

For those of you who do not know, last week I was in Philadelphia at the Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) plenary. I had the privilege of serving as one of three national delegates for the UCC. The CUIC is composed of 10 different delegations that share communion together. The group originally formed in 1960 as the Consultation of Churches Union with the goal of forming one protestant church.

The CUIC is composed of the UCC, Disciples of Christ (DoC), Presbyterian church (PC-USA), Episcopal Church (EC), United Methodist Church (UMC), Moravian Church Northern Providence, African Methodist Episcopal church (AME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMZ) church, Central Methodist Episcopal (CME) church, and the International Council of Churches (ICC). The Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) was part of the original membership, but has stepped away from this group.

When the initial combination failed, the groups tried to establish a way that we can all share communion together. The idea centers around the 8 principles or marks that as members of CUIC we recognize these marks within the other denominations. So, I can go and preach at any church belonging to one of those denominations and the ELC. Or they could come here and preach. But, I can only administer communion at another UCC, DoC, PC-USA, or ELC and vice versa.

So, that is a little information about CUIC. I was asked to go, so that I could talk about better ways that we can fill an ecumenical need in small rural churches. When I got to Philadelphia I finally received the actual itinerary for the plenary. I noticed that there were no small group or even large group discussions about rural churches.

I quickly found our ecumenical officer (or more actually he found me) to talk about everything. He told me that there wasn't supposed to be an actual discussion, but he felt that I needed to remind people there what it is like to be in the trenches dealing with these postCovid opportunities. I thought that he was kidding; but I quickly learned that he was not.

You see, I was the lowest person in attendance. There were a few young adults with me, but they all worked at their national offices in one position or another. The majority of the people there were ecumenical officers, heads of communion, presidents or executive ministers or whatever they call themselves within their denomination.

This was incredibly intimidating. At one point, I was sitting with heads of communion for the Moravians, AME, CME, and a UMC professor that specializes in ecumenical liturgy. I was trying to express my point about why we need to spend more time getting the information to us here at the congregation level and less time talking about points that do not really matter but I got blown off...at first.

That was when I switched my narrative. I stopped talking about hypotheticals and started talking about you. I shared stories about St. Paul's, about the Madrid Ministerial Council, about other churches that I've spoken with from the conference. When I did that, people really started to pay attention. Identifying someone in actual terms makes the idea much more concrete.

That is one thing that I like about the book of Isaiah. Even though Isaiah is a prophet, he is still very specific in his visions. In last week's reading, Isaiah speaks specifically about the birth of Christ, he even refers to him as Emmanuel or Prince of Peace. This was 700 years before Christ was born.

In today's reading, Isaiah is talking about the exile of the Jews and the Babylonians taking over. This prophecy isn't nearly as impressive, it is only a couple of hundred years before

it happens. Here he is discussing our God threw them out because of their sins and fighting amongst themselves.

Don't we all feel like that at some point? We start picking and fighting with others and it feels like God has abandoned us. We can't understand why it feels like everyone is against us. We feel like everything we do is met with opposition. And we do the same thing that we always do, we ask why and not what.

Isaiah is commonly described in terms of three books. Even though it is one text, it is depicted in terms of 1st, 2nd, or 3rd Isaiah. Today's reading is from 2nd Isaiah. That is important because the 2nd book of Isaiah is a story of salvation. We hear about how great God is and how his vision is there to guide us and protect us throughout life and the after-life.

With today's reading, we are hearing about the significance in understanding the what. Instead of being down in the valley, we start communicating with one another. The Holy Spirit fills us and we are blessed with God's wisdom and can hear what the other person is really saying. We aren't just listening to listen, we are blessed with God's love and hear what the other person is telling us.

Now these groups of people are meeting in the middle. One group is climbing out of the valley, while the other group is coming down from the mountain top. We have met in the middle and are creating a level playing field.

Fighting today or tomorrow doesn't really matter in the long run. Life is too short to turn people away. Eventually we will return to dust and who will really care or remember why we were fighting...nobody. God is the Alpha and the Omega. He is the beginning and the end. Not us, we are a simple flower. We grow and bloom, and then we wither and die. If we are lucky, we will feel God's love and blossom another season. But, eventually it will just be him again.

That is what happened with us at the plenary. We were fighting amongst ourselves about what we thought was important and needed to be addressed. I reminded them that it didn't matter what they thought was important, because I was one of the few people there that could actually implement change. I can come back and share what we talked about at CUIC with you and the MMC. But they would need to write a report and pass it along to someone, who would then look at it and pass it along to another group, etc. In most of those cases, it would take years for change to occur.

But we can do it here and now. We can be the change and stop asking why and start following the what. We can accept God's breath; we can be filled with the Holy Spirit and feel his love and his wisdom. We can tear down those mountains and lift the valleys and be the highway on level ground.

Our gracious, eternal God, give your attention to us as we again seek to "prepare the way of the Lord" on our advent journey.

When we are weak-kneed and world weary lift us up.

When we have lost our way or lost hope may we hear you speaking softly and tenderly to us.

When we cannot banish from our minds and continue to hold close the sins of the past give us the courage to claim your grace and to say: "enough is enough."

When we are fearful of our own mortality give us the trust in your word which endures forever.

When we are timid or fearful about the message of hope which we proclaim give us the courage to claim and to witness to the good news.

In the midst of all the despair the world and life can present cause us to find comfort in the good news. May we never forget that our message is a message of comfort and of love and of faithfulness.

Lift us up to a high mountain of living.

Lift us up to know the power of your might.

Lift us up to know that you will "feed (your) flock like a shepherd."

Lift us up to know that you will hold us close to you.

Lift us up to know that you will gently lead us.

What we pray for ourselves we also pray for others. Be with all those places where inhumanity is shown toward any of your children. Be in those places of war and conflict. Be in the sufferings of those who have experienced natural disasters, persecution or famine. May all the earth be captured by the will to love. May all the earth be touched to change. Amen