

Sacred Tenderness

By: Ginger Gaines-Cirelli

Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Luke 1:78-79 (Song of Zechariah)

For many months leading up to this year's General Conference, I've felt weird in my spirit. I've dutifully borne with this unnamable dis-ease, trusting that at some point — if I was still enough in the flow of things — the proverbial mud would settle and things would become clear.

I arrived in Charlotte on Monday morning, the day before the conference officially started, and had time to just sit, to walk outside, to explore the spaces that would hold our long-awaited gathering. I connected with beloved friends and colleagues, listened to what others were thinking and feeling, and observed the energies that were building as more and more people arrived.

There came a moment on that Monday afternoon when a word floated up from my heart, a gift of clarity after all these months. The word was “tender.”

I have been feeling tender. I am feeling tender.

I am feeling tender, like flesh that has been bruised, like a heart that has been broken.

I am feeling tender, weary of all the ways we, the human family, hurt one another and creation.

I am feeling tender, vulnerable in my stubborn, careful hope.

I am feeling tender, in love with the people of The United Methodist Church and with the life-giving spiritual tradition that fuels us.

I am feeling tender, longing for the Church to bear witness to God's beauty, justice, peace, and joy and clinging to my faith in what God will yet do.

I am feeling tender. And in my tenderness, I'm reminded that our God knows this tender place well. God's tender mercy and love came to us in the flesh, arms open, heart exposed, experiencing all the great love and terrible pain of human life. What a tender God to draw so near, to risk so much, to suffer so deeply, so that we might one day learn how experience the fullness of peace and joy.

Since my arrival, I've heard persons speak of deferred grief, of “wanting to hope,” and general strangeness about the way they're feeling as we enter into this conference...

People are tender...

I've heard myself reflect on the way my experience of General Conference in the past has felt dehumanizing and disembodied, as though I was a cog in a machine, the whole enterprise a series of transactions.

But what I'm experiencing as I enter into this 2024 gathering is that the tenderness so many of us are holding and feeling seems to be creating space for us to be human with other humans, to perceive one another as siblings, to be curious about those who are new to us, and to risk hope together, trusting that God really is doing something new among us.

This shouldn't surprise me. Because our tender God has shown us through Jesus that it is in the tender places that God can dwell most beautifully and act most powerfully to bring new and abundant life.

Thanks be to God for God's tenderness that holds me and all of us in the tender places and moves so generously through this and every gathered Body of Christ.