Wisconsin Conference UCC
Where God is still speaking.

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Dear friends:

In high school I worked on a dairy farm, baling hay, feeding calves, and mucking stalls. Twice a day, we shooed 60 cows into the barn for milking then sent them back out to the field. The trickiest part was getting them through a narrow gate flanked by barbed wire fences that occasionally snagged my britches. Amazingly, the cows learned to file one by one through that narrow way. How I longed for a wide-swinging gate that would alleviate this bovine bottleneck.

Then one Sunday I heard these words from Jesus: *"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."* (Matthew 7:13-14)

I've wrestled with this passage ever since. In Luke, the metaphor is similar: *"Strive to enter through the narrow door,"* implying that Jesus is the exclusive way to a life of fullness and salvation. Many people are drawn to this teaching because it is a reassuring spiritual promise that calls us into deeper discipleship. Yet it also draws from us, consciously or not, a judgment about who is "saved" and who is not. Winnowing the list of people worthy of God's grace doesn't strike me as reflecting the radical love of Jesus.

I find it interesting that in today's polarized environment, narrowness is revealed most clearly at the two ends of the political spectrum, where uncompromising ideologies lead to angry-finger pointing at the opposite corner. In mastering the skill of "othering," it seems, we lose the gifts of compassion and curiosity that so often produce unexpected blessings.

As we prepare to launch a new program year, the September Common Lectionary Epistle readings refer to Paul's mediation between Jewish and Gentile Christians around dietary customs and the Mosaic laws. Conflicts over their divergent backgrounds and traditions threatened to divide the early Church. But Paul declared that love must supersed judgment if we are to be one body in Christ. *"Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law … love your neighbor as yourself."* (Romans 13:8)

I read the invitation to pass through the narrowest gate as instruction to us to cultivate the widest love. If Jesus is the incarnation of love, and if we seek to embrace and embody such love, that has immense implications for our practice of openness and inclusion.

To walk the narrow way is to welcome the stranger, to help the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to shelter the unhoused, to feed the hungry, to embrace ethnic and racial diversity, and to love people no matter their gender or orientation. That is a love from which Christians too often retreat, returning instead to our social media feedlots for a steady diet of prejudice, disparagement, and stereotyping.

In a few days, our nation will mark the 25th anniversary of the terrorist attacks of Sep. 11, 2001 – an event that united Americans in deep grief. Sadly, however, we also experienced an anti-Muslim backlash that to this day fuels the xenophobia expressed by many and the massive, unjust ICE arrests and detentions of immigrants, most of whom have never been convicted of a crime. WWJD?

Meanwhile, as the nation mourns the death of Dolly Parton, we have been reminded again and again of her remarkable kindness. She was universally admired. One newscast ended with a video tribute sharing stories about her generosity and her care for the Appalachian communities that shaped her and at the end that noted she never spoke a mean word about anyone. When asked why, Dolly replied, “I just love everyone.”

As we head into a contentious midterm election, keeping “love of everyone” front and center is more important than ever. Through that narrow gate lie the wide-open muddy fields of life, where we can be agents of good will, ambassadors of the love of Jesus Christ, and stewards of the generous grace of God.

With best wishes for a relaxing Labor Day weekend and joyful September Sundays,



The Rev. Franz Rigert
Conference Minister