

**COUNCIL OF BISHOPS
THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**February 25, 2018
Dallas, Texas**

ON CHANGING OUR MINDS

Philippians 2:4-8

Acts 11:1-18

Introduction

Dear colleagues, I greet you as we gather for this extraordinary additional meeting of our Council in the name and spirit of Jesus, who humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Like each of you, I have been praying unceasingly for the Holy Spirit to break through and illuminate the way forward.

Have you ever changed your mind? Let's see those hands – who has changed their mind? Of course, we have all changed our minds. I was planning to wear the blue sweater, but I have changed my mind and I think I will wear the green sweater. I was certain that Pastor X was the right match for First Church. But, I have changed my mind in light of some new information. For most of us, we probably change our minds several times a day on insignificant matters and, perhaps, on a few very significant issues.

But, this is not the nature of changing one's mind that Paul is writing about in the passage Bishop Harvey read from Philippians. Paul is speaking about a change of mind – a change of heart – that is congruent with Jesus' self-emptying posture. Paul is speaking about a change of mind – a change of heart – that is congruent with Jesus' humility and downward mobility. Paul is speaking about a change of mind – a change of heart – that is congruent with Jesus' unwavering obedience to God's redemptive mission. Paul knew about churches and church people, including church leaders like us, and the way we tend to act, concerned for self and self-preservation, our pet ideas, our intentions and our vested interests that harm and hinder other people. And he said, do not look to your own interests. Change your minds!

Paul speaks of this transformation of one's mind in Romans 12, as well. I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases verses 1-2 in *The Message*:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of

immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

J. B.

When I was privileged to serve the West Ohio Conference, Char was deeply involved in prison ministry at the medium security prison in Marion, Ohio. She became a good friend of J. B. J.B. was the leader of the Aryan Nation in Ohio when he was found guilty of murder and imprisoned at the Marion Correctional Institution. He was a leader in prison. He continued to lead the Aryan Nation behind and beyond the walls. He led the trade in illicit contraband and drugs. He led in the beating of African-American and Muslim inmates. He led in the number of knockdowns by prison guards. He led in the number of days spent in solitary confinement. His mind was shaped by hatred, violence, domination, intimidation, exploitation and self-gratification.

Then his mind was changed. Through Kairos Prison Ministries and his exposure to a warden who was a sold-out disciple of Jesus, J.B. took on the mind of Christ, stood with Jesus in self-emptying obedience, and began to look to the interests of others. Under threat of death from the Aryan Nation members who now felt betrayed, J. B. became the cornerstone of the internationally renowned Horizon Dorm program that brought Protestants – white and black – Muslims and Jews together in a no-individual-cells dorm where they learned to respect each other's faith traditions. The Marion prison went from one of the worst in the state of Ohio to a model correctional institution. J. B changed his mind!

Easter Liberty

This meeting, this holy conference, this critical time of discernment falls in the very heart of Lent. I am bold to suggest that during these four days we practice the Lenten disciplines of unbinding, self-emptying and deep listening to the Spirit. It was Henri Nouwen who first pointed out that the Latin root for the word, "obedience," is "audire" or "audio" – which means to hear or listen. And being found in human form, Jesus humbled himself and became obedient – that is, listened fully, intimately to the Father, even to the point of going to the cross.

I urge us to practice the Lenten discipline of unbinding – unbinding ourselves from theologies of limitation that impoverish the radical grace, inclusion and freedom of the Gospel. Let us practice the Lenten discipline of self-emptying, letting go of the positions we came here to defend and the battles we are plotting to wage in this Council or the Judicial Council or on the floor of the Special General Conference. Let us practice the Lenten discipline of listening to God and one another to the point of dying to ourselves.

The clue to changing our minds to the new mind of Christ is emptying of our need to control and our anxious passion for security. And as our minds change, we come to new freedom. We are unbound, unburdened, able to live without fear. We find ourselves with Easter liberty:

- freed to focus on the interests of our neighbor;
- freed to repent of the burdens and limitations we have placed on God's people;
- freed to love with the same outrageous abandon that God loves us;
- freed to be our true selves and allow others to be their true selves;
- freed to replicate Jesus' life of humility, surrender and sacrifice in our own lives;
- freed to stand with Jesus in self-emptying obedience;
- freed to replicate Jesus' pattern of expanding the boundaries of whom God loves and includes in the Kingdom.

Who Was I That I Could Hinder God?

Don't you sometimes wish it had been your responsibility to determine the canon of our Holy Scriptures? Or, perhaps, the authority to re-do the canon to your own liking? (Let's see those hands; am I alone here?) If I had the authority, I would change the name of *The Acts of the Apostles* to *The Acts of the Apostles Changing Their Minds and Teaching the Church to Have the Mind of Christ*. I know it is a long, cumbersome name, but I believe it more accurately and thoroughly describes the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the early church and apostles.

The history and dynamics of the early church are instructive to me and our current reality within this Council and The United Methodist Church. The early Church, both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus, agreed on the mission of Jesus and found unity in that mission when two conditions prevailed. First, a leader or leaders (just so you are with me – that is us), filled with and guided by the Holy Spirit, proclaimed Jesus' expansive, extravagant, unbinding and unconditional love. Second, the community of believers, again inspired and led by the Holy Spirit, embraced the poor, the marginalized, the outcast, the "other" and affirmed that they would not be forgotten or neglected or excluded. In other words, the God Movement advanced when Jesus' followers let the same mind be in them that was in Christ Jesus.

This was, in large part, the same dynamic that fueled the Methodist revival movement. John Wesley proclaimed Jesus' expansive, extravagant love and grace and called the Church to be in solidarity with the poor. This is our DNA, our legacy, our mission, our hope, our way forward.

The witness from Acts, chapter 11, of Peter recounting his vision while in Joppa to the believers in Jerusalem is particularly instructive. Talk about a change of mind! Peter gets called on the carpet for baptizing some Gentiles in Caesarea. Can't you hear them saying to Peter, "What do you think you are doing, rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited and ruining our good and pure name?" Although we are more sophisticated and politically sensitive in how we ask such questions in most of our discourse today, our messages can carry the same closed-minded and hardened-heart disdain.

Peter goes on to tell the Council at Jerusalem that when he began to address the "outsiders" in Caesarea, the Holy Spirit fell on "them" just as it did on "us" the first time. And, he recites Jesus words, "John baptized with water; you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Peter concluded with a penetrating question. A question that, quite frankly, haunts me: "If then God gave them the same gift that God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" Who was I that I could hinder God? This is a mind-changing, heart-transforming question. This is a question that must guide our efforts to fully engage Christ's mission in the world and to maintain the unity of the Church. Who was I – who are we -- that I could hinder God?

To keep this question in the forefront of our consideration of the models that are before us at this Council meeting will be an act of humility, repentance, self-emptying, deep listening (hear obedience), courage and openness to changing our minds.

Who was I that I could hinder God? This question has the same effect that Jesus' scribbling in the dirt had on the explosive situation where the men were poised to stone the woman caught in adultery. Space is created. Holy space is created.

- Space enough for us to look again; look deeper for the presence of the Holy Spirit.
- Space enough to receive the baptism of the Spirit.
- Space enough to allow the Spirit to bless us with the gift of one heart and mind.
- Space enough for the Holy Spirit-fire to inform our doctrine and our decisions.
- Space enough for the reign of God to break forth.
- Space enough for us to find unity in our fire for the Gospel and our passion for the poor and excluded.
- Space enough to remember it is God's work, not our caucus group or tribal group agendas, that we are called to.
- Space enough to remember that righteousness is exercised, not through defending what we believe, but in loving and living what we believe.

- Space enough for us to change our minds to the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.

Going Home

In my President's Address to this Council in November of last year, I introduced many of you to Tod Bolsinger's book, *Canoeing the Mountains*. You may recall Rev. Bolsinger uses the metaphor of the Lewis and Clark expedition to explore the Louisiana Purchase to illustrate the leadership needed to "go off the map into unknown territory." Further, you may recall that when they reached the Lemhi Pass in the massive Rocky Mountains, they realized their canoes were useless to traverse the mountains.

Not only were their canoes useless, they had absolutely no knowledge of anything beyond the Rocky Mountains. They were going into uncharted territory. They were going off the map. Bolsinger writes: *The only member of the Corps of Discovery with experience beyond the Lemhi Pass, indeed the only member of the Corps of Discovery who was not in uncharted territory when they crossed the Continental Divide and headed over the Rocky Mountains was the Native American teenage mother with her nursing baby* (pg. 191).

Sacagawea was from the Shoshone tribe which lived in the area the Corps of Discovery was entering. *Sacagawea was not venturing into unexplored territory; she was going home* (pg. 191).

Sacagawea was a part of the Corps of Discovery, but she was on the "edge of the inside" and consequently, had a different mind in her. She was not dependent on the status quo to guide Lewis and Clark. She was not dependent on canoes. She was not dependent on established maps. She was not dependent on what had worked up to that point in the expedition. She had a picture of home in her mind and a hunger for home in her heart that served as her map, her compass, her focus, her grounding.

I don't know about you, but I can't even imagine the change of mind that had to take place in Captains Lewis and Clark to turn over the expedition and the hopes of President Jefferson to a teenage Native woman!

There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of United Methodist laity and pastors among us who are discovering how to move beyond a "single-story" narrative or a "church-dividing" narrative on human sexuality, while maintaining a clear, theologically grounded, integral sexual ethic and a passionate, effective evangelical mission, particularly to younger generations. They may be our Sacagawegas. They may be our guides home.

Tod Bolsinger offers this powerful, forthright insight: *Those who had neither power or privilege in the Christendom world are the trustworthy guides and necessary leaders when we go off the map. They are not going into uncharted territory. They are going home* (pg. 191).

I confess to you, my episcopal colleagues that I often agonize over whether God can use me any longer to lead my residential Area home, or help you all lead our denomination home. My mind is made up on so many things. I am conditioned to stay on the map. I am suspicious or afraid of the guides who live and minister on the margins. I am becoming increasingly risk-averse. After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness of our denomination's battle over homosexuality, the picture in my mind of home – of a vital, growing, healthy movement of God – is growing dim with frustration and fatigue.

Loving Both Dads

But I still remember. I still remember what it looks like, feels like to experience the mind-changing grace of God. One more story and I am done! When I joined the Council 17 ½ years ago, I was privileged to share my faith story, just like all of you. I shared a story that gave me a new mind, a new heart, new eyes, a new readiness to be in the business of raising the dead to new life in Christ. My apologies to those of you who have heard this story; I am hoping you have forgotten.

Char and I celebrated our 41st wedding anniversary last August. We have three grown sons, all married, and they have blessed us with 7 grandchildren. Our sons are now ages 49, 45, and 38. Some of you are doing the math. So here is the story. Char was married once before. Her first husband, and the biological father of our two oldest sons, Lance and Stuart, was killed in a tragic canoeing accident on the Red River in Fargo, North Dakota. Char, Lance and Stuart, ages five and eighteen months at the time, watched helplessly from the riverbank as the rescue personnel tried to pull Don from the undertow of a small flood control dam.

Char and I met a couple of years after that tragic event and she fell madly in love with me. I thought this was a marriage made in heaven. I was a poor seminarian at the time. I did not have a house or a car. Char had a house and a car, and she needed a husband and a father. Perfect!

The Easter before we were married, Char took the boys to worship, as was their custom. During the service, the pastor gathered all the children in the chancel area and told them the story of Jesus' resurrection, using those familiar symbols of the cocoon and butterfly, so that they could grasp that wonderful mystery. After the service, as Char and the boys were driving home, Lance, who was now seven years old, turned to Char and asked, "If God could bring Jesus back to life, why couldn't he bring my dad back to life?"

Char made three beautiful and appropriate responses to Lance. First, she told Lance that his father was with Jesus in heaven and that he was happy. She went on to tell him that it was okay for him to still love his dad, to talk about him and to remember him. Then she said the most incredible words. She told Lance that, in spite of their tragedy, God still loved them because God had given them a new father – me!

When Char told me this story, I felt about this big (*gesture*). Remember, I was in it for the house and car! There is nothing quite so humbling than to realize you are a gift from God to another person. That is true of everyone in this room. You are God's gift to at least one other person. You are a gift to the entire church. No one understood this better than Jesus, because he was God's gift to each of us.

This story has an ending. As Char and the boys completed their drive home from church, Lance sat quietly in the back seat trying to absorb all that his mother had told him. Just before Lance got out of the car to run into the house, he said to Char, "I've been thinking, and I guess it is okay for me to love both dads."

What happened there? What happened that Easter Sunday? I want to propose to you that resurrection happened! New life, new love, new possibilities were made available to that little boy. The floodgate of God's grace and love were opened. A little boy who could have been scarred for life, who could have grown up hating God, was freed from the tomb of grief and anger and ushered into Christ's marvelous light. He had his love doubled in an instant. Lance's mind was changed; released from the prevailing culture of death and despair; released from a theology of limitations. He was unbound. He experienced Easter liberty. And guess what – to this day, 41 years later, Lance continues to have the mind of Christ.

Conclusion

Dear colleagues, I am not a Methodist or Wesleyan scholar like some in this room. But, this I know:

- Our revival movement was born and nurtured by a disciple whose heart and mind were changed at Aldersgate;
- Our theology is grounded in love first;
- Our passion is to reach all people with the message of Christ's transforming grace;
- Our praxis has always been to unbind those bound up by the cultural immaturities of self-centeredness, personal preferences, hatred, sin, death, division, fear;
- Our rule of life is to welcome all in the spirit of Christ and teach them to do no harm, do good and stay in love with God;
- Our unity is to be maintained for the purpose of watching over each other in love and helping each other to work out our salvation. We can not do this apart or in homogeneous silos.
- Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world
- Our vision is that all the world would have the mind of Christ.

Friends, let's go home. Let's unbind our people and guide them home. Let's help our people empty themselves of the need to control one another. Let's help our people empty themselves of their fear of the future and their fear of a changed church. Let's help our people empty themselves of their obsession for security. Let's not hinder or harm one another. Let's take our people off the map. Let's be open to Christ changing our minds. Let's show the world what unity in the Body of Christ looks like. Let's go home! Let's go home! I believe we know the way! Oh, may your gift to God's people be to take our people home. Let's go home! May it be so. Amen!

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