



Council of Bishops

The United Methodist Church



[A Pastoral Letter to the People of The United Methodist Church](#)

Ash Wednesday, 2020

From +Kenneth H. Carter, Jr., President, Council of Bishops *Ken*

On Ash Wednesday, it is the tradition of the church to focus on the cross, in the form of the imposition of ashes, and to read Psalm 51. This is also a spiritual practice for many every Friday, to read this Psalm and to focus on the cross. Without a deep and constant turning to Jesus, we are always prone to pride and arrogance, we are always tempted by power and using any available means to achieve our ends, even those purposes we believe to be of God.

A church that loses touch with the spiritual practice of focusing on the cross and reading Psalm 51 will inevitably transfer its trust to institutions and leaders who are always in need of reform and renewal.

To read Psalm 51 is to be utterly transparent and open to the truth—in our spiritual lives and in our institutional practices. This leads us— as persons before God and as leaders of communities and congregations—to a deep and constant dependence on God, who has the power to change us, who is finally the source of our hope.

*Create in me a clean heart, O God
And renew a right spirit within me
Do not cast me from your presence
Or take your Holy Spirit from me
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
And grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*

Lent is a forty-day journey that can become, for us, an extended conversation with God. God's power, our weakness. God's provision, our emptiness. God's abundance, our scarcity. God's righteousness, our imperfection. God's wisdom, our confusion.

And a conversation with God can become the foundation for a conversation among God's people.

I see hope in the conversations that are happening across the church. Some conversation is between followers of Jesus who have very real differences with one another. Our unity is in the cross.

I continue to affirm, perhaps especially now, the resources contained in [The Anatomy of Peace](#) and the work done by the Commission on a Way Forward on convicted humility.

Another traditional text for Ash Wednesday is 2 Corinthians 5. It is a passage about reconciliation. The Greek word for reconciliation is *katallage*. It is a word that appears

only three times in the New Testament, and was a term more commonly used in politics than in religion. It is a word about settling disputes.

God settled a dispute with us through the cross. And God now asks us to move toward, not away from each other, as we take up this ministry of reconciliation. It is linked, Paul will go on to say in the first verses of 2 Corinthians 6, to our salvation. Our salvation is not in fleeing from each other. The Triune God did not flee from us. Our salvation is the way of the cross, our settling disputes with each other.

Finally, our hope is in the power and providence of God, in whose image we are all created, in whose church we are joined together through public promises. For the signs of hope, in conversations, in grace extended, and in justice sought, I give thanks. God is not finished with us yet. We now have these forty days. We are finite, God is infinite. And this is at the heart of Ash Wednesday—the way of the cross, which is God's great agenda.

That agenda is to resist the forces of evil, injustice and oppression, and to turn to the crucified and risen Lord, our judge and our hope, with convicted humility. This is the path by which we become disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.