

I have been a United Methodist pastor for over 25 years. There is much I love about our denomination and even more about the Wesleyan accent with which we speak the faith. I have always admired Wesley's ability to hold in healthy together head and heart, personal and social holiness, a passionate evangelicalism and a robust sacramental life, liturgy and mission, and an unwavering insistence upon Christians being those who love God and love neighbor in ways that transform lover and beloved alike.

I've heard this accent in churches across the Metro District. Our District truly is a remarkable place. We are diverse in most every way imaginable. In city center, small towns, suburbs, and rural communities we have pastors and laity committed to making disciples of Jesus Christ and loving their communities in ways that seek the thriving of their neighbors. You feed people with bread and the Bread of Life. You offer clothing, school supplies, housing, rides to doctor's visits, a hand to hold in cancer treatment centers and nursing homes, and open your doors to countless community partners working for affordable housing, better schools, and healthier communities. You teach English, welcome immigrants, send people in mission around the world. You listen to the hopes and dreams of children and youth, the heartbreak of the grieving, the despair of the depressed and the addicted, the longing of those who wonder if God might love them too or if there even is a God. You call leaders and politicians to be better. You are the voice for those who have no voice. You worship, baptize, marry, bury, bless, confirm, teach and preach the word, and so much more. I am grateful for it all.

Even so, we are not perfect and there are local congregations that are more vital than others. We are painfully divided, and the future seems unclear and uncertain for the institution known as United Methodism. There are moments I have great hope. There are also moments when I am reminded of a line from Chinua Achebe's brilliant novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe writes, "He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days." This is not an easy time to lead and be the church, but of course, why would we ever imagine following a crucified Lord would be easy?

As I've visited churches in our District, preaching and teaching, presiding at Charge Conferences, dreaming with pastors and leaders who are imagining creative ways of being faithful, encouraging faithful risk-taking, listening to hurts, hopes, and dreams, I've tried to keep a few things in heart and mind. I share them knowing that alone they do not answer all our questions or solve our great challenges. Rather, they inform the posture from which I do my work and keep me mindful of my own limits and short-comings as a pastoral leader.

- Church is not something we create. Church is the name given to the cruciform beloved community God is making through water and the Spirit.
- Church is not our "meeting" where we set the agenda and then ask God to bless it. We've been given the agenda, the playbook for being Church. We see it in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus who took towel and basin and washed his disciples' feet.
- Church is a gift, a gift we steward and give away but not a gift we own, control or keep to ourselves. It is not "our" church or "our" ministry.
- The Church is the hope of the world. Not because of us, our cleverness, our planning, or even our commitment and sacrifice. The Church is the hope of the world because somehow by the grace of God we are the body of Christ who is love, hope, freedom, and life in the flesh.
- Being Church is not safe. If safety is our primary virtue we shouldn't follow Jesus.
- United Methodism may or may not have a future. The Church does. The Church, as a foretaste of the Kingdom that we pray will come on earth as it is in heaven, has a future because of Easter and God's power to raise the dead.

- The Church is beautiful, *and it will break your heart*. Humility and confession are needed in full measure.
- Church should never be boring. The earliest followers of Jesus experienced life with him as a holy adventure. Shame on us if we make church predictable and boring.

Finally, the beautiful thing about being the Church is that we don't have to wait for the future to become crystal clear or for the meeting and voting to conclude before we "come and follow". Christ has gone ahead of us into the brokenness, the hate, the places of despair, into the injustice, the division, the violence, the poverty, hunger, into prison cells and hospice beds, and Christ is calling the Church, you and me, to empty ourselves, take up the cross, follow, and meet him there.

In a few weeks we will gather at Lake Junaluska for Annual Conference and think about the future of the Church. I regularly hear and experience the anxiety, fear, posturing and maneuvering related to our upcoming gathering. There are understandable reasons for all of that. My prayer is that we will approach our work there with the same Spirit we see in the women who went to the tomb on Easter morning. They went not with a desire to control, or wield power, or to claim position. They went with cloth, oil, and spices to lovingly care for the body of Christ and their lives were never the same. Could we dare to follow their example and care deeply for the body of Christ? If so, maybe Easter will come.