This last week I attended the UCC General Synod in Cleveland, OH. It’s a week-long gathering open to all UCC members and friends. It is full of worship experiences with amazing preachers and music. It has a huge exhibit hall showcasing ministries and efforts of the church and our partners. There is usually at least one service project and one social witness. There is fun social time and this year we had a first-ever dance. General Synod also conducts business for the national church, much like our annual meeting here at Hope. For that part of Synod, there is a voting process and each conference of the UCC and special groups send voting delegates. They approve budgets for the coming two years and this year they considered bylaws changes that would continue a series of changes to the national staff and lay leadership structure. Finally, they discuss and vote on a series of resolutions that have democratically come through our conferences or from the national setting. This year our conference, the Central Atlantic Conference, sent three resolutions-the first asking the UCC to take a stand calling for the Washington football team to change its name; the second calling for a just peace solution in the Palestine; and third, asking our church to work on dismantling the new Jim Crow, the forces of systemic racism infecting our culture. As the delegates discern and deliberate it can feel like a cumbersome process as sometimes our annual meetings do too. But also, the spirit can move...

I wanted to take the time to introduce General Synod to you because I would love for you to join me sometime. Mark your calendars for 4th of July weekend, 2017, because General Synod will be in Baltimore, MD. Not only am I hoping you will participate, but I hope some of you will volunteer to help pull off this incredible time of being church.

The General Synod is all those things that I mentioned, but it is also a chance for representatives of the church to gather face-to-face. To see one another, to hug one another. For those that have been in the church for years or maybe lived in different cities, it’s a chance to reconnect. It’s wonderful and exhausting to walk through the exhibit hall at breaks and be stopped by so many people I know. It feels comfortable. It feels like family. It feels like a homecoming.

So it’s interesting to me that our homecoming for the UCC is in the same week that our lectionary text begins with Jesus coming home. If you follow Mark’s gospel, the narrative starts with Jesus’ baptism by John, followed by calling the disciples and then Jesus performing a series of miracles and telling parables. According to Mark, Jesus hit the ground running in his ministry. But then he headed home for a bit, maybe to recuperate, to get those hugs and reconnect with his family.
But that didn’t go very smoothly. When he tried to come home, now having begun ministry, people didn’t support him or believe in him. They demeaned his ministry, saying “isn’t that Jesus, the carpenter? Mary’s son?”

Instead of the familiar being an asset to Jesus, it was a detriment. Why? People looked at him and thought they knew him. They were not expecting God to move through this person they had always known. Jesus didn’t look anything like a prophet or Messiah to them. He was just Jesus. Just Mary’s son. Just James’ brother. He was so familiar that he couldn’t possibly do something so extraordinary as bring God’s love, healing and justice.

This year’s theme at the UCC General Synod was “Unexpected Places.” That was our theme and yet, we often seemed to be committing the sin of falling into the familiar and looking for God in the same old comfortable places.

There are three ways that I think our desire for the known and comfortable can hurt us in the church. The first is probably the most obvious. We don’t allow new people to come into our circles. The church quickly becomes a clique or a club if we aren’t careful. That can happen here at Hope and it can happen at the national level too. If we only look around for our old friends, how to live out God’s extravagant welcome to new friends of all kinds?

Secondly, our desire for the familiar in church can hurt us because we, like Jesus’ family and friends, can limit God’s potential by our narrow expectations. We never know what God may be doing in our midst. We need to feel comfortable, safe and known in order to ministry, but that doesn’t mean we should close our eyes to the ways that God seeks to make us uncomfortable in our privilege or express a calling through someone we thought we knew. What if Scott Rogers looked at Jayden as just a child who wouldn’t talk about anything other than legos? If Scott hadn’t listened for God in unexpected places, he wouldn’t have heard God speaking through Jayden and given us such a wonderful sermon two weeks ago. What if I look at Rob, Ann, Naomi or Sarah? What about Sarah, what if we say, that’s just our friend Sarah? We would not be open to the unexpected ways she might show God to us through her leadership as our next moderator. So the familiar can hurt us if we are not careful but how we limit the potential of those around us.

And finally, our desire for the familiar can hurt us because it can lead us to dangers of assumptions and worst case to structures like racism and sexism that perpetuate privilege for some. Sometimes what feels comfortable is wrong because it draws on systems we have been taught to believe without thinking- preferences and privileges for some and not for others. These kinds of prejudices are the flip side of what was happening in Jesus’ home town.

At the UCC General Synod, they have separate microphones for delegates to come up and speak for or against the business of the moment. I found myself sizing people up when they came to the microphone to speak. I thought based on where they
were from or how they looked, I could tell what they were going to say on a particular topic. Even with a theme of “Unexpected Places,” many of our words and thoughts were expected, including my own.

How can God move when we are sizing one another up either to feel the comfort of familiarity or to label as distant and other?

The way we are drawn to our own expectations and toward tearing one another down is depressing whenever it happens, in Jesus’ hometown, in our own church or in the gathering of our national church.

And yet, we do follow the God of “unexpected places.” A stable was an unexpected place to birth savior. Jesus miracles and parables were unexpected ways to show God’s radical love of inclusion and resistance to empire. The cross was an unexpected place to demonstrate God’s empathy. And the empty tomb is perhaps God’s most powerful unexpected message of all.

We come to the table today, as I did at General Synod, with a desire for the familiar, for connection to God and to one another. This table is a way that we know, that is established, a way that is connected to Christians in every time and place. So even as we seek the familiar, may we remember the challenge to look for God in unexpected places. Amen.

References:

Photos, resolutions, and other synod materials: http://synod.uccpages.org

http://www.davidlose.net/2015/06/pentecost-6-b-independence-and-interdependence/

I was also inspired by a sermon at General Synod given by Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, pastor of Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem.