Our reading today from Luke purports to describe the methods of the earliest Christian missionaries. The reading claims to describe the operations of the advance parties that Jesus sent out in front of him, to identify towns that would be receptive to his message, and to prepare them for the arrival of Jesus. Our reading provides the image of missionaries sweeping through a town, encountering receptiveness or indifference, or even hostility. Jesus instructs the missionaries that if they are welcomed, they are to remain in the town to proselytize. If not welcomed, however, the response is to be controlled defiance. The missionaries are to go into the streets of the town and say, “Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest of you,” and then stomp out of town.

Now, I should at the outset say that this portion of the Gospel was written about 50 years after Jesus’s death, and there is no reason to think that the text accurately reflects Jesus’s instructions to his disciples. It is more likely that the text reflects an attitude toward mission at the time the Gospel was written late in the first century, say about the year 80 or 85, when the still-tiny Christian movement was having difficulty getting established. And according to historians,
when converts were made to the new faith, they generally would not have been made on the basis of sweeps of missionaries through villages, but rather on the basis of extended conversation between very early converts and their friends and neighbors, in the course of their everyday lives.

But still, historical accuracy aside, I think it’s fair to say that our passage from Luke today, especially with its depiction of a kind of grim hostility to those refusing to accept the missionary message, conforms with a particular stereotype of the “missionary,” and missionary activity. The missionary, according to this stereotype, least in popular imagination, is one who is absolutely sure of the rightness of his or her cause. According to this stereotype, the missionary looks down upon, even pities, those who do not accept the missionary’s message; those poor folks have simply refused to see the light. I think this is the stereotype of the missionary that our Gospel reading today tends to support.

Now, there are some caveats I should offer before proceeding further. There are, today, many who call themselves missionaries who perform valuable humanitarian acts, for example in medicine and teaching, for people around the world. In addition, in some faiths and denominations, there are many sincere people who call themselves missionaries who proselytize according to their own traditions. In my critique of missionary attitudes this morning, I intend to refer only to missionaries who conform to the “let me shake your dust from my shoes”
stereotype of today’s readings, not to these other missionaries who are pursuing the traditions and practices of their faiths.

Now, with all those important caveats, I think it’s fair to say that we in the UCC, today, generally don’t consider ourselves missionaries. We generally don’t seek converts, either to our own style of Christianity or to Christianity in general. Generally, the most we would say is that as a community we try to conduct ourselves admirably, so that others will choose, without persuasion, to join us. I think that most of us in the UCC would consider the notion of our being missionaries, at least in the proselytizing sense, to be antiquated, something more appropriate to the nineteenth century than to the twenty-first.

But is this a realistic view of ourselves? It’s true, we UCCers generally don’t go door-to-door, or appear on television, inviting people to join our faith, but we certainly are engaged in mission. As a denomination, in our local churches like this one, and as individuals, we advocate vigorously on public issues that we see as closely connected to our faith. We especially advocate positions of equality, by race, nationality, and gender and sexual orientation; we advocate positions of economic justice, touching on issues like taxation, labor laws, and the provision of health care; we advocate positions of international peace, justice and economic development; and we advocate for environmental sustainability.
And in our advocacy, like the missionaries described in today’s Gospel reading, we often encounter people, sometimes of substantial political power and influence, who are either indifferent to our message or downright hostile to it. We are seen sometimes as unrealistic visionaries, longing for a level of cooperation and generosity in society that cannot be sustained by human nature; or we are seen as being overly willing to sacrifice individualism, in our efforts to bring about a sharing society.

And often, those with whom we disagree in our social advocacy also differ with us in matters of religion. Clearly, political views in this country are to a high degree correlated with religious affiliation. This is a result of many historical factors. One of the most important is that those on what is today called the religious right often have felt their rights imposed upon in matters like the teaching of evolution and the absence of prayer in public schools. There are many other causative factors, but the main point for now is that in today’s society, especially in the United States, political disagreements often are correlated closely with religious disagreements. And this adds a good deal of rancor and divisiveness to our political life.

So what lessons might we draw from today’s Gospel reading? I usually try to find something positive to say about the Gospel, but in the context of today’s sermon, I really have great difficulty doing so. I think the image of the missionary
that today’s reading presents is simply unsuited to our times. In particular, in our own advocacy work today in the United States, I think there is little room for the “shake their dust off our feet” kind of hostility. This is one country, bound together by a single political system and by a common national media, both online and off. We are all interconnected; we all live in the same house; we cannot live without one another. Just as historians tell us happened in the early days of Christianity, conversion is likely to occur, if it occurs at all, through extended relationships among friends and neighbors.

The lesson here is the core biblical lesson of love for our neighbor, even for our neighbors whom we might consider our political adversaries. For example, except in extreme circumstances that I will mention in a moment, we should avoid accusing our adversaries of being immoral. We should instead seek agreement on that on which we are likely to agree – namely, the desirability, under God’s command, to relieve suffering where we are able to do so. We should struggle together with our adversaries, on a practical level, to design, say, health insurance plans which will relieve human suffering without so limiting choice as to make the plans politically divisive and ultimately infeasible. Similarly, in seeking to develop humane immigration and foreign aid policies, we should identify as the goal the relief of human suffering, and then try to identify policy measures that will relieve the suffering as effectively as possible, without any preconditions as to the
details of the laws that will result. The immediate goal is to relieve the human suffering; accomplishing that should be seen as a joint problem of both the left and the right, with the mechanisms for relieving the suffering to be determined by compromise, through political processes.

There will, to be sure, be instances in which even attempting compromise will not be possible. For example, so-called “white supremacists” have views that so violate God’s commands that they must be opposed and contained, rather than reasoned with. But fortunately, despite alarming increases in hate speech and violence, people filled with hate represent only a small minority in this country. The great majority of people in this country, I think, share with us the value of relieving suffering and would be receptive to a much more vigorous left-right dialogue on public policy than we have in this country today.

Today is a communion Sunday. Our communion symbolizes our oneness not only with those present with us here in the sanctuary, but also with all human beings, everywhere. We have, in this country, too often allowed ourselves to forget our essential unity. We have let divisions develop along many lines, including lines that are both political and religious, with the two often coinciding.

We in the United Church of Christ often have well-defined views on social questions that stand close to the fault lines of both American politics and religion. These fault lines are already under stress; they threaten to increase division in our
country to truly dangerous dimensions. In our advocacy, let’s be firm in our articulation and support – indeed, our missionary zeal -- for policies that will relieve human suffering and build peace and justice, both at home and around the world. And in the course of our advocacy, let us never forget that all of us in this country, and indeed the world, live together in the same house. As difficult as it may seem at times – and sometimes the challenges to civility are great -- we absolutely must be civil to one another, and engage constructively with one another, if this country and the world are to function for the welfare of their inhabitants. In our advocacy as well as all other aspects of our lives, let us conduct ourselves according to God’s most fundamental and important command: Let us love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Amen.