

What Matters Most

June 20, 2018

The crowded room was oddly quiet given the amount of activity. Walking into the conference room, I saw a dozen people standing and hugging joyfully, but silently. I had no idea why, but something had happened that mattered.

During this week's General Assembly in St. Louis, I moved among committee rooms to get a feel for the assembly business. Energy ebbed and flowed. One committee got bogged down in a procedural matter over why they must first move approval of an overture no one wanted, so that a substitute motion could be made to replace the entire original overture. One exasperated commissioner declared, "I quit!" and other empathetic commissioners laughed appreciatively. After patiently advising the commissioner he couldn't quit, the parliamentarian assured the committee if they wanted to do something, the staff would get them there.

I witnessed the quiet hugging in the packed Environmental Issues committee room, where a vote had apparently just been taken. The committee itself was quiet because they were preparing to consider the next item of business. Lining the walls behind them, people who cared deeply about the decided issue hugged each other silently, not wanting to disturb the ongoing proceedings.

In my time with you, I've been waiting to see this same passion at the Presbytery level. I anticipated I would catch glimpses of what mattered most to you. Ideally it would be something that united us as a Presbytery, not just a collection of individual interests at the congregational level. It would be enough to cause us to hug each other joyfully when progress was made, or to weep together at setbacks.

In our divided country, it's easy to take sides on any number of issues: gun violence, immigration, climate change, gerrymandering, racism. The suffering I've seen breaks my heart, and I believe it breaks God's heart. I've pondered whether Milwaukee Presbytery wants to pick a side on any of these issues.

But, being *for* something usually entails being *against* something else or, at least, giving it a different priority. My sense – and I might be way off base – is that you don't want to fight. You've fought with each other in the past, and it's been painful. You've been blindsided by decisions made about you, but without you. Or, you've been caught off-guard when a colleague broke your trust. So, now, it's easier to politely avoid certain people instead of dealing with the broken relationship. It's safer not to test the bounds of how people feel. We breathe a sigh of relief if our conversation partner makes a comment that shows we agree on a sensitive issue, freeing us to safely express our views without alienating a colleague. Otherwise we feel way too exposed to lobby on the hard, societal issues that might cause further division.

Yet, when I joined you, one of your stated core values was trust. You value authentic relationships in which people can be vulnerable with each other and trust that we have each other's backs. In the Holy Cow! work, we heard that you long to be in authentic community with each other. ***But, if we don't trust each other enough to risk disagreement about things that really matter, then we'll pursue unity only in things that don't matter.***

It seems, then, that this is where we need to start. As the Council has been grappling with a tighter framing of our core values and vision, the desire for authentic relationships persists. We're claiming it again...not because we're necessarily good at it, but because we lament that we don't always have it. We can do "Wisconsin nice," or we can go deeper. Committing ourselves to each other – in authentic relationship – will create the safe space we need to have sometimes difficult, but life-giving conversations about the things that matter most.