



Council of Bishops

The United Methodist Church



The Work of Jesus in the Way of Jesus

A sermon taken from John 21:1-19 and preached by Bishop Ken Carter at the Council of Bishops on May 5, 2019, in Chicago, Illinois

Sisters and brothers, I want to share three thoughts out of the scripture. If we stay close to these words, we will be a great blessing to the church that has called us in this season. And if we stay close to these words, we will find that we are not alone. The words help us toward a question we may not be asking, but we need to ask it.

How can we do the work of Jesus in the way of Jesus?

The first word:

Welcome Unconditionally

Our culture, our world, for better for worse, has a default way of labeling us, according to who we appear to be externally, or where our political sympathies lie, or accents that carry the words that we speak. We label each other, we form judgments, we imagine that we might have something in common with this person, or we assume that we do not.

In the set apart ministry of the church of Jesus Christ, we are called to welcome unconditionally. We see this pattern in the life of Jesus himself. He ate with sinners. He crossed ethnic boundaries. He touched the unclean. Jesus had the inner mark of holiness and the outer mark of compassion. In this set apart ministry of episcopacy we are called to represent Jesus, the good shepherd. The words of our consecration to this office echo this.

Our lives now are not our own. We represent Jesus, the good news of Jesus, the unconditional love of God. **While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us**, the apostle Paul wrote (Romans 5). While the prodigal was at a distance, the father runs and embraces (Luke 15).

For a season in ministry I served a church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, near the campus of Wake Forest University. There were three clergy on our team—it was a large church. I was blessed to serve with a very gifted elder named Susan and a local pastor, whose name was Derry.

Derry had gone into the ministry later in life, and had completed the course of study. Prior to joining our team, for nine years he served in Lexington, North Carolina, which is known for two things, barbecue and furniture.

Many of the members of Derry's church in Lexington worked in the furniture mills of that town. When Derry arrived he learned that a member of one of the active families was actually serving time in the state's central prison, for murder. He was on death row. And so Derry began to drive, every Saturday, to Raleigh, about 100 miles each way, to visit with the young man. He did this for two years. The church loved this—he was being a pastor, a shepherd—to the family.

And then, as it happened, events took a strange turn. Another inmate in the prison was overheard to say that he had in fact committed the murder. And so in a brief time the church member was released. He returned home. The congregation threw a great banquet, the son had returned! It was a celebration.

And you might think the story would end there, but it did not. The man who confessed the murder, Rickie Lee Sanderson, made contact with Derry, and asked if he would visit him.

And because Derry was a pastor, a shepherd, he began to do just that. Every Saturday he would drive to the central prison, 100 miles each way, to visit Rickie Lee Sanderson. He learned along the way that the church did not love this so much. But Derry had a higher calling. It was to welcome unconditionally.

He and Rickie Lee formed a bond. And in time Rickie Lee Sanderson asked him, “*would you be present at my execution?*” And then, “*would you officiate at my graveside service?*” And Derry would indeed be present at his execution, and he would officiate at his burial.

There is a power in welcoming people unconditionally. It is a power that is embedded in every page of the gospels, in the rhythm of Jesus’ very life, death and resurrection.

In a previous meeting of this Council, we began with a memorial service, for those who had died, bishops and spouses, that year. Among those remembered that evening were Julia Wilke, co-author of the Disciple Bible Study, and Eunice Mathews, daughter of E. Stanley Jones, and Reuben Job, former world editor of the Upper Room, author of *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Servants* and the *Three Simple Rules*, and retired bishop.

Bruce Ough, whom he had mentored, bishop now of the Dakotas, where Job grew up, and Minnesota, gave a remembrance. They were very close. And Bruce mentioned a question he had asked Reuben Job, near the end of his life. “What are you learning, spiritually? What is the Lord teaching you?”

And Job responded: “*Everyone is God’s beloved child. God does not make the distinctions that we make*”.

Welcome unconditionally. We are not in ministry to be compliance officers. Many scholars believe the purpose of John 21, which was attached later, was to reintegrate Peter into the life of the community, to restore him. Peter has denied Jesus three times and abandoned him. Now he is asked, three times, do you love me? And Jesus says, “feed my sheep. Follow me.”

Walk Together

A second word: *walk together*. For a variety of reasons we are tempted at times to do this work alone. This may be related to the myth of the heroic solo leader, or the philosophy of self-reliance, or sometimes it may just seem to be the path of least resistance. Other people are too complicated. I will do it myself!

But let me encourage us to walk together. I have looked upon the mural on the wall of the airport in Johannesburg, which I have seen on the way to Zimbabwe and Africa University. Many of you have seen it as well.

*If you want to go fast, walk alone.
If you want to go far, walk together*

In the set apart ministry of Jesus, you will want to walk together.

We have a word for this—the connection. The connection has a purpose, to help us to grow spiritually and to love our neighbor. This is the heart of Methodism.

Connection is our way of fulfilling the great commandment of Jesus (Matthew 22) on which hangs all of the law and the prophets (see Richard Hays’ concept of “weight-bearing” in Echoes of the Gospels).

The connection is rooted in the works of piety and the works of mercy, for whom we are accountable to each other. This happens more easily in small circles of trust and is less easy to scale in very large groups (like political conferences).

How are works of piety and mercy a part of my own life?

Works of piety include reading the New Testament and the Psalms and The Imitation of Christ and prayer, especially intercession, and corporate worship and receiving communion as often as possible.

Works of mercy may be my encouragement of others and my lifestyle and habits and being the best husband and father and grandparent I can be and getting more serious about charitable giving and figuring out how mercy blends into justice, and how I can engage in politics in appropriate (principled and non-partisan) ways.

The Mission, Vision and Scope noted that the connection is “strained”. The connection is contested. It is not a given. What would losing the connection mean?

Loss of connection is about loss of friendship and vocation and identity. It calls into question who we have been and are and want to be with others.

I have reflected lately that love of neighbor is not easy because the neighbor has increasingly become a stranger. Strangers are more pervasive as we are more siloed and even tribal. Greg Ellison, who was with us in the fall of 2018, has given a rich description of public, familiar and intimate strangers in his Fearless Dialogues.

How can strangers become neighbors? This is what the parable of the Good Samaritan is about (Luke 10), the question asked of Jesus, “who is my neighbor?”

When Wesley says that there is no holiness but social holiness, he is saying there is no way to fulfill the great commandment apart from connection. We cannot be disciples apart from connection. And we cannot transform the world apart from being disciples. Connection is our way of making disciples

of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world and is in service to this.

Whenever there is connection, there is hope. When there is no connection, we experience less happiness and holiness, words that were synonyms for Wesley.

Holy living is a set of practices that puts us in a place to mature. The presence of other faithful people helps us to practice our faith. And this looks like a mature spirituality and a corresponding compassion. We cannot love God, whom we have never seen, if we do not love our neighbor, whom we have seen.

We need a new canon of teaching that is rooted in Matthew 22 and Luke 10. The latter includes both the great commandment and parable of the Good Samaritan. The neighbor question is sometimes harder for us. It is of course a test of our salvation.

Our happiness and holiness is in our neighbor's well-being, and in our lives being more by surrounded neighbors than strangers.

So how do strangers become neighbors?

Curiosity and conversation and risk.

Seeing others without labels and imagining them to be more mysterious and complex than we had first thought.

Assuming the best about them.

Being willing to change our minds about others and giving them second chances.

Jesus sees us more as neighbors than strangers. Indeed, he calls us his friends.

And, many of us are here because we were given some kind of second chance.

How does the familiar become intimate?

Meals, in the reciprocity of giving and receiving, knowing that this takes time and patience.

If you want go fast, walk alone.

If you want to go far, walk together.

Effective bishops and superintendents keep people in connection with each other so they will grow in the maturity of their callings as leaders.

Effective bishops and superintendents care about the whole, the ecumene. And they (we) are on our own journey of accountability. That we do not talk about this or show the fruit of this may be (in part) the obsession of some with how we experience accountability.

We need oversight because of our capacity for self-deception, because we get stuck, because of our disordered love of cheap grace, because of our need for discipline and a law that is rooted and grounded in love.

Lastly, how can courage relate to connection? It takes courage to see the stranger who is near to us as a neighbor we are called to love. It takes courage to grow the center and risk not being in full

agreement with those on the convictional edges. And it takes courage to stay at a very contentious table. It would be easier to take a last sip of tea, push back our chair and walk away, to the certainty of the convictional edge.

When I first typed this the auto-correct changed convictional edges to convictional ledges. As if we jump into something there. Maybe something disastrous. Convictional ledges. A thought experiment.

It takes courage to sing, with Al Green, "Let's Stay Together". It takes courage and creativity to grow the center, to find some "new form of unity". It is actually the most inclusive space because it wants to keep as many as possible in connection.

Sisters and brothers, it takes courage to stay in connection. But it is the heart of Methodism. And to dig a bit deeper, it is the heart of Jesus. It bears the weight of everything.

What our church is wondering, this week, is whether we are willing to bear this weight with each other, and for the sake of the church they love. They are watching to see if we will walk together.

Walk together.

And a third word:

Worship Constantly

"My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me" (John 10). How do we hear the voice of Jesus the Good Shepherd? We immerse ourselves in the scriptures and we pray them.

In school we perhaps learned to deconstruct the scriptures and dissect them, but in this ministry they will serve a very different function, they exist to make us whole, to heal us, to save us, to bring us into alignment with the One who creates us and calls us and claims us. And as they make us whole, they will have the capacity speak through us, as we let our lives speak.

Worship Constantly. Pray without ceasing. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

Years ago I heard an ordination sermon, it was given by Bishop Edward Tullis, and he made a rather bold assertion, and one that seemed to me at the time to be fairly unscientific!

"If you are not reading scripture and praying every day, you will not be in the ministry in seven years."

Years later, I know he was onto something.

We build up capital early on, by being mentored, by professors, by sermons that inspire us, by laity who encourage us, it is like this capital builds up, and it is there to use. And then we draw it down and draw it down and spend it down, and we wake up one day and we are running on empty!

And in this moment we are in spiritual danger. It becomes about ego, or performance, or people pleasing. We can no longer hear the voice. It has become faint, drowned out by the noise of the culture and the marketplace and the media and the politicians.

And we perhaps see the church differently. Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of the shattering of our “*wish dream*” of community. People, ourselves included, are broken, imperfect, sinful. And yet in the mystery of providence Jesus has chosen us, chosen you, today, to constitute his body, and to lead his flock.

How do we sustain this? How do we do the work of Jesus in the way of Jesus?

To worship constantly is to be driven back to the admonition of the apostle Paul: “*Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds*” (Romans 12).

To worship constantly is to know that we do not do this in our own strength, none of us. To worship constantly is to return to the streams of renewal, to the holy book, to the holy places, to the holy people.

So, my brothers and sisters we embark on the adventure of a council of bishops meeting in the midst of a turbulent and chaotic moment. We need to leave this place different than when we arrived. Something needs to happen. We need to say something to the church. Something needs to change. Someone is searching for us, the lost sheep. Someone is willing to give us all that we need, which is the grace of bread and wine. Someone is willing to lead us, and to transform our leadership to the degree that we are willing to be led. Before we are shepherds or fishers of men and women, Lesslie Newbigin writes in his commentary on John 21, we are first disciples.

My sheep hear my voice, Jesus says, and I know them, and they follow me. How do we follow Jesus? We...

Welcome unconditionally.
Walk together.
And worship constantly.

This is our calling, together, in these days. And if we commit ourselves to these spiritual practices, if we are faithful, our life together will be fruitful. And where there is faithfulness and fruitfulness, there is unity.

The Jesus of John 21, who says follow me, is the same Jesus of John 17, who prays that we might be one.

Welcome unconditionally.
Walk together.
And worship constantly.

Let us pray:

O Jesus
the brightness of eternal glory
the comfort of our vanquished souls:

before you we are silent
and yet out of the silence you speak to us.

Come quickly.
Come to us your humble servants
and fill us with gladness.
Stretch forth your hand
and deliver us from our troubles.

Come quickly,
for without you we have nothing
in which to rejoice.
You are the source of our joy,
and without you,
our tables are empty.

Enlighten us, blessed Jesus,
with a clear, shining, inward light,
and remove the darkness from our hearts.
Teach us the way of true peace and freedom.

Bend our wills toward one another,
and teach us the limitations
of seeking our own advantage.

Pour out your grace from above.
Let your heavenly dew materialize
on our hearts.
Send streams of devotion
to water the face of the earth.

Let our hearts rest in you.
Quieten our minds.
Conform our purpose to yours.
Let our deepest desires be one with yours.
You love us more than we love ourselves,
and nothing can separate us from your love.

(Adapted from The Imitation of Christ, Book 3, Chapters 8-11.)

Amen.