

Rev. Mike Denton  
PNCUCC Annual Meeting Address  
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I've struggled more with this particular message than any other I've ever shared with you. When developing the theme for this meeting, the idea that emerged was around hope, recognizing the exhaustion of almost everyone.

It's entirely the right theme, and I was looking forward to hearing from *someone else* about it. I'm struggling with staying hopeful, too. On the one hand, the idea that I might have anything to say about hope feels almost ludicrous when I'm feeling a lot of what can best be described as despair. As I told it to a friend during one of the days I was struggling with this message, me speaking about hope today almost feels like inviting Eeyore to be your motivational speaker. On the other hand, writing this has forced me to stop simply ruminating about the general sense of despair and fight my way towards a slightly better place. Maybe it will do that for you, too.

I don't know how else to start this off, honestly, but to say that, these days, what hope there is frequently seems trapped under the rubble of a collapsing world. It doesn't help that, in some ways, it seems like every single day brings some new horror or atrocity. War with threats of nuclear weapons. Violent political acts. Climate collapse. The pandemic. Inflation. Continued individual, institutional, and systemic actions that deny the humanity of others through denigration, deprivation, and violence. Racism, heterosexism, sexism, ableism, classism, ageism, cissexism, and other forms of oppression spread and even seem to multiply.

We tend to look at these as separate issues or problems, but they are not. They are all part of a system of domination and control that consumes and consumes and consumes until there is nothing left to consume. Although we have beautifully diverse experiences and ways of living in the world, the *means* of oppressing people, exploiting the earth, and minimizing the value of life reflect a unity of oppression that include methods such as:

1. Naming a difference as separation and beginning the process of "othering."
2. Asserting the innate superiority of those with similar characteristics and the innate inferiority of those with "other" features.
3. Devaluing the gifts of the "other."
4. Suggesting the dependency and irresponsibility of the "other."
5. Naming "the other" as dangerous and needing to be "tamed" or "controlled."
6. Building systems that reinforce, protect, promote, and rationalize these practices.
7. Eliminating any evidence to the contrary, whether present in a person, movement, science, religion, art, or other ways of knowing.
8. Continuing to feed the system of domination and consumption by othering new groups of people, new pieces of the earth, and naming new differences as separations.

Systems of domination corrupt everything, including good intentions. Even the intent to counter this system with inclusion sometimes gets corrupted by unintentionally reinforcing the legitimacy of this system to include and exclude. What seems like a win against parts of this system sometimes sustains and protects other parts of the system. The initial value of good intentions is quickly degraded by this system's practiced means of defense and deflection.

However, even though these means of othering and consumption are pervasive, they are not sustainable. They never were. This system always takes more than it gives. It is content with consuming a potentially better future in exchange for a more gluttonous present.

My Siblings in Christ, we are not at the precipice. We are not near it. We are over it. Now, maybe we can hear the phrase "We are all in this together" not just as words of hope but also as words of warning. The "other" was a false idea *made* real, an idea so weak that it is requiring all the world's resources to sustain it.

Even with the separations demanded by the pandemic, we are seeing each other face-to-face in a way that we have at few other moments. We know more about ourselves than we might like as our facades - our armor - falls away in this time of collapse. The system of domination continues to try and consume its way out of its death by having us turn on and consume each other on its behalf instead of turning towards each other. A house divided cannot stand, and this house we all live in is falling.

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As accurate as I believe this to be, there is also this from 1 Corinthians:

*"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."*

Despite what sometimes seems like evidence to the contrary, I've seen the truth of these words, too. These three things are a trinity of rootedness that will be the spiritual grounding that helps us make it through to something new if there is life on the other side of the precipice.

We've heard these words from this scripture so often that it's easy to take them for granted, and we can't. These ideas have been intentionally co-opted as weak, sentimentalized ideals - minimized to only apply to romantic love - because systems of domination can not survive their persistent practice. Faith, hope, and love damn systems of domination because tapping into them

makes us less dependent, less afraid, and less able to see the differences between us, the earth, and *all* creation.

Where faith, hope, and love abide, *life* blooms. As much as systems of domination may try to sentimentalize and diminish them, faith, hope, and love can overwhelm systems of domination. They can help us turn towards each other instead of on each other. They can help us participate in systems of liberation and recovery with a wisely-reckless, spirit-led, faithful abandon.

These three things are all connected like a vine, its fruits, and its roots. To talk about one is to talk about all of them.

Within the UCC, specifically, there is a wide breadth of belief among our members, and people are free to participate as little or as much as they'd like. This was part of what attracted me to the UCC in the first place. However, there are significant vulnerabilities in this, too, because faith isn't just about what we believe but also about our practices and disciplines that are separate and interwoven with corporate life.

All too often, I can say that I've become a *consumer* of a faith that I expect to come from others instead of recognizing my responsibility to *practice* faith. I have sometimes fallen into the trap of looking for others to provide spiritual "products" instead of building that relationship of faith with a community in a mutual, challenging, and authentic way. I can say that, personally, this COVID Lenten period has been a time of personal faith deconstruction centered in prayer, journaling, and being open to the movement and conviction of the Spirit so that I can be a better participant in communities of faith. When I participate in worship as a leader, I have the capacity to recognize that my responsibility is to bring something to the service. I've struggled, recently, to attend worship as a fellow worshipper and participant; not just expecting to receive something but also bringing what I have and who I am.

In my visits with people or conversations about their church, it's not unusual for people to talk about not "being fed" by a pastor's sermons or worship leadership. At the same time, there is not always the self-reflective work that asks, "What am I bringing to the potluck?"

I'm not saying there aren't times we need help and that there aren't times we genuinely have nothing to bring because we're in pain or grief. Those are the moments we carry each other and share with one another. However, we have to resist the powers or domination that suggest that we're *entitled* to be fed all the time without nurturing our spiritual gardens. Even when we try, we also have to resist the powers of domination that whisper in our ear that what we might grow there is *unworthy* of being shared. Nurturing our faith gives ourselves and our communities access to the abundance of God, a practice we co-create through the experience of prayer, study, service, repentance, deconstruction, reconciliation, and action. When faith is a consumerist or

consumptive expectation, it collapses in on itself. When it taps into the abundance of God, it becomes a celebration of hope and a feast overflowing with love.

Love, as only a sentimental idea, is not love. I get that whole fluttery, beautiful part, but that is a benefit of love. It's not necessarily love in and of itself. To interact with love is to interact with a powerful and untameable force. Many have talked about love as the most powerful force in the universe. Others have suggested that God's power must surely be love if God is all-powerful. Love is not something we control but a force we are shaped by and learn to flow with as it is present in the world. When we serve Love, it blossoms within us.

The systems of domination seek to prevent our access to love. Instead of the mutually beneficial rewards of the give and take that comes with abundant love, we are promised to be rewarded with the gifts of being independent and self-sufficient. It's a false, unsustainable promise exposed at this moment in time more than any other. Seeking out to be wholly independent creates a redundant, deepening pit of need and want that, now, is collapsing in on itself. We're all hearing stories of congregations, non-profits, businesses, and governments in collapse. The planet itself is collapsing under the unsustainable weight of our expectations and desire for more and more power and independence.

Only the power of love can confront and diminish the system of domination's love of power. I am not so naive as to believe it will ever disappear, but I believe it can be diminished with practice, vigilance, and all the tools that love provides.

This brings me back to hope.

I am sure that many of you were inspired by this year's Lenten devotional that Courtney coordinated, focusing on sharing stories about those moments that provided hope. When we tap into the idea of seeing hope and looking for hope, there are ways and places we end up finding it, discovering it, and uncovering it. But, I think we're doing something else, too.

I'm also coming to understand that depending on hope as solely an *external* force that someone *else* provides has its limits. It gets us right into the consumer mindset. At its worst, hope is doled out by the systems of domination like a drug that builds a dependence on the system. At its worst, what is called hope by systems of domination becomes the carrot at the end of a stick that is always out of reach yet manipulatively sets our direction and choices. What looks like a promise becomes a taunt. I'm becoming convinced that, somewhere along the way, we were taught to consume some product dressed up to *look* like hope and slowly forgot that Hope. Is built.

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The New Century Hymnal's version of the old hymn is, "My hope is built on nothing less, than Jesus' love and righteousness, on Jesus' love and righteousness...."

Hope. Is. Built.

And maybe not in the way we expect.

In Rebecca Solnit's 2009 book "A Paradise Built in Hell," she writes about communities that emerge during natural and human-made disasters. One of the quotes from this book I have shared before is this:

*"The possibility of paradise hovers on the cusp of coming into being, so much so that it takes powerful forces to keep such a paradise at bay. If paradise now arises in hell, it's because, in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way."*<sup>1</sup>

Within the communities she writes about, leadership and structure emerges but only in so much as it serves the community. Instead of being seen as a *class* of people who somehow have *innate* leadership skills, leaders are empowered *as the community needs them*. Instead of being a *product* of leadership, a mutual, co-equal community becomes the nurtured norm. Leadership emerges from the *consent* of the community members as a *temporary* role to serve a function. I know this idea runs contrary to a lot of what is shared as common sense, but I believe that leadership is not essential *except* as a situational form of service based on the needs of the community.

Before the pandemic, the US spent around 45 billion dollars a year on leadership development work. In the five years before the pandemic, this amount had increased by about 39%. However, it's not working. Trust of those in institutional leadership is crashing. Trust in religious, business, and government leaders is below, and in some cases well below, 50%.

It's interesting that leadership training took off in the 80s at about the same moment as the resurgence of overt movements to reinforce family values, white values, male-centered hierarchical systems, and the defunding of social programs. It's interesting that, at the same time, funding for civics courses started to decline, and, in the church, we actively began to look toward customer service models to attract members. As part of those customer service models, it's interesting that we started to drop membership classes, diminish community responsibilities, and began, more and more, to talk about the *services* we provide for members.

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<sup>1</sup> Solnit, Rebecca. A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster. Penguin Books, 2009.

I recognize that the idea of membership has its challenges but replacing it with a more business-based consumer model or a corporate democracy model, or a non-profit client model has also been problematic. Just because Amazon, Netflix, or Costco call the fees we might pay them "memberships" doesn't mean we are actually members. The influence we have is as customers or consumers, not as members. However, some of these same expectations have become ingrained into church life. In these cases, leadership does not emerge from the members as part of a transformative movement of a community but functions only to sustain the product's life and expand its use. When we commodify the church, our souls become the commodity.

Do we need to identify and train those the community calls to leadership roles? Absolutely. Do we need to help prepare the *whole* community for being called into leadership roles? Yes. And, do we desperately need to figure out how to build *community* in a way that is mutual, and fair, and honest, and able to resist the systems of domination when they remerge in the post-collapse world? Please God, yes.

Hope. Is. Built.

Yes, we are in a time of collapse, but sometimes, a breakdown can lead to a breakthrough.

Hope. Is. Built.

I don't see any way that the coming days aren't going to get more challenging, but on the other side of it - and I do believe there will be another side - there might be better days if we remember that

Hope. Is. Built.

When we make promises now to the generations that will follow us.

Hope. Is. Built.

No one is going to deliver us hope, provide us with hope, because

Hope. Is. Built.

On the foundation of the love of God and with the tools of faith.

Hope. Is. Built.

Amen.