

This week I went out for breakfast with one of the other ministers in town. One of the things that I try to do each week is talk with one of the other local ministers. Some weeks I have better luck than others. But eventually I do end up talking with at least one person. And this week we went out for breakfast.

This minister in particular, we spend time talking about our personal lives before we start talking about theology or how we can better serve the community. So, I was telling him about my trip to Philadelphia and at one point he snickered.

I was thrown off for a second. Here we are in the middle of a serious discussion and he laughed. Now, let's be honest, it would not be unheard of for me to make a joke to lighten the tension. And the two of us couldn't be further apart in most of our views. But, this was not one of those times.

So, I paused and asked him what I had said that made him laugh. He quickly apologized and said that he wasn't laughing because of what I said, but because what someone had said in one of their recent meetings. I asked him to elaborate since I was surprised that St. Paul's was brought up in one of their meetings. He told me that since I was not a member of his church, he could not elaborate on their closed door meetings. But, he could tell me that one of their elders brought me up by name and not St. Paul's.

That made me want to know more about what was said. But, I didn't push the issue. I did say that considering he laughed with what I had just said, that I was going to presume that it was a comment regarding that. He agreed that it was and then asked me a question.

He said, "You really believe what you say? This isn't you going along with what your congregation says. You truly believe what you are saying." Again it took me a second to assess what he was saying. And I had to think hard about it.

I was talking to him about eccumenical denominations. How I believe that we do not all need to worship the same ways to make the world a better place and that we can do it by starting here in Madrid. We can make a change at the individual level and that change can carry out into the community and across time. So I said, "Yes. I honestly believe that we can make a difference and by working together we can not only make Madrid a stronger community, but also a spiritually stronger community."

He smiled and looked at me and said that he believed me. But, he didn't agree with me. He continued to say that he knew that he would always be welcome in my church whether it was St. Paul's or somewhere else. But, I would never be allowed in his church.

Let's think about that for a second. I'm being told by a minister that I am not welcome in his church, because I believe that everyone has a right to have God in their lives. I believe that no matter who you are or where you are in life's journey you are welcome here. Even if I disagree with you politically, socially, or religiously, you are welcome to come and pray with us.

Today is important for two reasons. The first is that today is the UCC's birthday. The UCC was founded on June 25, 1957. It was the beginning of we don't care who you are, just that you want to share God' love. The second reason why today is important is because it is Open and Affirming Sunday. Today we celebrate that we welcome with open arms all people into the UCC. It doesn't matter how much money you make, how old you are, who you voted for in the last national election, what the color of your skin is, or even what you do in your bedroom. We believe that you have every right to worship with us.

After that, the conversation really started to get interesting. The minister started to ask me some very direct and pointed questions. He asked me how I would handle different situations with sinners in the congregation. He asked me about how we can allow these people in our church when Paul said to mark them and cast them aside to eat with the Gentiles and the tax collectors.

I reminded him that Jesus himself ate with Gentiles and tax collectors. So, if we are casting people aside, we are casting them to sit with Jesus by his example. The second point that I tried to remind him was that it is not our job to judge. We are not meant to sort people into goats or sheep. Jesus will do that.

I then reminded him about Isaiah 61. How the spirit of the Lord has come upon us to spread the good news. We aren't to speak only to certain well off people. In fact it is the opposite. We are to help and deliver to the less fortunate.

In Isaiah's prophecy, the Jews were exiled from their homeland. They were sent to live among their oppressors. They were to continue living for one day that would be released and repaid for their struggles. In Isaiah, The people have come home. Zion has been rebuilt under the vision of God. But those who continue to do wrongdoings will continue to be punished, but those who truly repent will be forgiven.

Jesus died so that we can live. So that our sins were forgiven. Jesus taught us how to live a righteous life, to treat others as we would want them to treat us. He taught us so that if we slip we can still ask for forgiveness. But, that is a choice that we must make on our own.

You see, I can go to each one of you and forgive your sins, but if you chose to continue down a path of hatred and bigotry then what good does it do? If you tell me that you love all of God's people but will not support the LGBTLQ+ community, how is that love for all?

At St. Paul's we believe in our Statement of Faith (pg. 11 in red hymnal). We believe that the triune god loves all of us, no matter who we are or where we are on life's journey. He loves us and forgives us, so that we can all reach the kingdom of heaven and live peacefully for eternity.

**Lord God, our Father, no one has ever seen you but you have shown yourself to us in your beloved Son Jesus Christ. Help us to recognize his face in the poor and the humble. Do not allow us to overlook him in the brokenhearted and the weak. Let the Holy Spirit give us the courage to bring his good news of hope and joy to all who wait for him and need him, whether they know it or not. You bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and release the prisoners. You comfort all who mourn, and shower your people with the oil of gladness instead of mourning; a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. We will greatly rejoice in the Lord, our whole being shall exult in God, for the sake of the one who brought righteousness to life, Jesus Christ our salvation. Amen.**