

This week. I had what I have started calling my pastoral support group. We just get together for coffee once a month. And we were talking. We're talking about change, all the changes that have occurred over the past year. Whether at our church, at a different church, in our personal lives, in the football playoff system, whatever, we were talking all about it. And all of a sudden, one of the other pastors stopped all of us and he looks, and he's like, did you know this person got married? And I said, Yeah, he's sitting right next to me. We talked about it last month in our group, and it really bothered him that this other pastor got married over the last month. And we don't know why. You know, we're like, well, is your congregation, okay with you getting remarried? His wife passed away a couple of years ago from cancer. And he's like, yeah, my congregation's fine. They love the fact that I found somebody else. They like her, and they're trying to talk me out of retiring because they like her so much. Not so much that they like me but they like her.

So we talked more to this guy and we're like why? What is bothering you so much about the change? Well, he made the point. He made the comment that the church isn't what it used to be. The church isn't how he remembered it growing up. The church isn't the way it was when he was a young pastor or even when he was a pastor at that same church, five years ago. And it's especially not the same church now.

And I said to him, no, nothing's the same now as what it was five years ago. Covid completely changed the world. It completely changed how we are within the church ourselves. Whether we're in the pews or we're in the pulpit, it's a completely different place than it was five years ago. The more we talked, the more we found out. He was fine with the changes that came with covid. That wasn't where his problem was. His problem was that somebody in the church had passed away, a matriarch of the church of what he called. Somebody that had been there for over 75 years. Somebody that had been a deacon for them, had been an elder for them, had been a trustee for them, and he was upset that she had passed. But he was more upset, because he didn't realize how much she did in the church. He didn't realize that she was the buffer between him and the congregation. So every time somebody was upset with something that he did, they went to her and she smoothed it out. Now he doesn't have that buffer.

He's always realizing that there's a lot more people upset with him at the church than he thought there were. And he asked us, he said, "Does that mean my entire ministry has been a lie? I've been here for seven years, and I find out now that these people don't like anything that I'm doing." And that's a hard thing to see, especially since he's been a pastor for over 30 years. He's been there for seven and then he started to question everything else. He started to question. What about my last placement? What

about the placement before that? Have I always had somebody being that buffer between me and everybody else and nobody actually liked me when I was there?

I'm like, well, you're assuming a lot. You're assuming that we like you here. He laughed, he laughed and it went over well. Like, but that's not it. It's not that. They don't not like you. They do like you. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been at each place for over 10 years. The difference is your perception. You perceived, all these years that you were doing it alone, and you weren't. None of us are ever doing things alone. Whether we think that we are, we're not. There's always somebody there, helping guiding us, protecting us, whether we know it or not. They are always there.

When we're kids and we're in the church, our parents protect us from what's going on around it, You know, we don't know all the fighting; we don't know all the bickering. We don't know all the big decisions of where we're going to be each week, if we have enough money coming in to make it to the next week, if we need something fixed, who's going to fix it. As kids, we don't have to worry about any of that stuff, because we're protected by everybody else. When you're a young minister, which is a step I skipped, we find out that there are other ministers protecting us from the day-to-day routines. We find out that the deacons are helping us more, the worship committee, the trustees, the finance committee, they're all doing things in the background, especially in the UCC Faith that guide us that we don't realize until much much later.

Even being out there, we don't realize the people that run buffers for us, the people of the people that fix things behind the scenes. The people that are here every week making tea, making coffee, and changing candles. We don't see that. We don't see that these people are protecting us. We don't know why they do it, but what we do know is that they're there. When they're gone, and that's a hard, hard thing, we realize more about how much we appreciate and love people when they aren't here. When they aren't with us, we don't always see how important they are during that other time.

God puts all of us in a place for a specific reason, most of the time, we don't know it. We don't know what it is. We don't know why we're here. We don't know any of that stuff. We don't understand that we might be that buffer. We might be that person to hold somebody's hand, that person to go up and just say good morning. One day when somebody's having a really bad day, we don't realize that God puts us in those spots.

Like Mary in today's reading. If an angel came to anybody today and said, you're gonna have a baby in her spot, that'd be kind of weird. It'd be hard for any of us if an angel came up and told us, and he said, you're going to do this because God wants it done. That'd be real hard to believe. I mean, people call me on the phone and I don't believe that they really need help. Some of them, they want my credit card information. That's the world we live in.

Now, that's the change that has happened. It's easier to distrust people than it is to trust in people. So being Mary and having that angel come to her and say you're

going to have the son of God. And she's a virgin, she'd never been with anybody. She doesn't have anything but faith.

She has so much faith that God loves her so much that he chose her not just to have his son, but to be his mother. He chose her just like he's chosen, each one of us to do something. He's chosen each one of us to be somewhere because not only does he love us, he loves everyone else, too. He loves us so much that he gave us his son. That's what we're waiting for. Waiting for a couple days. We're waiting for Jesus to be officially born, to be a part of our lives, which is just another part of God, showing how much he loves us. How much his love is there. How much he has all of us together to be there for everybody else

This time of year, it's especially hard for people to realize that there's always somebody there. It's hard for them to realize how much people mean to them. It's hard for them to realize that they are not alone.

I was thinking of a story the other day. There was a hurricane coming in the town and the emergency broadcast people go, and they say you need to evacuate. Everybody needs to leave. They go door to door and they tell everybody. You need to get out. And one guy doesn't; he stays. He says I am a God-fearing man. I go to church every Sunday. I pray every day. God will help me. So the storm comes and the town gets flooded out.

He climbs up on his roof. His neighbor sees him, comes up in a row boat, and says get in. And the guy says no, no, no, no. I'm a God-fearing man. I go to church every Sunday. I pray every day. God will help me, and the boat leaves.

Couple days later, a helicopter comes flying over, drops down the line, and a harness. They tell him to get in. The guy says no, no, no, I'm a God-fearing man. I go to church every Sunday. I pray every day. I'll be fine. God will help me. Helicopter goes off.

A couple days later, the guy dies. He goes up to heaven. He sees God and he says, God, why did you let me die? God says, I made the announcement. I sent you a boat. I sent you a helicopter. You chose not to do it.

We often choose not to accept help from people. This time, we need to remember to accept help from people. God sends us people every day. He sends us people every day to help us, to show us his love. We just need to remember and accept it.

Let us pray.