



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Daniel Pawlus: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Daniel Pawlus.

Lillian Daniel: And I’m Lillian Daniel. Our guest today is The Rev. John Thomas, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ. He’s going to talk to us about the virtues of gentleness in a world where, seemingly, it’s in short supply.

Daniel Pawlus: We also welcome back Dr. Martin Marty, Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago Divinity School. He has a reflection in our ongoing series on the “Fruits of the Spirit.”

Lillian Daniel: And we start with the story of a woman whose passion is making friends with people from other races and religions. Gwendolyn Clayborne arranges informal gatherings in her home to encourage new friendships and a new understanding of each other’s religious beliefs. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Gwendolyn Clayborne: I was born to a Baha’i mother—a mother who became a Baha’i two years before I was born—but to a very strong Christian grandmother and other relatives. Because there were so many strong Christians around me and young people were getting baptized, I wanted to be baptized. I have a very unique upbringing: going to Bible school, going to summer camp with Baptists, all black Baptist children and adults, and then going to Baha’i school in the summer the same year. It was predominately white and there were a few blacks that were there, maybe 10 percent. Growing up in the segregated South, you had to go to colored-only water fountains. I remember having to go to the back of the bus. Baha’is never met in segregated groups. Never, even in the South during those days. And so I didn’t realize that that was such a profound thing to do. It was just the way it should be. That was my feeling. The elimination of prejudice of all kinds, Bahá’u’lláh is very clear about the teachings be it religious, be it racial, be it ethnic. Whatever. He said it doesn’t belong in our society.

I did want to be in a community that had some diversity. That’s how I ended up in Glencoe. In the Baha’i writings it talks about the solving of racial issues. That if we were to solve this problem it would be the assurance of world peace. So we talked about it and we said, “Let’s start inviting people to our home.” We decided to start a group called Focus. The purpose of Focus was to study the issue between blacks and whites according to the guidance of Baha’i writings; and it’s mainly to promote friendships.

[I'd like to thank everybody for joining us.] Should we promote friendships, other things will fall into place.

[People at work will say I have a black friend, I have an Asian friend, I have a Latino friend. They'll say that, but those people have never been one another's' homes. And we feel that if you start to have them to your homes, you really can start to develop a deep friendship. And then these issues can be addressed in a very mature way because...]

Our hope is that people who come to our homes, will want to open their homes and we like to keep them relatively small and intimate. When we get to a certain size we want then those groups to break off and to start their own groups. One of the biggest issues and most difficult things in this country is to talk about race. Nobody alive today created the problem. But you know what? We have the responsibility to fix it. It's as simple as that. Suppose your child comes home and they want to marry a person of African descent? You know, this is the world we're living in and I think we're moving in the right direction. I'm very proud of the U.S., really, in these recent days. We were created to live together and I think that's God plan, and we cannot frustrate God's plan.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Daniel Pawlus: Gwendolyn Clayborne is a college administrator and member of the Glencoe, Illinois human rights commission. We thank her for sharing her story. Now, let me tell you about today's speaker.

The Rev. John Thomas has served since 1999 as General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, a denomination with 1.2 million people and 5,600 congregations. Under John's leadership, the United Church of Christ has continued its historic commitment to being, in their words, "a united and uniting, multiracial and multicultural, accessible to all, open and affirming, and peace with justice church." John was a speaker on "30 Good Minutes" in 2002 and it's a great honor to welcome him back to the program. Welcome, John.

MESSAGE

John Thomas: Thank you, Dan.

Our text for today is from Philipians, chapter 4, versus 4-7: "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be made known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, may your request be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

There's a certain enthusiasm these days for an aggressive, assertive Christianity, an approach to piety often matched in the public realm where the "don't get mad, get even" approach to life is honored, not just in our personal relationships but in foreign affairs, and where "pre-emptive strikes" aren't just military policy but the way we deal with our own more intimate vulnerabilities.

We certainly saw this in our recent election season. Obama felt the need to show how tough he can be. McCain liked to demonstrate how aggressively provocative he can be. Sarah Palin portrayed herself as a take-no-prisoner hockey mom. And Joe Biden enjoyed telling about his childhood in blue collar Scranton, Pennsylvania, where learning to bloody the nose of bullies who taunted him was both encouraged and admired by his mother. Everyone was worried about the “wimp factor.” It’s no surprise we never saw a campaign button announcing “the gentle candidate!”

I wonder what each of these self-proclaimed Christians would make of Paul’s words to the struggling, persecuted church of Philippi: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say Rejoice. Let your gentleness be made known to everyone.” Is gentleness just a private virtue, a quality to be shown only in our intimate personal relationships, but not really suitable for “the real” world where dangerous threats are encountered and more muscular virtues are called for? Apparently Paul doesn’t think so. His letter is addressed to Christians facing the ominous prospect of persecution; imprisonment and death where, even likely, could be the case. Philippi was an important Roman city. Its residents were patriotic Roman citizens, comfortable, even enthusiastic in their embrace of the cult of the emperor. To claim that Jesus Christ is Lord was not merely the spiritual recitation of a pious creed; it was a defiant political act of resistance to the empire and its civil religion. This creed could get you in very dangerous trouble.

In spite of that, Paul closes his letter to the Philippians, counseling gentleness toward everyone. Making this plea even more remarkable is the fact that Paul himself is in prison. Paul is not encouraging gentleness from a comfortable and safe retreat house. He knows what it means to face dangerous, aggressive hostility. Yet he counsels neither fight nor flight. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. His was a violent world. So is ours. Violence—pre-emptive or reactive—is an easy, tempting approach to threat whether in the home, the school, the workplace, the streets, or the arena of global politics. But Paul offers an alternative response to the endless and seemingly impeccable logic of violent response: “Don’t be conformed to this world.” he tells his readers in Romans. Let your gentleness be known to everyone, which presumably includes enemies, too.

A few years ago I visited Beirut, Lebanon, a place caught up in cycles of violence for many years. We went to the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps where Palestinians have lived hemmed in for nearly six decades, unable to return home, unwanted in Lebanon and much of the rest of the world. It’s a place teeming with rage and bristling with weapons in the hands of Syrian soldiers, Lebanese police, and Hezbollah militia. During my visit to Lebanon, I had, for reasons not quite clear to me, been accompanied by four heavily armed guards from the Presidential security detail. It wasn’t a particularly comforting experience although I confess that when we got to the refugee camps, I found those guards reassuring. But our guide, a retired professor from the American University in Beirut, now a volunteer for the Middle East Council of Churches, made it clear to the guards that they would not be accompanying us in. Hurried phone calls were made, arguments offered, but Sylvia was adamant. “If we go in with guns, the people will be frightened, suspicious. We won’t be safe. But the people know me, they know the church. They know that we’re friends. With me you’ll be safe.” And so we marched into this cauldron of frustration and violence and rage, armed not with weapons, but with the witness of the church’s love. “Let your gentleness be known to all.”

Some will be quick to call this naiveté, the pious thoughts of the preacher, hardly suitable for life's rough and tumble. To be sure, gentleness has sometimes led to martyrdom, as it did for Paul. But there is power in gentleness, testifying to a confidence that, in all circumstances, the Lord is near, and that the peace of God will guard, if not our bodies, at least our hearts and our minds. Aggressive violence, tit for tat retribution has been the world's staple for a long time. We always seem to find a way to justify it, the necessary evil we sort of lament but eagerly embrace and often admire. In the midst of the climate of fear over national security it may not be possible to ask our political leaders to publicly claim this Christian virtue, at least not if they want to be elected. But, what about us, running not for office but for the heavenly prize? Could we try it? Let your gentleness be made known to all.

CONVERSATION

Lillian Daniel: If you'd like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from John Thomas, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or read the text anytime. Now, let's talk with John Thomas. John, thank you for being with us today, and for stepping aside from your responsibilities heading up our denomination. It occurred to me in your remarks about gentleness, you had many examples from the world of politics and international relations, but what happens when churches or congregations lose that spirit of gentleness?

John Thomas: Well, I long ago gave up my illusions about the gentleness of church politics, but I still can get disappointed. We often find ourselves beating each other, win-win at all costs, and in the process I think we lose sense, lose track of what it's all about. It's about God's love for us and how we seek to show that to others.

Lillian Daniel: As if we're sort of caught up, too, in the sense that we're righteous and fighting for something good, so we don't need to be gentle.

John Thomas: Absolutely. You better be tough, we have justice and righteousness on our side. In the process we display the very things we're arguing against.

Daniel Pawlus: I wonder, John, where do you think this aggressive, assertive Christianity comes from? Is it born into a church setting? Is it formulated by what's happening in society? Is it a combination of all those things? It seems like it's ramped up a lot and continues to ramp up.

John Thomas: Well, I think, certainly you can find in the Bible illustrations of a kind of an aggressiveness of Jesus himself. He turns over the tables in the temple. And there are many illustrations where extreme oppression or unrighteousness calls for aggressive, kind of assertive speech for truth. But I think we also soak it up from the culture around us and we allow the church to reflect the culture rather than mirroring a different kind of image to the culture.

Lillian Daniel: John, the United Church of Christ is known in sort of the American religious landscape as being out there early and often on the key social justice issues, be it civil rights or the ordination of women, or the ordination of gays and lesbians in the church. We tend to be out front early. Is it possible to be that kind of justice focus church and still be gentle?

John Thomas: I think it's not only possible, it's absolutely essential. I was thinking today, as I was reflecting on my own remarks, about people who live that out and I think of Desmond Tutu, who was one of the most powerful figures in the 20th century and, indeed, the 21st century, for justice, for liberation, but always with a kind of gentleness of spirit and hospitality to others. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke with great power but was, I think, at the heart level a gentle person. Gandhi was a person of great gentleness. So that the people in my life, and I suspect in our lives together in the church, who have had the most impact have spoken with great power, great courage but underneath it has been a gentleness that reflects, I think, their deep faith and their sense that their comfort comes from belonging to God.

Daniel Pawlus: Let's talk a little bit, John, about the UCC identity. You're very proactive in how you reach out to the community through different commercials and in a way that's different than many other denominations, I think. Can you speak to that a little bit about how that works, how you help manage that, what some of the goals behind that are?

John Thomas: Well, we've realized that the day of simply sitting in church and waiting for people to come is over, that we need to be out in the streets, out in the marketplace, and out in the media that people use. Just as Paul used the public media of his day, the spoken word in the center of the community, we need to be on television, on the radio, on the web. And so these last years have been a kind of time for experimentation for us. We've had fun. We've been playful. And I think we've discovered, if nothing else, that people are delighted to know that there is a church that can be a little whimsical and can sort of take itself not too seriously. Religion sometimes seems so sober and grim and oppressive, that humor and laughter, particularly if it's poked at ourselves a bit, can be effective.

Daniel Pawlus: Give me some specific examples of that. I think what you're alluding to are some of the commercials, but we have some time today. How have you used humor and the things you're talking about to reach out and welcome people to the United Church of Christ?

John Thomas: Well, one of the central themes we've been trying to communicate is that no matter who you are or where you are in life's journey, you're welcome here at the United Church of Christ. Many churches, of course, affirm that and try to live that out. But our message was particularly to people who are not already part of the church, but people who have even been alienated from the church or wounded by the church or for whatever reason, feel unwelcome. So one of our commercials was really setup as kind of bouncer commercial. A couple of nightclub bouncers outside a church with the velvet rope saying who could come in and who had to stay out. When Sponge Bob Squarepants, the cartoon character was accused by someone from the religious right of being sort of a front for the gay agenda, we had Sponge Bob Squarepants doll in my office and a picture taken with me saying that I welcomed Sponge Bob to the United Church of Christ. It was a serious message about tolerance, about inclusion, but it was done in a playful kind of way. And I suspect my legacy, if nothing else, will be my picture with Sponge Bob.

Lillian Daniel: It probably made you popular with any children around!

John Thomas: In fact, I actually had to start watching the show so I could answer questions for kids when I went out to local churches.

Lillian Daniel: That's great. John, tell us something about the statement that we hear a lot of times about the United Church of Christ, that God is still speaking. What does that mean?

John Thomas: Well, that's the phrase we've picked up. It really comes originally from one of our forbearers, John Robinson, who said goodbye to the Pilgrims as they left for the New World from Holland, and he reminded them that the Lord has yet more light and truth to bring forth from God's Holy Word. But then we picked up a very contemporary, more secular version from Gracie Allen who left a note for her husband, George, when she died. She said, "Remember, never place a period where God has placed a comma." And we added, "God is still speaking," to that. We believe that in these ancient words in the Scriptures, God still speaks in new and fresh ways to respond to the changing circumstances and challenges of our day. And so God is speaking a new and fresh word, even though the words come out of those enduring, ancient words from the texts of Scripture.

Lillian Daniel: Does that change the way you read the Bible?

John Thomas: I don't think so because I think everyone has always read the Bible that way. Jesus himself was interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures and trying to understand how they spoke in fresh, compelling ways: You have heard it said..., but I say to you. God is still speaking. So I think we continue to read in that spirit that we have heard it said, but new occasions teach new duties and call us to confront challenges that the ancient writers could never have imagined. So it's important to try to stay true to the intentions and the original wisdom of those texts, but see how they apply themselves in a new age in a new way.

Daniel Pawlus: As president of the United Church of Christ, John, I wonder: you must face several challenges in managing the denomination. What are, perhaps, a few of those that you're hearing from pastors like Lillian or other folks that you're trying to help negotiate and move forward in a positive way? And if we have UCC ministers watching the program, you'd like them to know that you're working on it in an active way.

John Thomas: Well, I should say with one of our great pastors here, I never try to manage the denomination.

Lillian Daniel: It's like herding cats!

John Thomas: Like herding cats, but we love our cats. So I think part of the challenge is to try to give people a sense of a unifying vision, something that holds us together, that gives us a sense of movement into the future, that's very important to a time when it can be discouraging to be a pastor of a local church when it's very challenging, to know that you're part of something bigger, part of a movement that has a great legacy from the past and a great gift to the future. That's one of the things we've been trying to do. I think another important piece is to continue to claim that legacy in compelling ways around issues of justice and peace in the world. We have a distinctive voice in the American religious scene and I think it's important for our local churches to know

that without them something would be missing from this culture. And it's important and vital that we remain strong and courageous in our voice.

Lillian Daniel: John, some people have suggested that we live in a post-denominational age, that the different denominations in Christianity are...everything is changing and that the need for denominations is not the same as it was. How do you react to those statements?

John Thomas: I agree that there's been great change and, of course, that the denomination boundaries are so fluid these days. Our members come and go and they bring gifts and riches and challenges from their own traditions. And some of our members move into other traditions. So in that sense, denominations aren't quite as important to people. But I do think that the denominations do denominate. They do declare, they do state. They sort of give a sense of a particular vocation, a particular distinctive voice. And so I describe denominations, not so much these days as institutions, but an accent on the Gospel: the way in which you articulate it with a particular emphasis accent, a particular stress, a particular emphasis. As in any human conversation, you remove some of the voices from the conversation and the whole ecumenical witness is diminished.

Lillian Daniel: That's a lovely image that we're all speaking the same language and saying the same message, but with different accents. That's very beautiful. Well, thank you, John.

REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: And now we turn to our friend, Dr. Martin Marty, Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago Divinity School. He has some thoughts on "gentleness" in our ongoing series on the "Fruits of the Spirit."

REFLECTION

Martin Marty: You are not likely to be impressed by someone who is described *only* as gentle. The nothing-but-gentle person is too soft to express opinions, can be pushed around, and has too narrow an emotional range to be interesting. You would not want a prophet like Amos to be gentle as he faced injustice, but you would like him more if he had a gentle side. You would not want "gentle Jesus" to be *only* gentle in the face of those who exploited the poor, but you are happy—aren't you?—that his gentle side shows up when he forgives, rescues lost sheep, or has compassion on a hungry crowd. The Greek word for "gentleness" translates well as "meekness." Fine. Jesus said that the meek shall inherit the earth. In the meantime we welcome strong people of conviction who do not browbeat others, but share their struggles and often gently convince them to receive the gifts of the Spirit.

CLOSING

Lillian Daniel: Thank you, Marty, and our thanks again to John Thomas, Gwendolyn Clayborne and you for being with us today on "30 Good Minutes." I'm Lillian Daniel.

Daniel Pawlus: And I'm Daniel Pawlus. As we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today's program and an extensive collection of other messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at "30 Good Minutes," may peace be with you in the week ahead.