

Dear God

I John 3:16-17

A Message to the Pennsylvania West Conference of the United Church of Christ in the USA by
UCCP Bishop Elorde Mendoza Sambat, June 11, 2016

Good day to all of you my brothers and sisters in Christ.

I bring you the warmest greetings from the North Luzon Jurisdiction of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines composed of nine annual conferences that include the Northwest Luzon Conference where the Penn West Conference has an established partnership for quite some time. I also bring you the greetings of the Council of Bishops of the UCCP of which our general secretary, Bishop Reuel Norman O. Marigza extends his warmest regards to all.

Two years ago, the Revs. Joseph Hedden Jr. and Melissa Mc. Lean visited our place and joined the annual conference in UCCP Cabulalaan, Bacarra, Ilocos Norte. They also visited some of our local churches especially the ones in the rural areas.

Today, I am tasked to share with you a message dwelling on God's love which I have taken as our biblical reference the verses found in I John 3:16-17.

In ways that we cannot figure out, God's love is evidenced through multiple blessings. As the Apostle Paul said, "Love is the greatest thing that endures forever" God's love is something beyond our comprehension.

In my case, it took an experience with an uneducated young boy to teach me how to love in manner that God designed it to be. I will share to you the story.

In one of our exposure programs as a young pastor, we were sent to a hinterland community of indigenous people where sub-human living condition prevails. People there live in dreadful poverty bereft of basic necessities including food. They merely subsist on root crops and other fruits and vegetables they raised from their backyards. Knowing their condition so well, we brought many stuff including bread and candies for the children. As we distributed the stuff to the children lining up to get their share, they were so frantic to eat their split and eager to beg some more after they finished eating. I noticed one boy who did not eat his share right away as he looked at other children. I was curious to know why an indifferent attitude among others so I ask him why he is not eating his bread. He did not answer but instead he ran away home speechless. I hurried following him out of curiosity only to find out that he has a little sister, a victim of polio who is sitting on a hammock waiting for her brother to share something that she can eat. The boy broke the bread and shared the half to his sister. I tell you I was not the same pastor since that day I experienced that simple but sincere expression of love. To think that it was a young, uneducated and inexperienced boy who taught me the virtue of loving unconditionally by giving what you have no matter how small it can be. I remember suddenly that God's love is much the same way as that of the boy to his sister. Sacrificing his hunger in order to split something for the one he loves and without expecting something in return.

That reminds me of our partnership between the North West Luzon Conference of the UCCP and the Penn West Conference of the UCC-USA. Despite your abundance living in a first world country where everything can be attained at the tip of your finger, you managed to reach out to people from a developing nation like the Philippines and the rural communities of NWLC in

order to offer us more than money can give. Your deep concern not only for our spiritual nurture but also of material needs deeply touched the hearts and minds of our people. Yours is a genuine concern on the plight of our people where a majority live in dire poverty.

In a natural setting, genuine partnership in order to become operational needs to be a two-way relationship. It must be reciprocal in nature so that every partner should perform his own task in order to attain success in the engagement. But God's love need not be that way. Even while we are remiss in our role, yet his deepest concern borne out of His profound love for us continues up to the point of offering his life as a ransom for our sins.

This same God is the one we glorify today in our holy conferencing where ties between our two churches living at the extremes (the UCC-USA being on the first world country and the Philippines being a developing one) gather in the same spirit and proclaiming His glory even as we declare in unison our utmost commitment to his work and mission. Truly, the psalmist is apt in saying, "I will praise the name of God with song and magnify Him with thanksgiving." And to this accord, we say "Dear God, I know that I am not perfect, I know sometimes I forget to pray, I know I have questioned my faith, I know sometimes I lose my temper, But thank you for loving me unconditionally and giving me another day to start over again."

Let us continue our partnership as an expression of our abiding faith in God who loves us and provides us with strength and zeal to pursue his ministry even beyond our borders. For as partners, we are to be reliant to each other not only for fellowshiping and worship but for a parallel growth in faith with each other. As Dr. John Dorhauer aptly said in his book, I just acquired yesterday from Valarie titled "Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Post-Modern World" that states, "At every stage of our development, and every aspect of our life, we are reliant on others for our development and success. Shifting our emphasis from teaching reliance on others teaching the value of strong, trusting and mutually beneficial relationships is critical. It is organic, it is biblical. It honours our most fundamental beliefs about a God who invests in relationships, builds covenant and calls for community. (page 154) He also stressed, "I have another way of saying the UCC mantra into like this, No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, we have need of you."

Furthermore he said, "I believe that we should be cultivating partnerships and relationships between churches and other organic bodies who share their vision, their mission and their core values. This should be as natural to us as breathing. I encourage all of our churches to develop partnerships with other churches."

The love of God that compels us to act so that his gospel can be propagated to the least and the last, to the needy, the poor and afflicted be carried on in perpetuity using our unworthy selves that experienced the same grace from undemanding God. May glory and honour be given to Him forever and ever.

Amen.