This was a tough week. I had some kind of delirious cold flu. I know lots of you were sick. And a few other things happened. Our national government shutdown. Our leaders do not appear to be really communicating let alone governing. That leaves many of you among us without work or pay, some working without pay, others affected in a whole host of ways, and the most vulnerable in our society with services. A mother suffering mental distress crashed into barriers at the white house and capitol, subsequently being shot by police. In our country and around the world, the most vulnerable remain vulnerable, perhaps even more so. Last night, our military struck against terrorists in two different countries. And according to our fall worship theme, we’re supposed to talk about the spiritual gift of mentoring and it is world communion Sunday and the Neighbors in Need. Whew, that’s a lot. I’m a little stressed, and confused. Are you confused? I’m confused. There is so much, so much going on. Where to start?

I find that this is often the case in my life and in all of our lives. We are juggling a lot. This week is a bit extreme on the scale of not much going on to the world gone crazy. But maybe if we start with a deep breath... Like most complicated things, we can only take it one step at a time. If we start with one piece of the puzzle, the rest might come into order as well. So let’s start with our topic of the day, mentoring.

We often think of mentoring as some kind of intergenerational helping, teaching, or loving. Wisdom being passed down from one generation to the next. Wisdom about life, wisdom about a particular vocation or job, wisdom about faith. Mentoring definitely can be that- so let’s start there. Let’s think of those who have mentored us in our lives. What are those special relationships, those people you have really looked up to? Most likely they were older than you, but that wasn’t all that made that relationship special. What made that mentor significant? What did they teach you or how did they change the course of your life? Mentors have big impact.

Share?

In the church, mentoring has a special meaning because it implies a spiritual connection as well. And the church has become one of the last places in our society where you can find intergenerational community, where you can find relationships with people who are older or younger than you are, where mentoring could happen. For many of us parents, that is a big draw of why we bring our children to church. We know that they need a support system bigger than us, other adults who love them and teach them. Most of us do not have intergenerational family close by.

I saw a clear example of this adult/child mentoring the other night at the bonfire. Norah Nijbroek was eating dinner with her family when a car pulled up and she was watching.
then as the people started to get out of the car she ran toward them and into a huge hug with
Ann Clites. I took a mental picture of that hug because it represents some of the best that
church can be. An adult loving and teaching a child.

In the early church, mentoring wasn’t necessarily intergenerational. But it was evangelical.
What does that mean? It means mentoring was sharing faith and talking about how to be a
community. The early church was small. Nobody knew what a church was supposed to be like.
They had never done it before. The earliest churches didn’t even have the scriptures, only
stories being told about Jesus and the things he said. They absolutely HAD to mentor and
support one another. They had to pass on the knowledge and faith practices if they were going
to survive. For those churches that Timothy and Peter were writing to, mentoring was
considered an essential part of church life.

This is how the message was shared, this is how faith spreads. One person opening their heart,
acting on the gift of mentoring, seeing the spark of the spirit in someone else and acting on it.
Saying, hey I see that too, hey will you come to my church, hey have you heard of Jesus because
his message changed my life. If you ask around the room to all of our faith journeys, most of us
had at least one person in our lives mentor us like this, affirm God at work in our lives and in the
world, invite us on the journey too.

This kind of mentoring and sharing the message became part of what inspired the roots of the
ucc and other denominations to send missionaries out. We are Christians today because of the
early mentoring of Peter, Paul, Timothy and the other apostles. But there is global Christianity
because of missionaries, mostly missionaries of the late 19th century. At that time, the
protestant denominations divided up what they called the mission field. The Congregationalists
sent missionaries mostly to the islands, Hawaii, the Marshall Islands, Samoa, and the
Philippines. That’s why most of the churches in those areas are UCC. Our circle is that much
wider because of the gift of mentoring.

But along the way a really important component of mentoring was lost. There is such a
temptation and a danger with mentoring. If you are the one with the gift of mentoring, it’s so
easy to start thinking too much of yourself, the wise mentor, who has so much to offer. Aren’t
those children lucky to have me as their teacher? I have been in this church for 25 years, these
new members need to listen to what I have to say. And this abuse of power with individual
mentoring also happened on the communal, global scale. Missionary work had a long period of
great superiority, classism and racism. The churches so arrogant as they forced native American
children into mission schools or only gave food aid to an African village if the villagers came to
church. They twisted and manipulated God’s message and tainted it with power. These
mentoring sins of the church are part of our history and they continue today in some places.
Our churches forgot what the apostle wrote to the elders of the church in 1 Peter about
mentoring, “Do not lord over those in your charge, but be an example to the flock. All of you
must clothe yourselves in humility in your dealings with one another.” When we forget these
words, we lose our way with mentoring and mission.
Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, continues to work hard in creating balance and restoring justice to mission relationships, bringing back the spiritual gift of mentoring. One of the ways we do that is to remember the most important component of mentoring— the blessing GOES BOTH WAYS in a right relationship. When an adult mentors a child in the church, both learn something, both are blessed. When a newcomer and a long time church member share their journey together, both are blessed. And in modern mission work, when the Hawaiian Christian shows the wider church something of God’s great Aloha, the circle is widened, we are all made more complete. That is mentoring as sharing across cultures, mentoring in which both sides are blessed.

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday. On this day all the Christians around the world are lifting up the bread and cup, acknowledging this spiritual connection between us. Someone knew Jesus and shared that message two thousand years ago and that message unites us all today. We are grateful for the spiritual gift of mentoring and the spirit that continues to connect us. Soon the World Council of Churches will have it’s gathering in South Korea, which is home to the largest churches in the world. They once were the recipients of missionaries and now they are sending out their own to share what the message of Jesus means to them. They will be the perfect hosts for such a gathering of ecumenical dialogue about faith, about world events, about global crises like poverty and climate change. As we take part in communion today, we remember how wide God’s circle is and we give thanks for the diversity and blessing that God has given us.

As you come to the table, I’ll also ask you to be thinking, praying and listening about what the spiritual gift of mentoring means in your life. It touches us all in some way, whether we are grateful for a mentor in our lives or we are offering mentoring to another. How has God already blessed you? How is God challenging you?

As you discern whether the gift of mentoring might be one of your spiritual gifts, remember the key component that the blessing must go both ways. In your discernment, think about whether you have something to share and whether you have something to learn. In this community, we have lots of newcomers that need to learn about the UCC and who we are at Hope. And I know they have a lot to teach us as well. Our children have lots to learn about how much God loves them. And I know the wisdom God in our children has a lot to teach us as well.

Being able to teach and learn in a balanced mentoring relationship is a true gift, one that keeps us in community, holding us together as we move through God’s time. In these uncertain days when even our nations elected leaders can’t seem to display these gifts, may we find comfort in the presence of the spirit and in the blessing of God, around this table and around the world. Amen.