



# Council of Bishops

The United Methodist Church



## The Cross and the Flame

**A sermon for the Special Session of the General Conference of the United Methodist Church by Kenneth H. Carter, Jr., President, Council of Bishops on February 24, 2019, in St. Louis, Missouri**

*In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.*

*Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

Ephesians 2. 13-16; 3. 20-21; 4. 1-3

You are here because your people respect you. They have entrusted something very important to you—the discernment of a way forward for this beloved church. You brought with you enough luggage for a few days, and a few other essential items. If you are like me you brought with you some measure of anxiety and yet also the assurance that many were praying for you. You came here from the north and the south and the east and the west.

And you come to this moment with a story. It could be a story of pain or hope. It could be the story of your salvation, or how God has used you to offer Christ to others, or how you have been a reconciling person in your community. It could be the story of an opportunity that God made possible for you, through this church.

If you look around, and reflect for a moment, it will occur to you that yours is not the only story. Many of us have learned this lesson from the witness of Chimamanda Adichie of Nigeria. My story is not the only story. Your story is not the only story. So we sit in these places, these privileged places, to share our stories *and* to listen to the stories of others.

**The good news is that God has a story too.** I want to enter into God's story through the language of the Apostle Paul. It is a story of divided peoples, and the power of God to include what we have excluded, to make clean what we have called profane, to salvage what we had discarded.

It is a creation story. We think we are here to divide something, or to dismantle something. That may be our story. God's story is about creation, a new humanity and making peace and breaking down the dividing wall of hostility that is between us.

We can be honest. We come to this in our divisions. Our languages divide us. Our life experiences divide us. Our opinions divide us.

Over the last three years, since Portland, I was asked by the church to watch and listen. To watch and listen for the good in conservatives, progressives, centrists. To hear their testimonies and honor the work of the Holy Spirit in them. To assume the best about them. It was not unlike the work I had done earlier, over twenty-eight years, as a pastor. Some of the most conservative and progressive people in my experience inhabited the churches I served, sang in the same choirs, studied the Bible together, spent the night with the homeless, mentored youth.

I learned to watch and listen for the faith underneath the surface. It motivated them to be in those local churches and, yes, to be United Methodists.

I learned to watch and listen for the connections between them. When illness or death came, they prayed for each other. When an economic crisis crippled a city, they wrote checks and collected food. When they disagreed about how to interpret scripture, they imagined they were still learning and growing as disciples and had not arrived.

The Commission on a Way Forward was a process of watching and listening. It was not an interruption to the work of God. It was and is the work. It was not an argument that distracted us from the mission. It was and is the mission. Now the work and the mission is in your hands.

If you watch and listen for the good in conservatives, centrists and progressives, you will see **the cross and the flame**. You will see people carrying the cross. You will see people who are living the prayer, "kindle in us the fire of your love", because the Holy Spirit dwells in them. You will see people loving those who do not love them. In these three days we will continue to watch and listen. We gather under the cross and the flame. We are people who have professed our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. And we will pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit, to **make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world**.

Make us one!

Unity is for the sake of the mission. Where you see the mission of God, you will see people connected to each other, for this very purpose.

The divisions are easy to see. What would it be like for us to watch and listen for the connections?

What connects us? It is not our stories. It is God's story. We hear a fragment of God's story from the apostle Paul. It helps to remember how radical was his life and ministry.

- Ananias was sent to Paul, and embraced him (the enemy) as "brother" (Acts 9).
- Paul remembered his "call" story and constantly shared it (Acts 22).
- Paul followed Jesus, which meant traveling the way of the cross (Galatians 2).
- Paul confessed his sin and struggles (Romans 7).
- Paul was willing to resolve conflict with other leaders, for the sake of the mission (Acts 15, Galatians 1).
- Paul led teams of women and men, and developed an understanding of diverse spiritual gifts (Romans 12 and 16; I Corinthians 12 and 14).
- Paul planted churches in strategic crossroads where the gospel engaged many diverse cultures (I and II Corinthians, Ephesians).
- Paul was a passionate advocate for the unity of the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4).
- Paul knew the difference between church and empire, koinonia and colonialism (Romans 12; Acts 17).

In Paul's writing there is a movement **from evangelism to doxology to life together**. God overcame the almost insurmountable division between human sinfulness and divine holiness. God overcame these divisions in the New Testament church and united it in mission. God through Christ shows us the way of peace amid our polarizations and binaries.

Because God has done all of this—more than we can ask or imagine—are we bold to believe that God could do this again?

It is as if Paul is saying, to the Ephesians, there are these two groups and God abolished the dividing wall of hostility between them, praise God, and now we sing the doxology to this One God, and, and....God can do it again.

John Wesley wrote, in **The Scripture Way of Salvation**, and I paraphrase:

*It is a divine evidence and conviction...that what God has promised he is able to perform. We admit that with us it is impossible, to make something clean from the unclean, to purify our hearts from sin, and to till the ground of our hearts with holiness. Yet with God there is no difficulty, since with God all things are possible....If God speaks it, it shall be done. God said, "let there be light, and there was light".*

God is able.

Think of your own life, your own journey. What God has made possible. How Jesus has walked with you. How the Spirit came like wind or fire or a still small voice. It is your story. It is God's new creation in you.

Say a prayer of thanksgiving in your own heart language, right here, right now, for all that God has done through you. Yes, through it all, there are these dividing walls. We come to St. Louis pretty equally divided. I am no stranger to the speculations or the surveys!

But could these three days be a time when Jesus might reconcile both "groups" (and all our associated tribes) into one body?

And, if I could be permitted to be theological for a moment, could it be that Jesus has already done this? **Could it be that Jesus has already broken down the dividing wall of hostility that is between us and made peace through the blood of the cross?**

The cross, what God has done for us. And the flame, the fruit of the Holy Spirit, love and joy and peace and patience.

Patience. Evangelism and Doxology create something new and that is a people who are in connection with each other. That is you and me, that's us. That is the people of the cross and the flame.

So we have been called, in humility, which means we allow our story to become a part of God's greater story, and we are gentle with each other, which means we do no harm, because every person with whom you share this space is created in the image of God, and we are patient, we bear with one another in love—that is sanctification—we bear witness to the world that we love each other because God first loved us, and, and.... we make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

I am convicted by these words from the **Rule of Taize**:

**Never resign yourself to the scandal of the separation of Christians who so readily profess love for their neighbor and yet remain divided. Make the unity of the body of Christ your passionate concern.**

It is an echo of the scripture:

Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

And this leads to a series of uncomfortable questions. Have we made every effort? Can we allow our stories to become a part of a much bigger story? What if we imagined that this means more to God than it does to us? What if, in our life together, we became an outward and visible sign of the cross and the flame?

**What if** we sought to hold together an evangelical orthodoxy with a radical hospitality to all people and trusted that God will journey with them (and us) toward a holiness that is not ours to define in this life?

What if we admitted that, in a post-Christian culture, when we speak of holiness the world hears judgment? What if holiness is experienced in the unexpected encounter with God (Isaiah 6) and in small circles of trust with each other, which we once called class and band meetings, or, to coin a phrase, “Christian conferencing”?

What if separation is never the path to holiness, division is never the way to revival, and schism is never an expression of the One Body?

What if searching for the exits is easier but less faithful, more aligned with our preferences but less reflective of the One who never gives up on us?

What if there is a deep center and a great tradition worth claiming? We know how to sing this, and it is about the very nature of God.

*“So free, so infinite his grace. Tis mercy all, immense and free. Jesus thou are all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art!”*

What if, like our Lord, we were to ‘empty ourselves of all but love’?

Sisters and brothers, in these three days, make every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. Make the unity of the body of Christ your passionate concern. Remember: you are the people of the cross and the flame.

Imagine that you and I are still learning and growing as disciples and we have not arrived, and so we say, in these days, “finish then, thy new creation”!

Sisters and brothers what if God is able to do abundantly more than we can ask imagine?

Hear the good news:

What God has promised he is able to perform. **God is able!**

Amen.