

## If You're Listening

If I may, I'd like to quote today's text from the King James Version. The language is dated, but beautiful.

James 1.19-20: Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.

Our church is in a time of listening.  
Our Episcopal leaders have called for a time of dialogue  
that they and all Methodist hope and pray will lead to true unity.

James tells us that we should be swift to listen and slow to speak.  
In other words, listening is important.  
It's what you need to do first, if a dialogue is going to be beneficial.

Even if the Bible didn't emphasize the importance of listening,  
I think we could discern its value by looking at the human body God  
created.

After many years of observation, I have concluded that most of us arrive in  
this world with two ears and one mouth.

Why did God make the body that way?  
I wonder if maybe it's because listening well is  
twice as important and  
twice as difficult as speaking.

To listen well you need two ears:  
one to hear what's being said and one to hear what's not being said;  
one to hear the words that are being spoken and one to hear the emotions  
beneath the words.

And in the dialogue the church is now having, we will need one ear to listen  
to each other and one ear to listen to the Holy Spirit.

I am a member of the National Board of the Confessing Movement.  
But I speak for myself.  
We're not given a script to use or a party line to promote  
when we speak to groups such as this one.

Still I think I understand and represent evangelical Wesleyan Christians in the United Methodist Church.

And if I may be so bold,

I think I know what we want the rest of the church to hear.

First, I want the church to know

that we are part of evangelical reform movements

not because we are angry with our church, but because we love it;

not because we want to tear it down but because we want to build it up;

not because we want to divide it but because we want to unite it.

We, clergy and laity, who are calling the church to doctrinal integrity are doing so because the church we love has been drifting from its biblical center and its Wesleyan core.

We are here because the gift God gave the world through John Wesley is holy and precious, and we believe that this gift must be protected, nurtured and renewed.

The second thing I want you to hear is this: We do not believe that homosexuality is the issue that is dividing the church.

Saying that homosexuality is the primary issue confronting our denomination is like saying that the primary issue facing a patient with a staff infection is his fever.

I wish homosexuality was the issue that divided The United Methodist Church. It would be enough. But it's not.

The divide runs much deeper than our differences regarding sexual practice.

When a psychologist listens to a hurting family, there's always the presenting issue:

fourteen year old Timmy's cutting class and piercing body parts, or sixteen year old Suzy's not coming home at night and when she does there's alcohol on her breath.

The parents come and say to the counselor,

"Timmy's the problem; fix him, and everything will be ok again."

Or "Suzy's drinking is tearing our family apart; help her to stop and we'll be whole again."

But the therapist knows those behaviors are only symptoms;  
there are always deeper issues.  
And it's his or her job to listen for those deeper issues, bring them out, and  
help the family deal with them openly and honestly.  
The one thing he or she cannot do and fulfill the task of being a counselor  
and a healer is ignore the deeper issues.

It's the same in the hurting family that we love called The United Methodist  
Church.

I wish homosexuality was the issue that divided The United Methodist  
Church.  
It would be enough.  
But it is only the presenting issue.

I have listened for the deeper issues and I have heard them.  
After presenting for our Annual Conference a seminar defending and  
promoting our official UM stance regarding the practice of  
homosexuality,  
the four other presenters and I met for several months with seven others in  
our Conference who wanted to change the language in the Discipline.  
We listened to each other.

During this dialogue over numerous meetings,  
I heard the deeper issues beneath the presenting issue of homosexuality.  
They are the same issues I have heard at recent General Conferences.  
And I believe that if you listening closely as our church dialogues about  
unity, you will hear these same issues.

The issues that are dividing our church and that cut to the very heart of what  
it means to be a church family are four:

1. The Nature of Moral Truth
2. The Authority of the Scriptures
3. The Revelatory Work of the Holy Spirit
4. The Uniqueness of Christ.

These are no small matters.

## 1. The Nature of Moral Truth.

Is moral truth determined by the unchanging character of God?  
Or is it determined by the ever-changing experiences of human beings?

Does the character of God determine what is right and wrong?  
Or do we conduct surveys and decide that if a certain percentage of persons  
in a given culture engage in a particular behavior, it can't be wrong.  
In fact, it must be natural and good, even a gift from God to be celebrated.

And if the people engaging in such conduct are good people,  
people who go to church and care about justice;  
and if it turns out that they are people that we love, maybe even our brothers  
and sisters or our sons and daughters –  
isn't that even more of a reason to believe that our views of what's right and  
wrong should change?

Friends, this is exactly what our African brothers and sisters were told on the  
floor of General Conference in Pittsburgh: "Obviously homosexuality is  
more of a problem in some cultures than it is in others."

The implication was clear: the practice of homosexuality is not the same  
kind of problem for those of us who are more enlightened,  
and it won't be for the Africans when they have progressed and matured  
the way we in the West have.

Interesting, isn't it, that at General Conference those who were patronizing  
and dismissive toward our developing world brothers and sisters were not  
the conservatives but the liberals.

If you want to hear us, listen.

We believe that moral truth is determined by who God is and what he has  
done, not by who we fallen human beings are or by what we do.

And because we are fallen in our actions and in our thinking,

we do not believe that we will discern moral truth  
solely by the power of our intellect or  
by looking at what we human beings do and  
deciding that if enough of us do something, it must be ok.

As the Scriptures say, "There is a way that seems right, but in the end it  
leads to death."

It is possible to believe sincerely that something is right and good;  
but, in reality, it leads us away from the God of life and truth.

We believe God determines what is true.

And for us to know that truth, it must be revealed.

That leads to us to the second, deeper issue that divides our church.

## 2. The Authority of the Scriptures.

Do they speak truth to all people in all cultures at all times?

Or were they wrong when they were written,  
culturally determined in their declarations, and  
hopelessly out of date for persons enlightened by the truth contained in  
the latest sociological surveys.

At General Conference in 1988 a United Methodist pastor spoke in favor of  
changing the current language in the Discipline.

In a moment of honesty, he explained why he felt comfortable with his  
position by stating, “We don’t go back to the Bible for the last word on  
anything.”

Though few are so open about their willingness to dismiss the authority of  
Scripture for faith and practice, this pastor is not alone.

Tom Griffith a pastor of a Reconciling congregation in an article in “Open  
Hands” titled “Give a Cheer for our Evangelical Brothers and Sister”  
wrote:

“Now it is our turn to get honest. Although the creeds of our denomination  
pay lip service to the idea that scripture is “authoritative” and “sufficient  
for faith and practice,” many of us have moved far beyond that notion in  
our own theological thinking. We are only deceiving ourselves – and  
lying to our evangelical brothers and sisters – when we deny the shift we  
have made .... We have moved far beyond the idea that the Bible is  
exclusively normative and literally authoritative for our faith. To my  
thinking, that is good! What is bad is that we have tried to con ourselves  
and others by saying, “we haven’t changed our position.”

Though I differ with him, I say “Hooray for Tom Griffith and hooray for honesty and hooray for being willing to talk about the deep issues that must be resolved if unity is to be a possibility for our church.”

Another United Methodist pastor, J. Richard Peck, wrote a particularly helpful and insightful article. It was titled “Church Should Examine the Reason for its Differences.”

In the lead-in to the article Rev. Peck was identified as a retired clergy member of the New York Annual Conference and a former editor of Circuit Rider and Newscope.

Remarkably, and correctly, Rev. Peck stated that before we can understand our differences on homosexuality, we must understand our differing attitudes toward Scripture.

Listen to how he describes the divide.

“Conservatives view Scripture as a single entity. They believe every book in the Bible is the inspired Word of God. They quote Leviticus and the letters of Paul with equal certainty; they are likely to assert: “The Bible says ....”

Later in his article he states: “Nearly all conservatives say the Word of God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. No scientific claim and no change in social standards can alter the fact that there is no passage in Scripture that supports homosexual practice, and every mention of homosexuality within that holy book is negative.”

Then he describes how liberals (his term) view the Scriptures.

Liberals, on the other hand, view the Bible as a library of books with different levels of inspiration and truth. A quote from Leviticus carries almost no weight with liberals. Liberals are not as quick to dismiss the letters of Paul. They well know that Paul wrote some of the most insightful and inspirational passages in all of Scripture. At the same time, they know that he was a product of his times.

(When I read statements like that I always wonder if liberals ever stop to think that maybe they believe what they believe because **they** are a product of **their** times –  
a time and a culture that is highly secularized and overly sexualized;  
a time where theology goes little deeper than “God is nice and we should be, too;”  
and a time when the highest virtue is tolerance, except when it comes to tolerating people like you and me.)

The article continues:

Liberals place Paul's teachings about homosexuality into the context of a time when lifelong committed homosexual relations were unknown. While liberals value the words of Jesus above all other teachings, even here they will distinguish between the early writings of Mark and the later and more theological writings of John. If there were teachings by Jesus in any of the Gospels about homosexuality, liberals would find these compelling and debate might be ended.

“Debate might be ended” – if Jesus had said what they have determined Jesus would have and should have said.

In other words, Jesus must be the Jesus they want him to be and his words must agree with their desires if he is to be valued as a source of truth.

It reminds me a bit of the statement, “In the beginning God made man in his image, and ever since we have tried to return the favor.”

Amazing isn't it that 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal theologians look back 2000 years and discover that a first century Jew named Jesus was actually a 21<sup>st</sup> century theologian who has the same views they possess.

If you're listening, please hear this.

We in the evangelical reform movements know that there are parts of Scripture that are difficult to interpret.

We do not claim infallibility in our understanding of the Bible.

And we humbly and gladly admit that we need the counsel of the entire Body of Christ rightly to divide the Word of Truth.

We need the witness of the historic Church and we need the insights of our contemporaries, those who agree with us and those who do not.

But please hear this, or you will never understand us.  
We do not believe that the Scriptures merely point to the Word of God or  
merely contain the Word of God.  
We believe they are the Word of God.  
We believe the Scriptures are more than the witness of godly men and  
women to God.  
We believe they are God's witness to us.

That means if the Bible contains it, it's not our job to correct it.  
If the Bible teaches it, it's not our prerogative to twist it.  
And if the Bible states it clearly and consistently, we don't need  
the latest copy of Psychology Today, or  
this morning's Gallup Poll or  
some pontificator of political properness  
to tell us why the Bible got it wrong and what enlightened folk,  
the new Gnostics, know to be true.

Please hear this:  
We choose to stand under the authority of the Bible,  
not over the authority of the Bible.  
And we will not sacrifice truth for the sake of unity;  
because we know that if we do, we will end up with neither.

The third critical difference within the church:

### 3. The Revelatory Work of the Holy Spirit.

Is it always in accordance with the Scriptures.  
Or can it amend and even contradict the Scriptures?

Again from Rev. Peck's article.

Liberals may agree with conservatives that God's Word is the same  
yesterday, today and tomorrow. However, they believe the Word of God is  
contained in the words of the Old and New Testaments and one must use  
reason, tradition and experience to find that Word within the words. Liberals  
also believe that a living Christ offers new insights into God's Word.

Rev. Peck's article is well-written, seemingly well-intended, objective and honest –

I think with the exception of the last statement I just read.

It is a little unfair to state that liberals believe in the value of interpreting Scripture using reason, tradition and experience without indicating that most conservatives do, as well.

But my real concern is with the less than accurate and misleading statement that “liberals also believe that a living Christ offers new insights into God's Word.”

Everyone believes that.

The most conservative Christians believe that it is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to illumine the Scriptures, reveal more of their meaning, and show us how to apply the eternal Word of God to the issues of our contemporary time and culture.

But liberals, at least the more radical liberals, go much further than that. They believe that the living Christ not only offers new insights into the Scriptures but that he also corrects, amends and even contradicts the Scriptures.

And it is the church's right and responsibility to recognize and codify these new revelations.

As one retired elder in our Annual Conference said to me over lunch, “The church created the Scriptures so we can re-create them.”

Friends, this is where the battle will be fought in the coming years. Did the church create the Scriptures and therefore now has every right to recreate the Word of God?

If you want to hear us, please listen to this.

We do not believe that the church created the Scriptures.

We believe the church received the Scriptures.

By the work of the Holy Spirit, (and yes it was a messy process) the church recognized what God gave to his people to be the canon, the measuring stick by which all claims of spiritual and moral truth are to be tested and judged.

And we believe God is consistent.  
He is true to his nature and he is true to his Word.  
And we believe he got it right the first time.

When God revealed his Word in the Old Testament,  
he was not in his spiritual infancy.  
When he revealed his Word in the New Testament,  
he was not in his spiritual adolescence.  
And we do not believe that now 2000 years later,  
now that God's all grown up,  
he has finally determined what he really believes and is ready to amend  
his former writings.

Yes, God does new things.  
Of course, the Holy Spirit has new insights for the people of God.  
But they will always be consistent with what he has revealed in the past.

Fourthly and most importantly,

#### 4. The Uniqueness of Christ.

Do we confess him as the only-begotten Son of God,  
the unique Savior of the world, and  
the supreme Lord of the universe?

Or can he be particularized to our experiences,  
relativized for a Western culture, and  
trivialized into just one of many ways to God?

To confess "Jesus is Lord" is to affirm nothing less than the absolute  
uniqueness of our Christ in a world which is full of cosmic competitors.

In our Jurisdiction we interview Episcopal candidates.  
It's a good process.  
Candidates respond in writing to our questions.  
We review their responses,  
and then we have an hour of dialogue with each one.

One candidate was asked about the importance of witnessing.  
He responded that some of his students did not feel comfortable telling others about their faith.

He stated they feel that to do so is “religious and cultural imperialism.”

He continued, “But I tell them that they can tell others about their faith; simply because a man says to his wife,  
‘You are my sunshine, my only sunshine,’  
it does not mean that other wives are not sunshine for their husbands.”

I looked around the room and some of our delegation were nodding their heads.

I raised my hand and asked, “Are you saying that in the same way Jesus brings light and truth into our lives other religious leaders do the same for others.”

“Yes,” he answered.

I pressed him, “So when we say that Jesus is the Savior of the world, really we are saying that he is the Savior of our worlds.”

Again the answer was affirmative.

And then he said: “God is wholesale. Jesus is retail.”

Let me translate for you.

God is Tommy Hilfinger.

And you can get him at Jesus J. C. Penney or Buddha Bloomingdales or Muhammed Macy’s.

It doesn’t matter where you get Tommy Hilfinger, it’s still Tommy.

And it doesn’t matter where you get God, any retail outlet in the mall of truth will do – it’s still God.

The good news is that this candidate was not elected to the Episcopacy.

The bad news is that he is a professor at one of our UM seminaries, teaching men and women how to preach the Gospel and save the lost.

Is Jesus just one of many –

one of many guides, one of many lights, one of many teachers, one of many sources to be considered as we determine the truth about God, the nature of reality, and morality?

Please hear this.

When you talk about Jesus, you are talking about the one who suffered thirty-nine lashes, his back torn apart with a cat-o'-nine-tails studded with bone and glass and metal, and then nailed to a cross to die the most painful and shameful death the Roman Empire could devise. And he did so, so our sins could be forgiven. So our hearts could be changed. So the curtain would be torn in two and we could walk into the presence of God washed in his blood and holy in the Father's sight.

When you talk about Jesus,  
you are talking about our Lord and our love and our life.

And there is no treasure,  
there is no threat,  
there is no promise and  
there is no power  
that can cause us to deny a single word that the Scriptures teach about who he is or what he has done for us.

He is not one of many guides.  
He is not one of many voices.  
He is not one of many teachers.  
He is not my sunshine.

He is **the** sunshine.

He is **the** way.

He is **the** truth.

He is **the** life.

He is **the** one who reconciles a sinful world and my sinful soul to God.

He is not one of many. He is the one and only.

These are the real issues that divide and disturb the United Methodist family:

1. The Nature of Moral Truth
2. The Authority of the Scriptures
3. The Revelatory Work of the Holy Spirit
4. The Uniqueness of Christ.

These are not small matters that can be ignored or denied for the sake of unity. They must be addressed or true unity will be impossible.

If you are still listening, please hear what will not bring unity.

We will not be made whole by singing every four years on the last day of General Conference “bless be the tie that binds.”

I wish that would work, but it won't.

(Switching to Kum-ba-yah and roasting marshmallows won't get it done either.)

We won't be made whole by denying our differences with nearly unanimous votes that proclaim our unity of mission when large segments of the church are committed to breaking the covenant that holds us together.

Such votes like a couple of aspirin,

may make us feel better for the moment but they do not bring long-term health and wholeness.

We won't be made whole by people misquoting and misusing Wesley's sermon on Catholic Spirit to buttress their belief that beliefs don't matter.

We will not be made whole by a listening process when some of those appointed to listen go to Lake Junaluska and tell a pro-gay gathering, “We believe you're right and those that disagree with you are wrong, and nothing the other side can say will make us change our minds,” and then they turn to us and say, “We're ready to hear you.”

That kind of listening creates more than a little bit of mistrust on our part.

We will not be made whole by institutional responses by company men and women, regardless if they are called Bishop, District Superintendents or pastor,

because what we are facing is more than an institutional problem.

You're not going to like this one, but we won't be made whole by getting the language right in the Discipline because what we are facing is more than a language problem.

And, I hate telling you this: but we won't be made whole by getting the right judicial decisions because what we are facing is not a judicial problem.

The people called Methodist are facing a spiritual problem and we need our leaders to provide spiritual solutions.

We are facing the most important doctrinal issues that any church can face and we need our leaders to guard the faith and give doctrinal answers.

The problem we are facing is a question of faithfulness and we need our leaders to give a response that worries less about being inclusive of every view and worries more about being faithful to the Scriptures.

In the past some of our leaders have act as if they are charged with accommodating the faith instead of contending for the faith. We have had leaders who accept every view no matter how radical and because they do they call themselves Christ-like, instead of guarding the Gospel and having the church call them trustworthy.

Some of our leaders seem to believe that they cannot take a stand or speak out on the controversial issues of the day because they represent the whole church.

The new mantra is that they must represent all views because they are Bishops of the whole church.

But for that very reason they must speak and they must speak the message of the church.

They do represent the church – the whole church.

They represent the church in Africa which has told us that if we change the traditional morality of the Scriptures we will eviscerate their ability to speak to a continent that is being courted and intimidated by the ideology of Islam.

If they represent the whole church, surely they know this means they represent the historic church with its 2000 years of teaching and tradition. They stand in the line of the apostles and have been given the charge and granted the authority to guard the faith.

You never save a troubled institution by refusing to talk about what's wrong. You save an institution by doing what's right.

You don't save a hurting institution by maintaining the status quo. You save an institution by changing its present dysfunctional reality.

And as important as they are, you don't make a divided church whole simply by listening or ultimately through dialogue.

You must at some point provide courageous and, if need be, costly leadership that others will follow.

Like a good counselor, the one thing our leaders must not do is ignore our deepest issues or act as if they do not matter. They must lead us to those issues and they must speak truth to the Church so that with a unified voice we will speak truth to the culture that the world may believe.

What will not make us whole are evangelical pastors too busy building the Kingdom of God in their local churches to work for the renewal of the church at large.

Neither will pastors who lack the courage to take a stand that will upset their bishops or disturb their ill-informed, slumbering congregations. And neither will pastors so full of political ambition that they would rather be mute and electable than bold and faithful.

What will make us whole and what can we do?

Let me begin by saying that it is not your job to create unity. Unity is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Being good Wesleyans we know that though we cannot control the Spirit, through means of grace we can open ourselves to his work in us and through us.

So what shall we do?

First, Listen and Dialogue.

Listen with sincerity and with a desire to learn. Dialogue with openness and honesty. But be sure to listen for the issues beneath the issues, and dialogue about the matters that matter – the deeper issues that truly divide us.

And in the process of dialogue, when you're told that you're not Wesleyan because you take the Bible too seriously, listen for the voice of Wesley. Hear him say that he is "a man of one book." Hear him say "the people called Methodists ... have but one point in view: to be altogether Christians, scriptural, rational Christians, for which we well know, not only the world, but the almost Christians, will never forgive us."

I'm not saying that those who disagree with us are almost Christians or nonchristians. I am saying that Wesley was attacked by those outside of the church and inside the church. He expected. It's been going on for a long time and we cannot be surprised or disheartened because it is going on now.

And when in the dialogue you are told that you are mean-spirited, listen to the voices of those with whom you're making the journey. Have you ever heard anyone in The Confessing Movement speak ill of anyone because of ethnicity or gender or sexual practice? Have you every heard one of us say that any one sin is worse than any other? Have you ever heard any of us say anything except that all persons are of sacred worth because each one is created in the image of God and Christ died for all?

And when you are told that you are radical or right-wing, part of the fringe, one of the two extremes, ask yourself: When did it become right-wing to believe that the Bible is God's Word? When was it declared radical to become part of a movement that affirms the Discipline of The United Methodist Church? When did it become extreme to want our covenant to be honored and enforced?

When did any of those things become anything but centrist?  
Second, Pray.

This is a wonderful moment in The United Methodist Church. There is a new breeze of the Holy Spirit blowing. And there is a new breed of Bishop stepping into leadership – men and women whose election we worked for and for whom we are grateful. Pray for them. Pray that they will change what it means to be a Bishop in The United Methodist Church, and pray that being a Bishop in The United Methodist Church will not change them.

Pray for faithful souls to be encouraged. Pray that God will not let them walk away or give up. Pray that we who are leaders in the reform movements will be worthy of those who look to us for leadership.

And pray that God will revive and unite his church.

Third, Proclaim the Truth.

In what you say, in what you do, and in how you say and do it, proclaim the truth.

There is power in the truth. There is power to convert the lost. And there is power to change the minds of those who deny the truth of the Scriptures and the uniqueness of Christ.

So proclaim the truth, humbly but confidently, boldly but winsomely.

Malcolm Muggeridge in his book on Jesus states that in every great book even while you are learning something new, your heart is telling you that you already knew this to be true. There are people dying to learn that God is who they always suspected he was – a God of love and acceptance and a God of power and transformation. Tell them the truth. Show them the truth. Be not ashamed, it is the power of God unto salvation.

Fourth, get involved in politics. I know that's a dirty word to some of us but I don't think it should be. Politics is just the process by which people organize themselves and agree upon their priorities.

The next General Conference is critically important. Four of the five Judicial Council members who consistently interpret the Discipline according to its obvious intent are up for re-election. Lose three of those and our church will be in chaos.

The other team has made it clear that's what they're after. They know they can't change the mind of the church. So their intention is to elect Judicial Council members who will side with them in their interpretations. We are one election away from the Judicial Council giving permission to those who want to break our covenant permission to do so with impunity.

You must get involved, learn how the system works, and use it to make a difference for the cause of the Gospel.

Finally, Pay the Price.

Allan Boesak, the South African clergyman, wrote that the final judgment will be different than we imagine. He wrote that we will stand before God, and he will ask us, "Where are your scars?" And we will look at ourselves and then back at God, and we will tell him, "We have no scars." And God will ask us, "Was there nothing worth fighting for?"

I don't want to scar others. But I am willing to be scarred.

We're not concerned with trivialities, but about the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. It is our time to be faithful and, if necessary, to pay a price.

Our Lord Jesus could not fulfill his mission without being scarred. In fact, after his resurrection, the only part of himself he insisted that others view were his scars. How do we think we can do all the Father has given us to do without being wounded and scarred?

When Methodism began in the New World, it began with heroes who were willing to be scarred. Of the first 700 plus to die in the colonies and then in the newly formed United States – facing pestilence and disease, the elements, and the rigors of the open road – of the first 700 to die, nearly one-half of them died before the age of 30 and nearly two-thirds died before they had served 12 years. And every year they would gather at Annual Conference and sing the words we take for granted, “And are we yet alive and see each other's face ....” And they would look around the room to see who was yet alive and who that year had given their lives in the service of God. They were heroes. And they expected to pay a price and to be wounded and scarred in their service to Christ.

In the last century as the church drifted further from its biblical core and Wesleyan heritage, heroes arose. Keyser, Jessup, Robb, Hinson, and others who were wounded and scarred by those in the church and out.

And now it's our turn. No, the Holy Spirit does not need us to do his work, but for some reason he has chosen to do his work through people like us – if only we are willing to be wounded and scarred.

And if you are faithful and if you are scarred, be grateful and count it your greatest privilege. This is how the work of God has always been done and we can expect nothing else in our time.