

GC Episcopal Address: Bishop Gregory V. Palmer

Let us pray:

- Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.

In behalf of all of your bishops active and retired I greet you in the name of the living God who is disclosed in Israel and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are grateful for you and all that you represent in behalf of the whole church called United Methodist. You have been, you are now much in our prayers and we are sure that we are much in yours as together we seek to do the work of the one who has called us to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to the mission of ***“making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world”***.

Call to the GC for humility

Since these precious colleagues (pointing to the Council of Bishops) asked me to take on this assignment there has been one word that has not left my heart and mind - **humility**. It is said that once some of the followers of St. Bernard of Clairvaux asked him to cite the four cardinal virtues. To which he is said to have responded ***“humility, humility, humility, humility”***. I have had a picture in my mind of all of us in this room, as each one is able, laying prostrate before the Lord our maker divesting ourselves, if only for a moment, a season, of our pride of place, prestige, rank, position and power. It may be just a pipe dream. But even if what I have seen in my mind eye was not possible to accomplish in this physical space, could we see ourselves standing before God and one another humble and delivered from our hubris and self-sufficiency?

From beginning to end the scriptures convey to us that humility honors God and God honors humility. In a moment when it appeared that the options were few Jehoshaphat cried out **“we don’t know what to do but our eyes are fixed on you”**. (see 2 Chronicles 20:12b)

When Micah bears the word of God to the people of Israel with whom God is distraught they are reminded that what puts things right is not more ritual sacrifices but justice, mercy and humility. (See Micah 6:8)

In the Gospel of John the thirteenth chapter there is a picture of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ humble and vulnerable. He lays aside his cloak and kneels to wash the feet of his disciples who he also calls friends. This action on the part of Jesus puzzles and challenges the disciples. They are forced to think about him in some ways that perhaps they had not before.

Paul strikes a similar theme when he addresses the Philippians and asks that they take on the very mind of Christ and reminds them of the saviors' denial of privilege and entitlement, his self emptying and his humility.

So I wonder during these days:

- Can we see ourselves lying prostrate before God without whose guidance our efforts at this or any other conference are futile?
- Trust that the Holy Spirit who is always at work has been active in all of the preparations that have brought us to this now.
- Can we wait, tarry long enough for the Spirits' direction about what decisions we make, what actions we take?
- Can we muster the courage to wait even for what may not be known by the time we adjourn?

God's people do not wait because we are afraid to act. Quickness to act does not necessarily amount to courage. Failure to act ever is avoidance of our calling and our duty. Further, waiting on the Lord is not passive. In fact it is quite active. But it is not according to the standards and patterns of this world. Eugene Peterson suggests that ***"waiting in prayer is the disciplined refusal to act before God acts."*** We wait because there is grave danger in being overly self-reliant. We need to cultivate and practice a renewed God reliance. We have been so adequate, so able, so competent, and so successful for so long it may well be that we have only given lip service to trusting in the Lord. We didn't mean to. It is a hazard that comes with the territory.

If attention to humility, not being puffed up or thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought, is the order of the day how might we give expression to it. I am not sure of all the means that what should employ on the journey to humility but I am sure that prayer is the first pathway.

Since I was a young child growing up in church the prayers I heard in public worship shaped me consciously and unconsciously. I was taking in the meaning, power and aspiration of the words even when I was not aware of it. One of the more formal prayers of the church that got memorized and internalized early on for me is the Collect for Purity. It is still part and parcel of the Service of Word and Table. It is a part of our entry; it starts us on our way in worship. Would you join me in praying it now?

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known and from you no secrets are hidden. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

It needs to be said that the 2012 General Conference took something out of this church in dramatic proportions. In the days, weeks and months following the adjournment of the last General Conference some voices described the experience as a waste of time and resources. Other voices expressed discouragement, hopelessness, fear and disappointment.

I recognize that this room includes people that were a part of the General Conference and persons that were not, at least in any official

way. But all of us who are a part of General Conference 2016 have been called to be here by God who we believe continues to be at work in and through the United Methodist Church. We are here to invest ourselves in discerning the next faithful steps in mission and ministry of the United Methodist Church. We are here because we are **“prisoners of hope”**.

We are here because we have seen God at work in our lives and through the ministries of the United Methodist Church. We are witnesses and participants in life changing, life giving ministry:

- Imagine No Malaria
- Response to the Ebola Crisis
- Disaster Recovery
- Clean, Safe Drinking Water in Flint, Michigan and Freetown, Sierra Leone
- Disciple Bible Study in Local Congregations and Jails
- United Methodists welcoming new neighbors as the children of God they are across the globe
- We are creating **“new places for new people”**
- Together we are developing **“principled Christian leaders”**

I have simply seen too much of what we can be and do for the one who has called us to himself and to the mission to turn around now. I refuse to give in to discouragement and despair because the work of becoming the church we can be, of truly embodying beloved community is hard. I feel like going on to see what the end will be.

Now I say none of this as a diversion from the real challenges that we have. But it is offered as a check on unbridled pessimism.

There are indeed ***“fightings within and fears without”***.

For the sake of the mission and making ourselves fully available to the future that God wants to draw us into we need a new start with God and with one another. I am always convicted and comforted by the Prayer of Confession in our liturgy for the Service of Word and Table that says:

Merciful God,

we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart.

We have failed to be an obedient church.

We have not done your will,

we have broken your law,

we have rebelled against your love,

we have not loved our neighbors,

and we have not heard the cry of the needy.

Forgive us, we pray.

Free us for joyful obedience,

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Time of course will not permit a thorough exegesis of the prayer. But some things are worth noting:

- It is a prayer to be prayed by the community. It's all about the "We".
- It is bold in naming failure. That takes both courage and hope.

- Forgiveness frees us from bondage and enables “joyful obedience”.

Confession and repentance are about truthfulness with God and neighbor. This is not easy. But it is necessary.

I have a friend and colleague now deceased from the Iowa Annual Conference. Some of you have heard me speak of him before. Others in this room knew him better than I. When I arrived in Iowa he was already retired but quite active in the work of transforming the world to be a more loving, just and human place in which to live. I recall meeting him at one of those exhausting and exhilarating district get acquainted gatherings in the fall of 2000. Bob spent lots of time and energy engaging and enlisting friend and foe alike in seeing the world and its struggles through a gospel lens. From the environment to race relations to war and peace and so much more he saw himself as a truth teller. He really believed that if you knew the truth you would indeed be set free. (See John 8:32) He communicated face to face, by regular post and persistent position papers. He networked and rallied against the injustices that he believed undermined the gospel and our shared humanity.

I have long since forgotten the numerous position papers he sent me. But I never will forget the day he really captured my attention. He got so close to me and said with passion, earnestness and tears flowing

“Greg our relationships are so superficial, especially in the church, that we won’t even risk saying something that we might later have to apologize for.”

So I ask you dear friends in Christ are we merely skating across the surface with God and one another? Do our relationships lack the kind of depth that engenders real growth, change and transformation? Is it too hard for us to get real with one another because we lack the spiritual and emotional infrastructure to thrive in the midst of realness?

In the church and in the many nations from which we hail we have all been witnesses to the politics of “mutually assured destruction”. Disagreement has led to unbridled acrimony that has led to seeing those with whom we disagree as other than fully human or truly Christian. Our capacity to turn on each other is destroying our soul and under-serving the mission. We can do better. We must do better.

It is an understatement to say that we have challenging and difficult work to do during this General Conference. That says nothing that you do not already know. The measure of the quality of our life in Christ together will not be only the decisions, outcomes and headlines but how we treat one another. It does matter how we see one another, treat one another address one another. A “**right**” decision can be undermined by the means that we get there. If we treat one another as other than fully human, truly Christian, genuinely beloved then why should the world outside of the church believe that they will be treated any differently even if they can subscribe to some of the things we say we believe or stand for. Our credibility and integrity are suspect if only we get all the words right but our behavior has little resemblance to our words. We are the church that sits at the intersection of both and of creed and deed in every way. Everyone here is a child of God; hard

stop; period. Any behavior to the contrary of that truth undermines the Gospel and a choice to live beneath our privilege.

I am told that there is a strand of Jewish mysticism that emphasizes our common humanity and deep linkage to God. Not just for some but for all. It teaches, I am told, that each one of us is assigned an angel whose sole responsibility is to go before us in all of our comings and goings announcing ***“Behold the image and likeness of God”***. Whether this is to be understood literally or not it more than suggests an image to keep in mind both about ourselves and our neighbor. Imagine how we might speak or act if behaved as if it were true.

I want to admit to you that I sometimes get hooked on biblical narratives that move from alienation and rage to estrangement to reconciliation and redemption of life and relationships. They draw me in I am sure because I always have some growing to do and because I tend to admire what I aspire to but do not achieve. One such narrative is in Genesis 45. For the eight chapters preceding it we slog through a story of family dysfunction on steroids. There is questionable parental decision making, pride, jealousy, avarice, greed, lying, cheating, pot holes and pitfalls everywhere.

Finally Joseph discloses his true identity to his brothers who are struck silent with disbelief. They are cautious and skeptical beyond words. But he woos them through tear stained eyes with these four words ***“come closer to me”***. Could we imagine these days together as “leaning in, turning toward and coming closer? We would not be poorly served by gestures that help us heal.

Therefore Go

We gather in these days in Portland, Oregon guided by the theme ***Therefore Go***. It is based upon the so-called Great Commission found at the end of the Gospel of St. Matthew. It is a good word for us in these days. There is wonderful alignment with our mission statement ***to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world***. It is inspiring to be reminded of who we are and who we have been called to be. But if this General Conference pays mere lip service to the Great Commission or to our denominational mission statement we will have failed. Let's face it these words are so familiar that they sometimes wash over us with little affect. You likely can awaken many United Methodists from a deep physical sleep and ask them to recite the mission statement of the church and they would be able to do so flawlessly. But absent a burning zeal in the heart to live it out it is just another piece of useless information; but not something that shapes our individual and collective lives. In fact research has revealed that many a United Methodist knows the mission statement of the church but there still remain disparate views on what it really means or what should be emphasized.

The text at the end of Matthew 28 and the words of our mission statement convey an authority and urgency that does not seem to stir us. To many United Methodists, too many United Methodist congregations are complacent and lethargic about the mission at hand. Too many are fearful about the survival of the church as an institution but we have lost the zeal to truly join God in the healing of a world that is broken physically, spiritually, relationally.

And if we are not fearful we are complacent. We are playing it cool. Going along to get along. We don't believe we are called to invite others to share this extraordinary life we have been given by the grace and mercy of God. That job belongs to someone else like the professionals or those who are over the top, but surely not us. We are slow to challenge the structures of evil that grind the life out of the earth and of people. We want to serve in mission as long as a bit of tourism is involved but not speak truth to power about the root causes of inequality, injustice and oppression. We are hesitant to invite others to join the journey. All of that is too risky. We might be called extremists or militant.

But our theme and our mission statement are a rallying cry to get our act together and get focused on what God is focused on which is nothing less than New Creation for people, nations, cultures and the earth.

If we are really clear about the mission and intend to carry it out paragraph 122 of the Book of Discipline outlines a process for us and maps the journey for us. Imagine United Methodists having a template, a pattern a method to go about the task at hand. We would not be us if we did not have one.

- **Proclaim** –the gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ
- **Lead** –persons to commit their lives to God through baptism by water and the spirit and profession of faith
- **Nurture** –persons in Christian living through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley's Christian conferencing

- **Send** –persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, being and becoming a compassionate, caring presence, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel and the mission of seeking, welcoming and gathering persons into the community of the body of Christ.

This is a holistic means of carrying out the mission we have been given. This pattern must be taken as a whole. No one or two parts stands on its own. It is in combination that the church is shaped and disciples are formed. It is not a list of optional practices to choose from. If any piece is underemphasized or neglected the church is not whole and disciples are left less than whole. The diligent engagement of this **virtuous cycle** moves us toward our aim making fully formed, mature disciples of Jesus Christ who in the power of the Holy Spirit participate with the Risen Christ in the transformation of the world. Ours is a holy, urgent, crucial and ever relevant call. Daunting as it is it is an honor and a privilege to serve the living God in this way. We should not demure, resist, disobey this holy calling.

I am always struck by the powerful liturgy in the services of Baptism. In fact as I have sometimes felt myself physically trembling as I have led congregations in the ***Commendation and Welcome in the Order for Baptism and Reception***. They are especially dear to me because they always stir within me the question ***“can we do this”? Are we this kind of church?*** You know them well. The leader, often the pastor, addresses the congregation and says to them “do all in your power to:

- Increase their faith

- Confirm their hope
- Perfect them in love

The process or method referred to earlier is all in the service of fulfilling this aim in all of us; in every United Methodist congregation and ministry setting. It is the plumb line that that we must align with missionally. It is the fruit we toil for, the outcome we hope for. Disciples, of Jesus Christ whose faith in God is increasing and deepening, in whom the hope of the Gospel is confirmed and who are being made perfect in love in this life is our end game our urgent call and our only business.

Some years ago a leader in our denomination preached in the congregation where I was serving. He used a phrase that day that has stuck with me ever since. It sort of summed up for me our lack of passion for the mission. He said ***“We must discover again the vocation of being full-time Christians”***.

It will take a full-time church to nurture full-time Christians who are increasing in faith, being confirmed in hope and being perfected in love. This trilogy of increase of faith, confirmation of hope and perfection in love is for ourselves and for the disciples of Jesus Christ yet to be is the mission that awaits us, what the world needs and what we yearn for. We have been called to this work and commissioned to do it with all that we have and all that we are. The only unanswered question is whether we will Go. We have everything we need all fear, doubt and controversies notwithstanding. We have nothing less than the promise of the Risen Christ that he will be with us. Not with us when it is easy and smooth; not only when the path seems clear; not with us only in certain geographies and among certain language or cultural groupings but with us all the way. So let's trust God as never before and GO. The

light is green.

Go forth for God, go to the world in peace;
be of good courage, armed with heavenly grace,
in God's good Spirit daily to increase,
till in the kingdom we see face to face.
Go forth for God, go to the world in peace.

Go forth for God, go to the world in love;
strengthen the faint, give courage to the weak;
help the afflicted; richly from above
God's love supplies the grace and power we seek.
Go forth for God, go to the world in love.

Go forth for God, go to the world in strength;
hold fast the good, be urgent for the right;
render to no one evil; Christ at length
shall overcome all darkness with his light.
Go forth for God, go to the world in strength.

Go forth for God, go to the world in joy,
to serve God's people every day and hour,
and serving Christ, our every gift employ,
rejoicing in the Holy Spirit's power.
Go forth for God, go to the world in joy.

Amen.