

# **Finding Each Other, Finding Our Way — Becoming WISE**

September 15, 2024

## **Finding Each Other, Finding Our Way**

As I begin this morning, I will point out that a substantial part of my reflection is quoted from a piece by Rev. Anna Blaedel of enfleshed, called “Finding each other, finding our way.”

Blaedel writes:

A few weeks ago, with my two younger nibblings, I was trying to describe daily life before cell phones, Siri, Google, Alexa. I told them about entire albums, listened to as an event, about card catalogs and encyclopedia sets, and having to wait, and wonder, when we do not know.

They wanted to know how I talked with my friends, how I even could find my friends, in a world without texting, location sharing, pin drops and dots that glow green or red. So much has changed, so quickly, about how we find each other, and how we find our way. In so many ways, we seem to be losing our way, finding each other less and less while increasingly oversaturated by exponentially proliferating forms and means of “connection.”

I thought about how, in college, my friends and I would find each other, by learning each other’s rhythms and lives. I was usually at that one coffeeshop, with a stack of books. One friend, usually with his guitar, could be found on one particular stoop. Another, often, at the piano in that one dorm lounge. In the late afternoons, a particular group of benches was a congregating spot. A grove of trees by the river was another. We’d look for each other until we found each other, or until we found something or someone else to share our time, and attention.

I’ve been thinking a lot about how we find each other, now, in this time of converging crises and cascading catastrophes. So much is unraveling, so quickly. So much is coming undone. So much is being revealed. So much is being lost, and so much is at stake, and so much is yet possible. In a time of apocalypse – which is to say, a time of transition, of transformation, of unveiling, of invitation – how do we find our people? How do we find our way?

Sendolo Diaminah talks about our time as a time of empires ending. How empires end, he reminds, matters. How the undoing happens matters. We have an unprecedented opportunity, he says, to steer and shape the end of empire. There is so much to be afraid of. There is so much pain and devastation. It’s not all sweetness and beauty and “live laugh love” and “love and light.” But. And. Sendolo speaks of the unshakable confidence that emerges when we are able, yet,

to cultivate connection and encounter beauty and treat each other well, in the midst of All This.

Mary Oliver writes, imagining the end of empire if we stay the course we're on, "We will be known as a culture that feared death and adored power, that tried to vanquish insecurity for the few and cared little for the penury of the many. We will be known as a culture that taught and rewarded the amassing of things, that spoke little if at all about the quality of life for people (other people), for dogs, for rivers. All the world, in our eyes, they will say, was a commodity. And they will say that this structure was held together politically, which it was, and they will say also that our politics was no more than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of the heart, and that the heart, in those days, was small, and hard, and full of meanness."

### **Becoming WISE**

So often, it is our poets who capture the essence of our reality. Anxiety is skyrocketing. Depression is at an all-time high. Rates of suicide are through the roof. AND, the wait times to connect with treatment are often far too long. We live at a scary time and place in human history, and it ought to be no surprise at all that our mental health, individually and collectively, is fraying. And yet, Jesus said, "I came that you might have life, and have it most abundantly."

Rev. Blaedel named our times as an apocalypse, not necessarily as the end times, but as a time of transition, transformation, unveiling, and invitation. The church has a vital role to play as we as followers of Jesus seek abundant life for ourselves and for all amidst this chaos.

Last year, the Wisconsin Conference United Church of Christ voted to become WISE regarding mental health, and today I'm asking our congregation to start the journey toward doing the same.

WISE stands for: Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged.

The formal process for becoming WISE includes forming a team of people who will discern Union's strengths and opportunities around fostering mental health. That team will then work to write a WISE covenant that the congregation will be asked to adopt. In adopting the covenant, the congregation would commit to addressing mental health as a priority. Steps can be as simple as reminding one another to be intentional about our language and refraining from stigmatizing labels. Even though saying something is "psycho" or "loony" may feel innocuous to someone who is speaking, folks with mental health challenges can hear language like that and subtly (or not so subtly) determine that this is not a safe and welcoming place.

Being a WISE congregation might include educating our community about mental health challenges and best practices. It might include being more forthright about our own challenges, creating a culture where we talk and pray more openly with one another about these challenges, where we support people who are struggling mentally with meals and rides and cards and visits just as naturally as we do those who are struggling with physical health concerns.

Some will ask why we need to take on this formal process and seek this formal designation. Here, I lean on our congregation's leadership in becoming Open and Affirming. Time and again, congregations who are hesitant about beginning the ONA process ask "Why do we need to proclaim it? We understand ourselves to be gay friendly — isn't that enough?"

The response is that the process is important. It is educational and formative in and of itself. AND, marginalization is insidious. Acknowledging, formally, that creating a culture where mental health is our priority, tells our story. We need to be formally WISE, because just like with being Open and Affirming, many with mental health challenges have learned the hard way that "All Are Welcome" often doesn't apply to them, and they can't assume that every church will be safe for them and their families. At its core, becoming WISE is about destigmatizing mental health challenges and creating a culture of healing and best practice.

### **The Scriptures**

If we take on this challenge, which I hope we do, the passage that I read today from Numbers might be instructive to us. Are you familiar with it? We don't read it in worship very often. The context is the Exodus. The Israelites have escaped from slavery in Egypt and are now trying to find their way to the Promised Land. They will wander for 40 years.

In today's passage, they whine and grumble, and God sends an infestation of poisonous snakes that bite and kill many of them. The people, who had just been kvetching about Moses' leadership, come to him and ask him to get rid of the snakes. When Moses prays about this, the LORD tells him to fashion a bronze serpent in the image of the poisonous snakes, put it on a pole, and that everyone who looks upon it will live. He does, and they do.

The wisdom that this passage sheds on my invitation to become a WISE congregation is that the thing that had been killing the people became their means of salvation once they held it up, examined it, and looked at it clearly. Friends, our society's mental health crisis is killing us. AND addressing it head on, honestly, in the light, will be our salvation.

### **Conclusion**

Friends, I began my reflection today with wisdom from Rev. Anna Blaedel and her musings about how, while it's easier to locate one another today, it may be harder than ever to find each other. I would suggest that a substantive part of how we will reshape our current mental health crisis is by finding each other.

Rev. Blaedel concluded her thoughts by reminding us that:

To find each other, these days, we need hearts that are big, and discerning, and full of tenderness. To cultivate such tenderheartedness, Andrea Gibson describes a practice of love that joyfully replaces thoughts of "me" with "we." Gibson writes, "The *We* I speak of here stretches beyond humanity to the tadpoles in the creek, to the rowdy rainstorm that flooded my basement, to the mourning dove perched on the Honey Maple tree watching me learn Qigong (awkwardly), to the ladybug who I suspect is a boyish ladybug like me, walking the tightrope of my lifelines while I carry her outside to sunbathe atop a kind and sturdy rock."

At the core of becoming WISE, as we seek to follow Jesus, amidst this time of apocalypse – which is to say, this time of transition, of transformation, of unveiling, of invitation – is when we find our people, we find our way. Our homework, then, is to ponder: How are we finding your people? How are we finding your way? How are we finding each other? How can we find a way so that they will not be able to say that, despite the culture that we live in, our hearts, in these days, were small, and hard, and full of meanness? How will we, together, in the name of Christ, establish a counterculture of connection and hope and grace and gratitude? How will we collaborate in building up the reign of God?

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
**Joel 2:12-16; Numbers 21:5-9**  
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