

Afterword

First Be Reconciled

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The gospel is at the core of our faith, and the Sermon on the Mount is at the core of the gospel. Of the forty-four Standard Sermons of Wesley, thirteen were from the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon begins with the beatitudes: how life is blessed, how we flourish, what happiness means. These first few verses of Matthew 5 are a reversal of the world's values. Disciples of Jesus are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. There is something different and distinctive about a follower of Jesus. The southern writer Flannery O' Connor commented, "you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd!" And then a statement that Jesus has not come to abolish the Old Testament—this is not out with the old, in with the new—but he has come to fulfill the law and the prophets. And then the six antitheses—"you have heard it said . . . , but I say to you . . ." Jesus is giving us a model for a higher righteousness.

He begins with murder, violence and anger. Jesus has a way of taking a subject that seems to apply to other people, other groups, and bringing it close to home. He has quit preaching and gone to meddling! Suddenly, when we are in the presence of Jesus, the distrust, the suspicion, the anger are within us. In the best of families, the best of churches, there is conflict. And in the best of families, the best of churches, there is a need for reconciliation.

We lived in a deeply divided time. This is reflective of our recent presidential election in the United States, but it is also true for nations across our global church, in Africa and Europe and the Philippines. And the divisions are real in our own denomination. The Commission on a Way Forward was called into being by the General Conference in 2016 to look for the missional purposes that might transcend the many matters that divide us, ones rooted in understandings of not only LGBTQ identity but also the interpretation of scripture and the nature and mission of the church.

The question before us in this Colloquy is what do these divisions mean for disciple of Jesus Christ in the Wesleyan tradition? And, more purposefully, how can we be disciples of Jesus Christ who are transforming the world in the context of so much division? The Commission on a Way Forward is but one of the instruments God is using to answer this question. This Colloquy is another.

Before you place your gift on the altar, Jesus says, first be reconciled to your brother or sister. Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. Love your enemies. It is more important to be in a right relationship than to be right. We sometimes forget as well. It is the addictive nature of the culture wars. Or it is the impulse that is within us to win. But the divisions become more and more pronounced.

Early in ministry, I served a rural four-point charge. You may not know what a four-point charge is; it is four churches that share a pastor and live in harmony—or something like that. Every fall and spring each church had a revival, services that would last several days. This meant I had eight weeks of revival a year. I was a very revived person!

The stated purpose of these revival services was to reach and save the lost. They began on Sunday morning and continued on Sunday evening through Wednesday or Thursday evening. And so, I would be listening to the visiting preacher on or about Wednesday evening, and the

message would be about the lost and how they and we need to be found, and I would look out at the congregation and think, these people are not lost. They are the committed core. After all, they are here, on the third or fourth night! And I wondered, why do we have all of these services? What is the purpose? And then, in time, it was as if God spoke to me and gave me an answer.

When you live in a small community, no one new ever moves in or moves out, you go to school together, you do business with one another, families blend together, things happen. We do harm to one another. Other people do harm to us. They do harm to people we love. If you live long enough, it happens. Even in the best of families. And we begin to construct walls . . . right down the middle between us. And here is where the revival services came in. What was happening in those services was that we were being called to make things right with one another. As people came forward, they would kneel at the altar, and they would make peace with their Creator and with someone—a neighbor, family member, a business partner—they would make peace, and they would leave it there at the altar. It was reconciliation.

What would it mean in a culture and, yes, in a church divided in most every way, for us to first be reconciled, to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to love our enemies?

There is something deeply Wesleyan about this teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. I cannot be holy without you, and you cannot be holy without me. This is the connectional nature of our church. This is social holiness. My relationship with my neighbor has everything to do with the sacrifice, the gift I am offering to God. This is the wholeness we seek, it is the integration we need in our minds and our bodies and spirits, in our communities and in our state and nation and world.

We are not there yet. That is why we need Jesus.

First be reconciled, he says. The Greek word *katallage* occurs rarely in the New Testament. It appears here, in the Gospel and twice in the letters of Paul. It is a word not commonly used in religion; it had more to do with settling political disagreements. Jesus and Paul apply it to our relationship with God and what God is calling us to do and be. Paul writes, in 2 Corinthians 5:19: “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (NRSV).

In January, I met with several members of the Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The AME Church came into being when Richard Allen, an African American, was asked to leave the Methodist Church in Philadelphia in 1787. Richard Allen was later ordained by Francis Asbury in 1799, and consecrated a bishop by Asbury in 1816. Emmanuel Church was planted in Charleston during this time. It is the oldest black church of any kind in the south. In 1822, it was burned to the ground because it had become a center of teaching and preaching about liberation and freedom among slaves. It was rebuilt. It was and is a vital church.

In 2015, a young man drove two hours to Charleston, went into the church on a Wednesday night, and took part in the Bible study. At the conclusion of the Bible study, everyone stood and closed their eyes in prayer. In the next few seconds, the young man fired seventy-four bullets from a semi-automatic weapon, killing nine people, including the pastor.

After listening to the story, we all walked to the altar. At the time, I tried to imagine the grief of the people who worship there. I have since wondered, what is God calling me to do, maybe to understand how I need to be a part of the solution to the pain and the injustice and the unrighteousness. First be reconciled, Jesus says. Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. Love your enemies. Jesus is teaching what he will come to embody. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, and we are ambassadors for Christ. God makes God’s appeal through us.

Paul continues, in 2 Corinthians 6:1-2:

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

For he says,

“At an acceptable time, I have listened to you,
and on the day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time: see, now is the day of salvation! (NRSV)

As Wesleyans, our salvation has holiness as its end, Christian perfection. The end of Matthew 5 has a simple statement of Jesus: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48 NRSV). In Luke’s Gospel, the parallel teaching has it this way: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (6:36 NRSV). Both are concluding words that the early church heard Jesus saying after his instructions to first be reconciled, to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to love our enemies. Be perfect. Be merciful. In the words of the New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, “to be perfect here means to love in the same indiscriminate way that God loves.”

We come together to wrestle with the mystery of the unity of the church and the corresponding mystery of human sexuality, especially in the life of the LGBTQ community in our midst.

We confess that we need this teaching of Jesus, and the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit to discern what it means for us. Perhaps in our journey to perfection, we need to not neglect mercy, and in our extension of mercy, we can confess that we have not yet arrived at perfection. We must not allow disagreement over our understandings of LGBTQ identity to divide the church. And yet we must not seek or settle for unity at the expense of the another’s dignity or sacred worth.

In The United Methodist Church, the minister stands at the altar and raises his or her hands to God and says the words of the epiclesis, the invocation that the Holy Spirit will be present in the bread and cups that we receive, and that we will actually be the body of Christ in the world. And then the powerful request of God:

Make us one with Christ—this is faithfulness,
make us one with each other—this is unity,
and make us one in ministry to all the world—this is fruitfulness.

A sacramental minister of the gospel is licensed or ordained for this purpose—to see that the work of the Holy Spirit does sustain ordinary people—that is all of us—in our daily attempts to represent Christ wherever we are. The faithfulness, unity, and fruitfulness of the church form a whole. We cannot be one without abiding in Jesus; we cannot be Spirit-filled without loving our neighbors; we cannot experience revival as we sow divisions in the body.

Let us kneel at an altar, and if we discover that our brother or sister has something against us or we them. What will we do?

Sources

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