



# FROM THE PULPIT

## *North Shore Congregational Church*

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### **“What Does It Mean to be Congregational?”**

**Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching**

*I Corinthians 12: 12-27*

*September 10, 2017*

*The following is an introduction to this message that was delivered by our Moderator, Norm Christensen, at the outset of this sermon:*

As I reported to you in the August “News Letter”, one of the highlights of every Annual Meeting of our National Association, is the “Congregational Lecture”, which historically has most often been delivered by a long serving ordained minister. This year, however, it was presented by a five member panel, each person sharing in his or her words what it means to own the covenant and share in the history, freedom and responsibility of participating and worshiping in the “Congregational Way”. Our own Rev Dr. Marty Hall was a member of that panel. His words spoke to all and I have asked him to consider sharing them again this morning, so that they may speak to all of us blessed to worship today in this place. Thank you Marty.

*At this time Rev. Marty took over to begin the sermon:*

I remember a conversation with our youngest – our son Jay – when he was probably 3 or 4. We had closed up the church building after our Sunday services and we were headed out to lunch when, just as we were pulling into the parking lot at the restaurant, Jay decided to ask, ‘Dad, why does God love us?’ I remember, in that moment, feeling totally speechless, knowing that this was either a question we were going to spend hours on, or one we weren’t going to tackle at all. In no way, however, was I going to try to explain the motivations of God’s love for us, to a 3 year-old, in a span of 30 seconds as walked into the restaurant. So, I simply made some comment that that was a conversation for another time, and we moved on.

I recalled that conversation going into this particular presentation at the annual meeting in June, however, because that was very much the same way I felt about this question I had been asked to tackle for the panel. ‘What does it mean to be Congregational?’ That question quickly started to reverberate with that same sense of grandiosity that I felt in the face of our Jay’s theological inquiry. My mind kept tracking in a million different directions that would take hours, if not days, to explore – and I had ten minutes! So, I struggled with what exactly I would be able to say in the 600 seconds I was granted to answer that question.

I sat down and pulled a few books off my shelf – Art Rouner’s Congregational Way of Life, Atkins and Fagley’s History of American Congregationalism, Henry Dexter’s Congregationalism over the last 300 years, I kind of jumped from one Congregational historian to another as I skimmed the pages looking for something that might send me in a particular direction, but those common themes and catch-phrases of our tradition continued to spill from my mind – faith, freedom, fellowship, ecclesiastical autonomy, covenants, Puritan roots, Pilgrim ancestry, Mayflower journeys – all of the things that it means to be Congregational kept racing through my mind when, more and more, my heart started to hone in on an underlying principal that I have often considered in relation to most every one of these cornerstone concepts and considerations of our Way. The more I thought about the plethora of ideals and narratives that emerge when we talk about what means to be Congregational, the more my heart and mind centered on the foundational notion that, in the vast majority of these concepts and considerations, we are confronted by the reality that, what it means to be Congregational is that, in the end, it’s on you!

Think about the story of our Puritan ancestors who gathered in Scrooby, Gainsboro, and elsewhere – covertly huddling in small homes, driven by their faith and conviction, to pursue a life of worship and discipleship that would be more fruitful to the nourishment of their relationship with God. Think about the risks they took upon themselves as they bore the name of Pilgrim and journeyed to Holland and then some years later boarded the Mayflower to sail the new world to live out this burgeoning way of being faithful that we know, today, as Congregational. Lives overturned, entirely driven towards the purpose of garnering a deeper relationship with God not because someone told them what to do, when to do it, or how to get it done – but, because they took it upon themselves to fully live out their relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

Consider the faith to which we are called in our Way – a faith not dictated by compulsory doctrine or delineated creed, but a faith of covenantal relationship with God. A faith in which we, as individuals, voluntarily and intentionally enter into an ever-evolving conversation and relationship with God. A faith in which we are persistently compelled to question, consider and re-create our understandings of who and what God is in our lives, and who and what God longs for us to be in light of his love.

Consider that fellowship of which we are part as individuals, and as churches. That cornerstone notion of autonomy in the local church and covenantal relationship among the members of those local churches inherently brings to the forefront the profound reality that the fellowship of which we are a part is a fellowship by choice. We are not, nor can we be, forced into relationship with one another in our Way. The fellowship that we hold as foundational to our manner of being a church is one we know by our choice – by our very decision to engage with one another in the local church, and with other churches of our associations.

Think of that freedom that is so quickly the neon-lined banner surrounding most every conversation about the nature of the Congregational Way! We can spend hours talking about our freedom from outside control, theological dictate and hierarchical structures, but the truth is that there is a purpose to that freedom. As has so often been said, a purpose not just in a freedom from restrictions, but a freedom for the purpose of living out our faith with Jesus as head of the

Church and Lord of our lives. In other words – a freedom from external compulsions forcing us into a relationship with God that provides us the glorious freedom of allowing us to enter into that relationship ourselves!

And, think of the countless Congregational churches that have been formed throughout the still infant history of our nation. So many of them formed not by a Minister planting a church, not by a denomination establishing a new body, but by people, often gathered in some living room somewhere in town, coming together in a common faith and starting a church. For us, at North Shore Congregational Church, nearly 70 years of ministry, hundreds upon hundreds of baptisms and confirmations, thousands of worship services and incalculable works of service and support to those in need in the greater Milwaukee area began with 25 people literally kneeling down at a coffee table in the living room of a Fox Point home on April 27, 1949. With no one but themselves and their God to count on, they gathered together to sign that declaration and covenant that founded the church we are today.

No matter which way and how we look at the stories and cornerstone principals of our way of being faithful, they all lead back to this road that reminds us that what means to be Congregational is that it's on you to make it real in life!

- The principals and history of our Way are such that you are not going to be told what you need to believe in order to know the truth of God or what you need to do to be right with God.
- The manner of our way of being a church is that it is not the Minister or the leadership that carries the ministry, but it is the people giving of themselves in every way for the purpose of living out their faith and relationship with God that will breathe new life into the body.
- The very essence of what it means to be Congregational is that, as a Congregationalist, it's on you – To engage in your ever-growing relationship with God, to involve yourself in the body of Christ, to utilize the gifts God has given you, and to own the call to be responsible for your faith, committed to fellowship with others and ready to use the freedom of our Way to personally embrace that which God is seeking to do in your life.

In our culture of ceaselessly seeking to pass the buck, shift the blame and avoid any personal responsibility in every way possible – ours is a Way that simply doesn't give that luxury. What it means to be Congregational is that the very living out of your faith, in every sense, is on you. So, what it means to be Congregational is that we own that privilege and responsibility, and live it, every day!