

Our UCC DNA

Acts 2:42-47

Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: *O God, give us a listening ear—one that welcomes correction and inspires higher resolve. Help us hear the needs of the world so that we may turn everything decent in our nature into action and our lives into paths of healing for others. Amen.* (Adapted from Howard Thurman’s “Give Me the Listening Ear” *Meditations of the Heart*)

In its October 2010 issue, *Tails Magazine*, a publication for high-end pet products and celebrity pet owners, ran a cover line about Rachel Ray that read, “Rachel Ray finds inspiration in cooking...” Because it might sound offensive and there might be children listening here or on Zoom, I won’t complete the teaser. I’ve omitted the exact words to keep things family-friendly—there’s your hint—but let’s just say a missing Oxford comma changed the intended meaning of the headline. Without that comma, it sounded like Rachel Ray was putting her sources of inspiration in a cooking pot. It was a simple typo, but it was enough to change her character from a celebrity chef into a villain.

It matters **where you put the comma**. Or, as in the case of the reading this morning in Acts chapter two, it matters where you **split the text**, as one commentator puts it.¹

The New Testament was originally written in Greek without commas, periods, paragraph breaks, or even spaces between words—just one continuous stream of letters, known as *scriptio continua* (Latin for “continuous script”). No chapters, verses, or headings as we have them in our Bibles today. Punctuation as we know it—commas, colons, and question marks—came much later, gradually added by scribes to help in reading and interpretation. It wasn’t standardized until centuries later with the advent of printing around the 15th century.

So when you see commas in your English Bible, those aren’t original—they are **editorial decisions**.

¹ Meg Jenista, “Acts 2:42-47” sermon commentary for Sunday, April 26, 2026, <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2026-04-20/acts-242-47-4/>

Why is this important?

This is important because while punctuation helps us read and interpret, when it is placed poorly, it can **misshape our understanding**—and, even more drastically, our **discipleship**. Consider how the lectionary divides Acts 2.

First, we hear the story of Jesus. Then, we go home. A week later, we hear about the Holy Spirit's arrival and the baptism of 3,000 people after Peter's sermon. There ends the lesson—and we go home again. This structure makes the final verses of the chapter—verses 42-47, the passage we read today—feel like a separate thought.

But what if we've placed the comma in the wrong place? What if the response to the Holy Spirit isn't just that initial moment of conviction or the decision to be baptized? What if the *entire* passage—everything from the first sermon to the final verse—is actually one continuous story? If so, then the narrative reveals a deeper rhythm: a story of how God's people **respond to the Spirit not just once, but constantly**.

When you look at it that way, everything changes.

Because when we respond to the infusing power of the Holy Spirit, it isn't just a moment of salvation. It isn't just an initial decision—it's a **process of learning to live differently**.

The problem is, we often place a mental "comma" between verse 41 and verse 42, right where our text this morning begins. But doing that creates a **false divide**. It makes us think that responding to the Spirit and learning to live a common life are two separate activities when, in reality, they're one and the same.

As that commentator I referenced earlier asserts, "A bifurcated text leads to a bifurcated faith, leading people to bifurcated lives."² In other words, when we divide our scripture, we divide ourselves. We make it possible to have a powerful experience on Sunday, then go back to exploiting people on Monday. We proclaim **Jesus is Lord** during worship, but pledge allegiance

² Ibid.

to unjust systems the rest of the week. We act like spiritual beings for one hour, then **set aside our values** on Monday.

Every time the world calls us hypocrites, they've actually got a point. We've let a massive gap grow between what we say we believe and how we actually live. And that disconnect? It starts with how we read the Bible. To a world that's watching our every move, it really does matter where we put the comma.

We talk about spiritual experiences, but the first Christians defined spirituality through their bank accounts and dinner tables. For them, it's applying the truths of scripture in practical terms.

The Spirit's presence didn't fade when the "excitement" of the first sermon ended; it manifested in what followed. In Acts 2:42–47, the early church didn't just pray together; they shared everything so that no one went without. They practiced Jesus' teachings about social transformation, not just spiritual.

This echoes a passage in Amos, one of scripture's strongest critiques of religious hypocrisy. Speaking for God, Amos declares,

I hate, I despise your festivals, and take no delight in your solemn assemblies... Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Take away the noise of your songs. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:21-24).

The prophet Amos warns Israel against this kind of divided faith and religious hypocrisy. They were deeply religious—faithful in their rituals and observance of the Law. But God says **worship without justice is hollow**. Ritual without ethics is a parody. Their songs become noise because the same hands lifted in praise are also oppressing the poor and pushing them further down. (Amos 2:7).

Amos isn't saying sacrifice is wrong. He's saying worship without righteousness is offensive to God. In Israel's public life, the wealthy used religious activity as a **smokescreen**—hiding their failure to care for the vulnerable, the poor, the marginalized.

Look, the Gospel is *holistic*. It's not only about the private, spiritual afterlife but also about a comprehensive restoration of every dimension of human existence and the cosmos. The Gospel addresses the **whole person**—body, mind, and spirit, and the **whole world**—social, economic, political, and environmental. Jesus did not just preach about the Kingdom; he healed the sick, fed the hungry, and challenged corrupt systems.

One of the earliest Christian slogans was simple: "**Jesus is Lord.**" On the surface, it sounds like a prayer. In reality, it was an act of subversion. But it wasn't a call to arms to overthrow the Roman Empire by force; it was a declaration of allegiance that directly challenged its propaganda. Because to say "Jesus is Lord" is to say that **Caesar is not**. It places Jesus above the Emperor, insisting that our **ultimate loyalty belongs not to any human leader but to Christ alone.**

In the first century, the mandatory "pledge of allegiance" for a Roman citizen was "Caesar is Lord" (*Kaisar Kyrios*). Roman Emperors were often deified and given titles like "Son of God," "Savior of the World," and "Lord." So, declaring that "Jesus is Lord" was considered treasonous because it claimed that an ultimate authority existed above the state.

That same tension—between the demands of the state and the call of Christ—defines our modern mission. We recognize that a faith that fails to challenge systems claiming authority over God and human dignity is not the faith of the early church.

In the United Church of Christ, we believe **faith** isn't just a **Sunday feeling**—it's about taking what happens in worship and living it out the rest of the week. Advocating for justice is part and parcel of the Gospel proclamation. We **can't praise God** in the pews while **ignoring unjust systems** in the world.

We at First Congregational are part of this courageous history. We believe that *God is still speaking*, calling us to move beyond "noise" and into "righteousness."

As the Rev. John Dorhauer, former General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, stated, the UCC is a progressive, justice-driven institution grounded in the radical welcome of all people. Embracing the belief that "God is Still Speaking," we strive for collective liberation, equity,

and environmental wholeness, boldly witnessing to the possibility of a just world for everyone.

Echoing this understanding of our calling, Joseph Evans said it best with these words, which he so eloquently delivered as president of the 1977 General Synod, a national gathering of UCC churches. Evans declared,

I love the UCC for its courageous history and its devotion to the equality of all God's children. From feeding the hungry to breaking the chains of the oppressed, this church acts on its calling. But most of all, I love this church because I believe that in our fellowship we understand, better than most, that the love of God in Christ cannot ever be fully expressed except in a just society (Paraphrased version from the *Minutes of the 1977 General Synod*, p. 125.).

Let me repeat that last phrase: "that the love of God in Christ cannot ever be fully expressed except in a just society."

May we refuse to put a **comma between our worship and daily lives**. Between Sunday and Monday. May the ongoing presence and power of the Holy Spirit continually infuse everything we do. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**