

April 29, 2018

SERMON

Mike Denton, Conference Minister shares:

In early March, I had a connection through Dulles International Airport on the way home from a denominational meeting in Cleveland. I was wandering around during my two-hour layover when there was this one, weird moment.

I was walking to my gate and heard the same phrase repeated four times within 100 yards. It started with one airline employee trying to get the attention of another employee to which that employee responded in a matter of fact yet pleading way, "I'm too busy for you right now." The first employee appeared nonplussed, gave an understanding nod and wave and moved on. A few more steps later was someone walking by quickly growling out "I'm too busy for you right now" to someone on the phone. A few more steps and it was a group of laughing teenage girls. One of them had all their attention as it looked like she was telling a story that ended in her audience's laughter with an exaggerated, dramatic delivery of the line "I'm too busy for you right now" with her hand extended as she walked away. Finally, I heard the phrase "I'm too busy for you right now" coming from one of the seats at my gate. I don't know the context of the statement but as I turned, the only people I saw were a mother and daughter both engrossed in their phones. I heard and saw all this within, maybe, two minutes. Like I said... weird.

At another point, if you would have asked if God sent us messages this way, I would have rolled my eyes and suggested it was just a coincidence. It seemed too simplistic or magical. Over time, that's changed a bit. I've come to believe that God loves us so much that They created a world that's full to the brim with meaning. This was one of those moments to drink deeply.

I'd just come from multi-day meeting that included varying configurations of UCC Conference Ministers, the head executive staff from our denominational offices in Cleveland, and members of the United Church of Christ Board. The official theme of our meeting was about some of the difficulties that are frequently part of our relationships and the accompanying unofficial theme was how the number of things we all have on our plates makes connecting with each other so difficult. Everyone understood that these things were related and everyone was struggling with how to change this.

We need each other and we're too busy for each other.

This is one of the realities that keeps me up at night about our conference life, too. In the various settings of our conference, we really do recognize how much we need each other. And there is so, so much that needs to be done that we don't get much of an opportunity for deepening, meaningful relationships with one another.

We're at a moment when, collectively, we have the least amount of people, money and non-committed time we've had in a long, long time and all the statistical projections about the mainline church in the US see this trend continuing.

Yet, when we look at the state of the world, it's also clear how much the commitments, voice and work of the United Church of Christ are needed. We need each other and we're too busy for each other.

Or, maybe not.

Of those four stories I mentioned above, one didn't fit the narrative, did it? There were those girls taking the drama to a moment of exaggeration and laughing about it. They weren't just laughing a little. They were laughing so hard everyone else noticed. They could barely stay standing. They were leaning on each other for support.

So, on the denominational level, what I didn't mention is that all these folks agreed to add an extra day onto the time we normally have to gather and agreed that its primary theme needed to be related to creating whole-hearted relationships. And guess what happened?

We ended up making progress on some budget questions that, because of the nature of our relationships, we'd been stuck on for two years. We created the bones for some information sharing processes that will help us share and help each other across the various settings of the church. There were other difficult conversations about the equity between conferences that had been discussed around the edges of our meeting rooms before but, for the first time in my memory, these questions were discussed openly. These are people whose jobs mean they feel the pain of the church every day but it wasn't the painfulness that defined us as narrative we'd been telling ourselves it should.

We walked in having fully drunk in the toxic brew of hopelessness and unfairly high expectations and walked out full of appropriately cautious hope!

We've tried to be as transparent as we can about the challenges our conference is facing. Your board has recommitted to cohesive priorities that are broad but, more importantly, they're deep. It's moving from an intellectual exercise to one of the heart and soul.

Deepening relationships, doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God are all good priorities and all things we've heard before. The difference is how our finances, staffing, intention and messaging are being invested in these priorities. We're finding new life in these things as a conference.

- It feels as though something is turning in our financial life.
- Sure, some local churches have had to step back what they give to Our Churches' Wider Mission but 6 other churches in our conference have also pledged to increase their giving.
- Giving from individuals has increased significantly in the last year.
- Both of our camps have received large financial donations in the past year in recognition of our camps' work and ministry.
- Most importantly, some of these monies have come from folks outside of our conference who recognize the gifts our camps are.
- Our staff has been recognized for their gifts, experiences and callings. Mark and Wade have both been asked to consult with other camps about their ministries.
- Courtney has been invited to consult with other conferences about church vitality.
- We all count on Arlene to help us through some administrative realities of conference life.
- Michelle has helped more than one church sort through a difficult financial question.
- Tara Barber, in her called and contracted role, has been invited to share her model for Communities of Practice in other conferences, invited to share the boundary training she designed, and more.
- Our Justice Leadership Program is being studied as a model by other regions in the UCC. I could go on and on about how local clergy and lay folks are being regarded as leaders in the region and the denomination.

Seriously. It's amazing.

Demographically, we're far from the largest conference in the UCC but, proportionally, we have one of the largest impacts.

Something has been quietly happening in our conference for a long time and it's becoming impossible not to notice.

If you have been waiting for the right moment to give to our conference and our camps, this is the moment. If you've been looking for the right moment to step up for committee work, this is the moment. If you've been waiting for that time to reach out to your Siblings in Christ in another church in the conference, this is that moment.

Sure, we've got some of the same challenges that the rest of the US Church does but this is also the moment we can laugh at the drama.

What's happening in the Church is important and hard and, sure, sometimes a little scary.

- But, are you deepening relationships? Then you're doing what God has called us to do.
- Are you doing justice? Then you're doing what God has called us to do.
- Are you doing the work of "loving kindness?" Then you're doing what God has called us to.
- Are you walking humbly with God? Then you're doing what God has called us to.

And if you're not, know what? The best news - the Gospel - is that today is a good day to start and **God. Will. Welcome it.**

It is tempting to look at all the numbers related to the church and be convinced that the Church is dying and, sure, in the big picture the numbers are lower.

But, it was never just about the numbers. It's about the call.

When we live into these ancient priorities God has called us to, the reality is we're not dying. In fact, we're just getting started. In this crazy, broken, hurting world of ours, there is lots and lots for us to do, to share and to offer.

We're just getting started, friends. We're just getting started!