

If I Only Had A...

Michigan Annual Conference
Opening Worship

May 30, 2019
Bishop David Alan Bard

Texts: I Corinthians 16:13-14; I Peter 3:8

Welcome friends. Greetings in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and peace and power of the Holy Spirit. It is good to be gathered here with you. I want to extend a particularly warm welcome to those guests who are with us as family members of clergy whose lives we have remembered. You've been in our prayers and in our hearts. We in the Michigan Conference are deeply grateful for the service of your loved ones.

So where to go from here? What do I say after I've said, "howdy?" I have deliberated, pondered, thought, meditated, cogitated, ruminated, reflected, considered, mused, contemplated, puzzled, mulled over, and have I mentioned, prayed really hard, about how to begin this sermon this year.

I could figure this out, if only.... If I only.... If I only had a brain. *I could while away the hours, conversing with the flowers, consulting with the rain. And my head I'd be scratching, while my thoughts are busy hatchin'. If I only had a brain. I'd unravel every riddle, for every individdle, in trouble or in pain. With the thoughts I'd be thinking, I could be another Lincoln, if I only had a brain.* You know, I sound just like Ray Bolger in the shower.

How can I try to be funny? How dare I? Don't I know what's going on in our church? Don't I know what's going on in the world? The words of Psalm 56:8 have seemed often relevant: "You [O God] have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?" So maybe I have a brain, it's just a heart I lack. I know I have a heart, though, because it's breaking, often.

Maybe you are thinking, if we only had a better time in which to be the church. If we only had a better world in which to be the church. The situation in our denomination is really difficult right now. General Conference 2019 reaffirmed traditional positions on clergy officiating at same-gender weddings, and on the ineligibility of self-avowed, practicing LGBTQ persons from consideration for commissioning or ordination. Added to this were mandatory penalties for those found guilty at church trials for officiating at weddings, and additional provisions affecting the just resolution process. The reaction to this has been deep and widespread, with many United Methodists in the United States and Europe declaring that this does not represent them, nor the best of our Wesleyan tradition. Of course, others disagree. General Conference 2019 did not find a way forward for The United Methodist Church, but instead revealed even more starkly the depth of our differences. If some space is not created within Methodism we will continue to be swept up in an increasingly intense cycle of action and reaction. If we only had a different time.

Meanwhile, back in the world, this embattled church finds itself in a society, in the United States, in which what happens in the church is less and less relevant. To be sure we made the news after General Conference, but otherwise? Survey after survey of people in the United States confirms that the fastest growing religious affiliation in our country is “no affiliation.” The success of The United Methodist Church and its predecessor denominations in planting churches in the 1800s and early 1900s means we have many churches in declining communities. Are there ways to engage in worship, spiritual formation, and ministry to the community without the cost of maintaining a building? Can we share our buildings or share leadership in new ways in some of these communities? Tough questions.

We live in a world witnessing great disparities in wealth and opportunity. Some people are doing remarkably well, so well they can pay “consultants” thousands of dollars to help their children get into college, while too many people struggle to figure out how to pay for college. School shootings and other forms of gun violence continue to plague us, and we can barely find common language in which to talk about it. Racism remains a toxic poison. Our inability or unwillingness to address differences of race, culture and economic status and how they have had an impact on our lives keeps us from becoming the church we should be and the society we could be. We poison our relationships in countless ways, even as we also poison the very planet on which we live including contributing to climate change.

Some might say, “Bishop, now you are straying from the gospel into politics,” to which I would suggest that this represents a failure in our understanding of spiritual formation in Jesus Christ. Spiritual formation has something to do with Philippians 2:5, “Let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” It has something to do with I Corinthians 16:14, “Let all that you do be done in love.” I don’t know about you, but the Jesus in my Bible seemed to think disparities of wealth could get in the way of spiritual development. The Jesus in my Bible reached across lines of difference to bring healing and hope. The Jesus in my Bible connects with a Syro-Phonecian woman, breaking every rule in his time about who should be talking to who.

Our church is kind of a mess. Our world is kind of a mess. If we only lived in better times. Or maybe that’s not it. Maybe it’s this – if I only had a better appointment, then I could really dig deeply into this encompassing spiritual formation, and we could help move The United Methodist Church forward. Maybe it’s this – if we only had a better pastor appointed,

then we could really dig deeply into this encompassing spiritual formation, and we could help move The United Methodist Church forward. Maybe it's this – if we only had a better bishop!

Let's not get crazy here. Take a breath. There are reasons for appointments to change, and bishops will change. Take another breath. We are where we are in this time, in this time in the history of The United Methodist Church, in this time in the history of our country, in this time in the history of our world. This is where we are. A philosopher once wrote, "People make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past."

We are where we are, and in this time we need leaders. We need to be leaders. We need to be leaders with the qualities described in the texts read earlier. "Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love." (I Corinthians 16:13-14). "Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (I Peter 3:8). I might summarize by saying we need and need to be leaders of wisdom, heart and courage, all rooted deeply in our faith in Jesus Christ. Our churches need such leaders. Our world needs such leaders. Sunday I will preach more about clergy leadership of wisdom, heart and courage. One resource I used in thinking about that sermon was Gil Rendle's new book Quietly Courageous. I mention it here because Cokesbury will be closed following ordination and you may be interested in the book after that sermon. Sorry for the ad. Here I want to develop another thought – what if we viewed our churches as laboratories for leadership? What if our churches became greenhouses for nurturing leaders, leaders of wisdom, heart and courage?

Leaders of wisdom or mind. Stay alert. Have a humble mind. In traveling around the state this past year, before General Conference, I spoke each time about the importance of humility, of a humble mind. I said that humility is about two things. It is about self-knowledge, about knowing our strengths and limitations and gifts. It is also about openness, openness to new learning being open to new learning, new growth. One can always learn more about the wonder and mystery of life and the love and grace of God. We can always see more broadly, feel more deeply, think more imaginatively, and love more profoundly. We can always open our minds, our hearts, our spirits a little wider – to others, to God, and even to ourselves. Years ago I read this wonderful book entitled The Ironic Christian's Companion in which the author writes: “curiosity, imagination, exploration, adventure are not preliminary to Christian identity, a kind of booster rocket to be jettisoned when spiritual orbit is achieved. They are part of the payload” (9). We need leaders with adventurous and curious minds, humble minds, and the church can help make that happen. We can be places that welcome questions, curiosity, conversation.

Leaders of heart. Let all that you do be done in love. Have sympathy and love for one another, a tender heart. Traveling around the state, I also spoke of heart. To have heart is not to let fear take up too much room in our soul. To have heart is to know joy, even when it is difficult, a joy that allows us to be astonished by beauty over and over again. That we are here together remains a thing of beauty that still touches my heart. You're still beautiful. To have heart is to be gracious. To have a tender heart is to have an open heart. In other words I read years ago: “We may think that by closing the heart we'll protect ourselves from feeling the pain of the world, but instead we isolate ourselves even more from joy.... The opposite of happiness

is a fearful, closed heart.” (Elizabeth Lesser, The New American Spirituality, 180). An open heart risks seeing the other as other and as also loved by God. We listen intently to others. Part of what plagues us in both the church and our society is a failure of compassion, a closing of our hearts toward others. Another part of what plagues us in both church and society is a failure of imagination, the inability or unwillingness to imagine the life of others – their hopes, dreams, joys, fears, pains. What if we listened intently to and tried to imagine more deeply the experiences of persons of different racial-ethnic backgrounds, of persons on the economic margins, of persons not born in the United States but who came here seeking a better life, of LGBTQ persons? How might our hearts be opened? The church can help make that happen.

Leaders of courage. To have a humble mind takes courage. There is always more to learn, so it has to be ok to say “I don’t know.” When we see things from a new vantage point, we may have to admit that our previous viewpoint was stunted or stilted and wrong. That’s not easy. To have a tender heart takes courage, the courage to let our hearts break again and again, the courage to hold a range of feelings and imaginings together in our soul. At the center of courage is faith, faith as trust, faith as trust in the God of Jesus Christ whose love stretches the spangled heavens and whose love knows our every breath and heartbeat. Our churches are grounded in such faith.

If this is something of what leadership of wisdom, heart and courage looks like, and our church and world need this kind of leadership, our churches need to be greenhouses growing such leaders. We need to be places that plant seeds that are skills necessary for such leadership – skills in listening well, skills to tolerate ambiguity and not knowing, skills that help people grow in their self-knowledge in light of knowing that they are loved by God, skills in

working with difference and conflict, skills in reading and learning together. We need to deepen our prayer lives for in prayer we slow our reactivity, in prayer we come to know ourselves more deeply. We need to enrich our worship life, for worship reminds us of the big picture of God, in love, transforming the world toward a new heaven and a new earth.

Greenhouses are not only places where seeds are planted, they are also nurtured and tendered. They need **light**, and our churches offer the light of God's love in Jesus Christ. When we know we are loved we can be more open and curious and adventurous. God knows we mess up, and God does not give up on us. When we know we are loved we are less threatened by persons who are different. We can see their beauty. We can listen with open hearts and minds.

Plants require **water**, and in our churches we offer the waters of baptism. Those waters refresh and cleanse and move us along a journey of renouncing the spiritual forces of wickedness, rejecting the evil powers of this world, repenting of our sin, of using the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves, of following Jesus the Christ in union with the church which Christ has opened to all people. When the waters of baptism flow seeds of wisdom, heart and courage flourish.

Plants also need **warmth**. When we offer the waters of baptism, we offer to surround people with a community of love and forgiveness. Warmth. What an audacious offer. When we live into those words, we nurture people who can lead with wisdom, heart and courage.

This annual conference is about bold and effective leadership. I invite you to think about how each of your congregations can be a greenhouse for leadership of wisdom, heart, and courage in the name and Spirit of Jesus. There is no "if we only had..." here. By God's

grace and by the power of God's Spirit every one of our churches has some capacity to grow this kind of leadership. Every one of them!

But why wait? Right here, right now we can be a place that nurtures leadership of wisdom, heart and courage. We can do things together here that form us. We can surround each other with a community of love and forgiveness. We can debate and deliberate thoughtfully. We can speak with heart, that is passionately, yet also with a heart for those who will disagree. And when we vote, as we will, and your view prevails, how will you treat those who voted differently? When your view does not prevail, how will you speak of and with those who voted differently? Will we see others, or only our own caricatures of others?

Part of the reality we are facing, friends, is that we may not be together long. I may be the first and the last bishop of the Michigan Conference of The United Methodist Church. I get it. If the church divides into more traditional and more fully inclusive branches, I will be in the more fully inclusive branch. Yet we are together, here, now. I am the bishop for all Michigan United Methodists, here, now, and I remain deeply committed to this ministry, committed to engaging in this ministry with all the wisdom, heart and courage I can muster by the grace of God.

I've been thinking a lot of two images from Genesis. "Abraham took his last breath and died after a good long life, a content old man, and he was placed with his ancestors. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him." (Genesis 25:8-9a, CEV) "Isaac took his last breath and died. He was buried with his ancestors after a long, satisfying life. His sons Esau and Jacob buried him." (Genesis 35:29, CEV) Keeping those images in mind, I think of a lovely benediction that I use from time to time: "Life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those

with whom we share the way. So be swift to love. Make haste to be kind. All in the name of our companion on the way, Jesus the Christ.” A community of love and forgiveness nurturing seeds of leadership, leadership of wisdom, heart and courage even at a time like this. Even here, even now.

The film *Apollo 13* is based on the actual Apollo 13 space flight headed for the moon. When a malfunction made the moon landing impossible, and significantly damaged the space capsule, the astronauts and the flight crew had a new mission. They had to get these astronauts home. At one moment, as all the odds against getting the astronauts home are ticked off and one official says, “this could be the worst disaster NASA has ever experienced.” The flight crew chief, Gene Krantz replies, “With all due respect, sir, I believe this is going to be our finest hour.”

Will The United Methodist Church in the coming months changes its trajectory to avoid some kind of disaster? Will we simply burn up? Will we explode, or implode? How will we Michigan United Methodist live together in this chaotic and uncertain time? Might this be among our finest hours?

If only...?? **No.** We can make it so by the grace of God and our own choices. We have the leadership capacity here, if we let it be nurtured by the light of God’s love, by the waters of baptism, by the warmth of a community of love and forgiveness. “Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.” (I Corinthians 16:13-14). “Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind” (I Peter 3:8). Be leaders of wisdom, heart and spirit here, now, so we can go from this place better able to nurture leaders in our churches for the shared mission we still

have of making disciples of Jesus Christ so people can be different and so the world can be transformed. May it be so. Come, Spirit, come. Amen.