

The Choice Is (Y)Ours

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Matthew 22:32-40

Words of greeting.

What a wonderful welcome to your home, which is now, thanks be to God, my home. I've learned that when one is in a new home there are three important tasks and one essential task. First, you have to find your way around. Last week I made it to Holidaysburg for a great Altoona district worship celebration and today I've arrived at State College – so I'm getting there. The second is, you have to eat the native food. Zedna Haverstock brought us corn soup and I've had sauerkraut, but I understand I won't have really qualified until I've had snit and hogmaw and something called knep. The third is, you have to speak the native language. I'm working on "Lanc'ster" and "hume". So, those three are the important tasks. The essential is the building of relationships and you have made that so easy by your gracious and generous welcome.

Prayer

For years I have admired the Central Pennsylvania Conference for the long-standing commitment to full payment of ministry shares to the General church, for the outstanding leaders, both clergy and laity, whom I have known from CPC, and more recently for the amazing and sacrificial commitment to missions through the establishment and operation of Mission Central. This is a strong conference.

And now, by the grace of God, I am your bishop. I believe with all of my heart that God has put us together for such a time as this.

What this conference has discovered is that ministry which reaches outward strengthens the church inward. Jesus said, "You have to lose your life for my sake to find it." As a church, when we lose our life in service to others, we find vitality and power and we experience the fruits of sacrificial love.

With this strong foundation, I believe we are poised to do what perhaps no conference has ever done. I believe we are ready to grow churches in a part of the country, which is not showing dramatic population growth. I believe that we can go where no one has ever gone before and can transform our churches, all of them, into churches which are alive for Jesus Christ and committed to making disciples.

We will be required to change, to risk, to love.

Change

Risk

Love

ALL OF LIFE IS CHANGE AND WE MUST SAY YES!

I remember it as if it were yesterday, but it happened 35 years ago. I was standing in our 6-year-old daughter's bedroom in Oklahoma as the packers were working their way through the house to pack all of our belongings for Connecticut. I felt a sense of desperation. I thought, "I can't do this. I just can't make this move. There is too much pain. I can't leave friends. I can't leave everything I love. I can't move across the country from our families."

Then I realized, what is happening to me is change. All of life is change. From the moment of birth until the moment of death we have to deal with change. If I say "no" to change, I am saying "no" to life. It was as if I heard the voice of God say to me, I put before you life and death. Therefore, choose life. And in that moment I knew I could not say "no" to life. The only possible answer was "Yes". That "Yes" said 35 years ago is part of the journey that brings us together here, today.

God put the question to person after person in the story of our faith, "Choose, will it be life or death. God said to the Israelites, "I place before you Life and Death. . .choose life so that you and your children will live. As they looked from their years of wandering in the foreboding desert toward the promised land, they heard these words: I set before you life and death. Therefore choose life.

The choice was theirs.

The choice is yours.

The choice is ours.

This choice which I believe God is setting before us now, this choice between life and death, will require change.

Change is first and fundamental to the new life toward which God is calling us.

Most of us like to think we aren't part of these profound calls to leave where we are and move on. God always called God's people from the now into a new and unknown future. But, in fact, God is constantly calling each of us to do so.

I am not happy with change. The night I was elected bishop and knew I would be going to some unknown place, leaving my own beloved conference, Jack can tell you, I did not sleep all night. I realized what this change meant. We would be moving to somewhere in the Northeastern Jurisdiction from Maine to Maryland to West Virginia would I be going? I cried and I cried out all night and finally fell

asleep about 5:30 a.m. At 6 a.m. sharp the phone rang and it was Sue Ella Barto telling me I would be coming to the Central Pennsylvania Conference. Change may be frightening, it may be awesome, it may be painful, but if it is God's change it is always ultimately good.

The future cannot be the same as the past. In the United Methodist denomination with an average age of 58 the future WILL NOT be the same as the past. In twenty years most of those who are pillars of our most of our churches today will be DEAD. You know that, you already experience that. Our future WILL BE different from our past. Change is NOT a choice. You WILL change. The choice is HOW you change. So the first point is we must choose to change.

The second point I want to make today is that God is calling us to RISK. Here's what I believe God is offering us today: we can simply do what we're doing now and that future will change into a future of death. OR we can choose the shape of that future – churches risking worship styles, risking a renewed commitment to mission; risking reaching outward instead of protecting ourselves.

Some of you know that I have described my experience of asking congregations why they want to grow. What I heard far too often was: “We need people to help with our bills and we need new folks to help with the ministry. We don't have enough money and we're tired.”

Among United Methodist churches as a whole the percentage of persons who did NOT grow up in a faith community of any kind is only about 8 percent. Today, although almost 95 percent of our youth claim belief in God, less than 20 percent of children and youth actually participate in a church – across all religious experiences. If we assume only 8 percent of those 80 percent non participants will ever find their way into a church – we're going to have many, many empty church buildings in 30 years.

But even more important, far more important: the 80 percent non-participating children and youth are desperately needing the church. In a recent study of the crisis in the number of depressed and suicidal youth, a sophisticated group of scientists, educators, and physicians said, “that children are ‘hardwired’ to connect with communities of people for it is here that they receive values and commitment”. These scientists are saying children and youth NEED the church . “ We are the values driven community which can offer spiritual foundation to our children, we are one of the few places in society today that offers an

intergenerational experience, we must offer to our children and youth a life line to the future. And we must do everything possible to speak their language.

(*Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*, report from Institute for American Values 2003)

Vital ministry will be characterized by:

- Welcoming and open churches committed to spreading their message of invitation and this should include making a financial commitment to growing. Adam Hamilton at the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City – a church that had no members, that did not exist in 1990 and now 14 years later has 10,000 members – committed 10 percent of its annual budget to evangelism for the first 10 years of their ministry. What percentage of your budget goes to evangelism?
- Worship which excites, inspires, and speaks the saving message of Jesus Christ using a variety of media and music. How many of you remember seeing television for the first time? How many of you grew up with television from your first memory as a child? Generations are now informed, educated, impacted, touched by images. We must include images more creatively in our worship experience.
- A high bar for membership and leadership which requires weekly attendance, spiritual growth through Disciple and other scripture study, mission engagement and tithing. Come, worship with us. Be a part of our church, participate. But when you decide to join the church and if you are a leader, these are the requirements.
- A spirit of love which is immediately palpable.
- Sacrificial commitment individually and corporately to mission, locally and globally. The churches which are truly reaching out in mission are the churches which are alive.
- Constant prayer is the norm in the life of the entire church, open to the renewing and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, open to God's gift of healing.

Churches which are willing to transform themselves into vital centers of faithful living and giving must be willing to risk.

This choice which God is asking us to make will require not only change and risk but also loving, loving with the mind and heart of Christ. The third requirement is love.

We must live together as the church seeing with new eyes, seeing Jesus Christ in our sisters and brothers and, yes, in ourselves, and being so convicted with passion that everyone will be drawn irresistibly to our churches.

One of my favorite of all stories is called “The Rabbi’s Gift.” Perhaps you’ve heard it.

Long ago in a deep woods there was a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of anti monasticism through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and rising secularism in the nineteenth centuries, all of its branch houses were lost.

“The spirit was rare among the monks and they were indeed discouraged. There were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

“In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. ‘The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again.’ They would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

“The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. ‘I know how it is,’ he exclaimed. ‘The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore.’ So the old abbot and the rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. ‘It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years,’ the abbot said, ‘but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?’

“No, I am sorry,” the Rabbi responded. “I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, “Well, what did the rabbi say?”

“He couldn’t help,” the abbot answered. “We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving – it was something cryptic—was that the Messiah is one of us. I don’t know what he meant.”

“In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi’s words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that’s the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people’s sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn’t be that much for You, could I?”

“As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

“Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to

picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

“Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi’s gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.”

[*The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*, Scott Peck]

If we could hear and believe and live out this message today, “The Messiah is one of you,” how our life together would be transformed. What an extraordinary spirit of love would prevail each time we gather as local churches, as districts, as the conference, as the General United Methodist Church, in every prayer group, every Disciple bible study, every volunteer in mission team, every trustees meeting, every time two or three of us gather together!

I challenge you now to choose to respond to the challenge which I believe comes from God calling us into a new day, a day of change, a day of unbelievable risk, a day in which we are required to fulfill the commandment of Jesus: to love God with all of our heart and mind and soul and our neighbor as ourselves.

And I challenge you to a renewed commitment to see the Christ in each other. Not just in those folks with whom you agree. Not just with those with whom you find instant joy in working. Not just with the lovable. But to see Christ in those marginalized persons in your life and in your community. To see Christ in the people whom you think are wrong in their theology. To see Christ in the difficult people, the crotchety ones. I challenge you to see Christ in every one.

I challenge you to choose to change – to make a commitment to follow the great commandment to love with all of your heart and the great commission to reach out to others on behalf of Christ no matter what the cost. Even if this means ignoring or confronting the control folks in your church who will not change. Even if this means giving up power that has given you pleasure at the cost of keeping your church from being faithful. Even if this means risking your life as you know it.

There is NO limit to what we can do as churches, as a conference if we dare to follow what I believe is surely God’s call to us.

The choice is yours.

The choice is ours.

Of this I am utterly convinced: the Messiah IS one of us.