BUFFALO UNITED METHODIST

Sun June 21 See No Stranger | Leviticus 19:33–34 and Luke 10:25–37

Last week, Amy Austin and Gloria Farwick and myself attended the Annual Conference. Gloria came Tuesday and Amy Austin came Wednesday It was the first time I ever asked people from the church to join me. And it was delightful!

The following are some words Amy put together to share what she appreciated about the Annual Conference.

Attending the Minnesota Annual Conference last Wednesday was both inspiring and affirming. The conference theme, "Live Boldly, Serve Joyfully, Lead Courageously," was repeated throughout the day and resonated deeply with me.

It not only reaffirmed our current efforts but also felt connected to our vision statement at BUMC, "so that all may know joy".

One of the most inspiring moments was the opening worship experience Wednesday morning. The jazz-style music brought such joy and energy to the gathering.

We sang familiar hymns, from Just a Closer Walk with Thee to a beautiful baptismal song while witnessing the baptism of a precious baby girl.

We also sang Jesus Loves Me, one of my all-time favorite hymns. The service concluded with a lively rendition of When the Saints Go Marching In, with trumpet, trombone, and saxophone.

It was such a joyful celebration! As a worship coordinator, I was reminded once again of the power of music to unite people, inspire faith, and create a joyful spirit!

Bishop Bridgeforth's keynote message also challenged me to think differently. Using Matthew 11:28-30, he explored multiple Bible translations, including the First Nations Version, The Message, Amplified Bible, English Standard Version, and even a Gen Z interpretation.

If you have never plugged a verse into another Bible version, I encourage you to do so and give the Gen Z Bible a try. It is bound to put a smile on your face.

Overall, I felt God reaffirming to my spirit that our congregation is moving in the right direction.

The participation of our church leaders, including Pastor Amy, Gloria, and myself, underscore our shared commitment to help this church become more and more healthy.

At this conference, I felt like God is guiding our efforts both in weekly worship, in our 140/40 Celebration planning, and as we make plans for the future!

One practical takeaway I am bringing home is a renewed commitment to utilizing the resources available through the United Methodist Church.

I was especially interested in discussions surrounding artificial intelligence and how it can serve as a helpful administrative tool while never replacing the importance of human connection, discernment, and ministry.

AI is inspiring and scary all at the same time, but with Gods hand over it we will can use this tool for good!

Overall, the fellowship was one of the greatest blessings of the conference. It was refreshing and encouraging to spend a day surrounded by people united by their love for God and commitment to ministry.

The experience left me grateful and reassured that God has placed me exactly where I need to be.

And then I will wrap up.

As I reflected on the conference this week, one question kept surfacing in my spirit: What does it actually mean to be a neighbor?"

Jesus responds not with a stifling definition but with glorious disruption, that simultaneously shook up AND comforted that group of listeners.

Jesus provided us with a story that refuses to stay contained behind stain glass or lost within our Bibles.  It is a story that springs off the page, busting apart religious boxes, topples professional boundaries like a Jenga tower, and evicts us out of our comfort zones.

And, of course, I am talking about the parable of the Good Samaritan.  And how this story reorders the world by showing that neighborliness is not about who lives on my street, or looks like I do, but instead it is about mercy in motion.

Coming out of Annual Conference, what lingers and remains is not the legislation, reports, or voting as important as those things are. What sticks with me are the people. What lingers and still stirs within me is the embodied reality of the Church gathered—which is diverse, sometimes strained, yet still longing to be faithful to Jesus.

In that space, what stood out was not perfection, but people showing up, huddling together for warmth - that AC was intense, singing and swaying, taking notes, listening to people's thoughts and comments. And carrying one another's burdens in small but meaningful ways.

That became a lens through which the Good Samaritan came alive in a new way for as it confronted me with the danger of passing by,

The danger of passing by. Luke tells us that both the priest and the Levite "passed by on the other side." The language is deliberate. It is not that they failed to see; it is that they chose distance after seeing. They put up blinders.

The Annual Conference is a massive body of people trying to see and not see at the same time. We put up blinders. Pastors are looking for their pastor friends and trying to avoid talking to the Bishop or their Conference Superintendent. Not in a mean way, but in a way that is simply about wanting to take a break from church stuff. Just keeping it real.

Annual Conference can unintentionally reinforce this avoidance, this passing by, this wearing of blinders…as we press through the agenda and tasks at hand.

Trying to do the work of the church but also needing to NOT see— the hurting clergy, exhausted lay leaders, fractured communities, or ministries stretched beyond capacity.

For example, I had one pastor colleague who is being forced to move to a different church by the end of June/beginning of July. She didn't want to. But the Bishop asked.

And I could see the pain on her face, she had just begun to build relationships and momentum in her role. She looked so lost and confused.

So, for me, this parable is not just an old story but presses in with fresh sharpness, and I find myself wondering, "How do I help support my colleague in their transition?"

I felt split in two.  The Annual Conference, seeking to love God, was showing me that it is possible to be present in religious systems and still avoid merciful engagement.

"But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity" (Luke 10:33). He did not pass by. His pity and compassion compelled him to stop and care.

The turning point is not a good Sunday School answer to that teacher's question, the turning point was emotional connection. Being moved by pity.

Compassion interrupts the Samaritan's agenda. He does not merely acknowledge suffering; he allows it to rearrange his time, resources, and trajectory.

It was also at the Annual Conference that I experienced a few days in which I was the one feeling beat up and stuck in the ditch. I was the wounded traveler.

My arm was acting up and I was in pain. It came on fast, without warning and I was shocked by it. I had really wanted to go to the Annual Conference looking to comfort others and I end up being the one comforted.

Gloria, so grateful for Gloria, and my pastor colleagues helped me get to get the rest I needed. They were so kind and prayed for me. All of a sudden, I lived this parable from the inside out.

And in receiving the grace and help I needed I see with new eyes what being a good neighbor means to the wounded.

I get this parable from a whole different perspective! And I am so grateful!

To become the neighbor Jesus describes is to live with eyes trained to see suffering without stepping away, and with hands willing to act even when the cost is real.

The Annual Conference reminded me that the Church is always somewhere on that road to Jericho: sometimes passing by, sometimes wounding, often stopping for the wounded, becoming the neighbor someone desperately needs.

I look forward to discussing and processing this conference with Amy and Gloria over lunch next week. And I took lots of notes to help me glean as much as I can from the time spent away. I am excited to see how God boosts our thinking and planning based on what we learned at the Annual Conference.

Lastly, looping back around. So, the question Jesus leaves us with, leaves hanging at the end…hanging there with the intent that each of us feels like Jesus is looking right at us to answer…

That question Jesus poses at the end is not rhetorical or abstract.

When Jesus asks “Who is my neighbor?” it is very real, it is needed, and we live out our answer every day.

That when mercy and compassion are possible, will we stop and be that kind of good neighbor?

This week, someone will appear on your road to Jericho. Someone carrying grief, uncertainty, loneliness, exhaustion, or fear. The question is not whether they are your neighbor. The question is whether we will stop long enough to become theirs. Amen.

Two questions for our Time of Reflection:

Who is God placing on your road right now—someone who needs mercy, encouragement, presence, or practical help—and how is God inviting you to respond?

Or reworded a bit differently, where might you be tempted to "pass by on the other side," and what would it look like this week to stop, see, and become a neighbor through Christ's compassion?

May God give us eyes to see, hearts that are moved with compassion, and the courage to be the neighbors Jesus calls us to be. Amen.