no longer Arianism as it was in the year 325. Today our concern is far greater than that, for it is a concern over a loss of human compassion, humanity, and our common link as fully human to Christ and God. Amen.