



HEARTLAND CONFERENCE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
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Growing in Our Vocation as Disciples of Jesus Christ: “Daring to Listen to God’s Unfolding Story Through Others”

“Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” 4 Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.
- Matthew 11:3-5



Dear Friends in Christ,

I have been thinking a great deal about the stories we are willing to hear and how those stories shape us as individuals and as communities local and global. Indeed, there is much conversation these days about whose stories should be heard and who should tell them. Probably that is because the stories we engage shape and form the systems of life we design and inhabit. It seems to me that a key question for us as followers of Jesus Christ revolves around our willingness to hear and tell stories in ways that uncover more and more of God’s unfolding story of healing and the formation of the beloved community. A related question has to do with how we are engaging the Jesus’ story and in what way is it shaping our heads and our hearts and our lives?

As Matthew’s Gospel tells the story, from prison John the Baptist sends some of his disciples to Jesus to ask if Jesus is the Christ. Jesus answers by inviting John’s disciples to listen to the stories of what is going on in the lives of the people he has touched. They are stories of healing and good news for the poor. Jesus draws attention to the reality of newly flourishing lives, especially for those who were on the margins of society, by giving their stories a hearing and responding in agape love.

I wonder how the axis of both our internal conversations and those we engage with others might shift if we were to allow the Jesus’ story to shape the questions we ask and the narratives we rehearse? What if our reading of the Gospel awakened us to listen for an always larger and deeper story than the one we might otherwise be rehearsing? Of course, this is nothing new. But it seems especially important as this season of COVID continues to tempt us toward isolation from each other and as the polarization of our society continues to grow.

Could it be that a core vocation of the Christian life is to listen deeply to the stories of others (especially those unheard or on the margins) with a heart open to the possibility of healing? If Jesus offered anything to those who were healed, he first offered a pause of presence honoring the story of the person in front of him. From this place and posture, a new possibility of something life-giving emerged. That emergence became the story that got told about Jesus. Even more, it included the stories of those who were healed. In other words, God’s story of healing grew larger in the heart of the world. As followers of Jesus Christ, I believe we too are called to a similar prayerful posture of loving and engaged listening and storytelling.

Over the past two years, together we have been forming networks across our life that have arisen because some have noticed that there are stories that need to be heard and engaged, guided by the healing way of Jesus Christ. The subjects of these stories are varied: anti-racism, mental health, differently abled inclusion, drug overdose prevention, disaster response, climate justice, faith formation, and outdoor ministries, just to name a few. You can find out more about any of these networks by emailing the conference office at office@heartlanducc.org. All of these have a common theme: to hear and respond to the stories of all God’s family and creation as a first step toward healing through love that seeks the other’s greatest good.



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As followers of Jesus Christ, it seems to me that our vocation at least in part is to listen in love to the hurt of the human family and the creation in daring and vulnerable presence fostering an opening for wounds to heal. The difficulty of being available to such stories should not dissuade us from the call of Christ to be present in this way. Neither should we be afraid of hearing from voices long hidden. For this is what Jesus did repeatedly in his ministry of mending the world. In this new year, my prayer is that each of us will dare to discover something of another's story by being present in openness, grace, and love. And by this may we discover anew our calling in Christ Jesus to be agents of mending the world. Blessings on you all!

-Pastor Dave