

Sermon 6-8-25

Paul Purdue preaching

This past week our Tennessee Western Kentucky Annual Conference met at Collierville United Methodist Church. Our gathering was upbeat, prophetic and hopeful. Bishop David Graves remarked *"The Spirit of God is moving in this place, God is doing a new thing with us. There is such a good spirit in this place, I believe if I held up a jar of pickles offering them to the body you would break in the thunderous applause."* At which point a chant arose from the balcony *"pickles, pickles, pickles "*.

Over the last three years, our Conference lost hundreds of churches to dis-affiliations, but in Collierville we found our joy. In John 15, Jesus says the Heavenly Vinedresser *prunes back branches* to bring about new growth. Perhaps after a cutting season: new life, new relationships, and new ways of being the church are budding within us.

Pentecost launches the church like a rocket with a loud howling wind, tongues of fire dancing over everyone and awe. The Acts (or actions) of the Apostles begins with this miracle. It is a miracle of connection and relationships as people hearing the good news in the language of their hearts. It is a miracle of inclusion: *"Everyone is filled with the Holy Spirit"*. It is a miracle of empowerment *"Everyone is filled with the Holy Spirit"*. It is a miracle of institutional decentralization and democratization. *"Everyone is filled with the Holy Spirit"*.

After a communal burning bush moment, Acts moves from individual spiritual empowerment into the spiritual community, we call the church. Acts is about the actions of that church and so I thought it might be good to report about the actions of our Annual Conference.

In 4 minutes and 34 seconds, my brother, Rev. Doctor John Purdue, led a report of the TWK Hispanic, Latino & Indigenous Ministries Team with a "Holy Fire and Liberation" message about how "the Bible is an immigration story" The conference rose to its feet. Friends, you can sign up for a workshop about loving our immigrant neighbors. The link will be in my sermon text at Belmontumc.org

<https://www.cognitofirms.com/TennesseeWesternKentuckyConference/LovingOurNeighborsAsOurselvesWebinarsRegistration>

Our TWK Conference voted to *"commit to standing in solidarity with migrants and refugees by supporting their families through our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness, and by advocating for their dignity, safety, and human rights."*

<https://twkumc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Welcoming-the-Migrant-in-our-Midst-2025.pdf>

Rev. Sharon Karamoko challenged our nation to live into Lady Liberty's promise to the world: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the refuse, the homeless, the tempest-tost" or put a big old chain around Lady Liberty

outstretched bronze arm and hook it to a big old ship and pull her down into New York harbor. Prophetic images often jar us!

Our Annual Conference voted to *“create a conference-level team for the purpose of actively supporting the LGBTQ+ laity, clergy, and (our) candidates for licensed/ordained ministry ...with community-building, faith and leadership development, solidarity, and advocacy... amplifying the voices and experiences of the LGBTQ+ community, especially those who have been marginalized by church and society.... curating, creating, and sharing resources to equip local churches for relationship building, continuing education, and meaningful ministry with, for, and by LGBTQ+ church members, clergy, and the larger community.”*

<https://twkumc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Inclusion-Resolution-2025.pdf>

We rejoiced as our own **Keller Hawkins** was ordained a deacon in full connection. We listened as **Rev. Marie King**, who lists Belmont as one of her home churches, preached at the memorial service where we remembered clergy spouse, **Beverly Levell**.

**John Pearce** and I brought home a 15,000 pension plan rebate check representing 10% of our 2024 apportionments as did every church that paid their apportionments. Instead of just mailing the checks, they let the DS's, who were maybe the most battered by disaffiliation, pass out the checks out in the fellowship hall! Fun!

The Acts of the Apostles begin a rocket-launch miracle, *with a sound like the howling of a fierce wind blowing from heaven filling the room, individual flames of fire light up each person. The Spirit of God filled everyone. Peter remembered God's promise in Joel, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people.” “Your sons and daughters will prophesy.” “Your young will see visions.” “Your elders will dream dreams.” “Even upon my servants, men and women,” “I will pour out my Spirit in those days,” “and they will prophesy.”* It is stunning how quickly the church forgot that God's Spirit empowers daughters to preach and we too easily forget that people who have experienced enslavement, disenfranchisement and oppression are the voices God amplifies to bring we, the comfortable, harder prophetic words that may cut us, but like a surgeon's scalpel bring greater healing, hope and life.

But what happens after Pentecost or a great spiritual gathering? How do our holy moments, baptisms, ordinations, weddings, easter brass ensembles, Feast Of Lights candles change us?

Maybe the biggest miracle in Acts 2 happens after the tongues of fire disappear. Hear the good news *“All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.”* **Maybe this is the miracle our divided lonely age needs: a deep sharing of**

**lives, holding things in common, learning a stranger's name, exchanging stories around tables, carrying each other's burdens, standing with our immigrant neighbors, marching with our queer siblings, or divesting our possessions and investing in a better world? .** Not only was everyone filled with God's Spirit, they began sharing everything in common. These spiritual movements belong together. You cannot love God and not begin to more deeply love your neighbors. ( 1 John 4) The Love of God is living and active, organic, fermenting, growing, and catalyzing greater love. God's love grows and pushes us outward towards loving others. Maybe first we learn to love in safer spaces, then out to neighbors, and when fully mature we Love enemies. Love is never inert, passive or stagnant.

Rev Carlos Uroza preached our closing worship and told us how he met a group from Belmont who were on a mission trip to Mexico City in 1997. Carlos described how the Belmonsters stood out from other mission groups. *"They asked questions, they sat at our tables. They prayed with us. They didn't just come to help out, they opened their hearts, and we opened our homes and our hearts in return. That week something sacred happened, they crossed the line many mission teams never do, they moved from service to relationship, from charity to compassion. I wanna tell you that those relationships continue to this day. The grace of God I experienced from Belmont is part of what led me here today. Led me to this conference. Led me to this calling. Led me to this church that I've grown to love. I love the United Methodist Church because people welcomed me and I was known."*

Rev. Carlos Uroza sent us forth: *"We are sent out today with the commission, not just to do more ministry but to go deeper into it, let's stop building programs and build relationships. Maybe (we do not need to ask) are we doing enough, but instead are we crossing the threshold of compassion? Are we moving from good deeds into holy friendships? Are we welcoming strangers not just into our pews, but into our lives? Because the truth is we can feed people and still not know them. We can serve from a distance and still never risk transformation. We say the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world and that is a powerful call, but here's the truth. God has already brought the world to our front yard, so there are no excuses. You don't have to go far. You don't have to get a passport because the world has moved in across the street. The world is in your neighborhood. The world is sitting at the back row of your sanctuary, hoping that someone learns their name. Go across the threshold into compassion."* (<https://twkumc.org/ac2025/livestream/>)

Oh beloved ones, you are made in the image of God, you are beloved, God's Spirit has been poured out on you! In Christ, you have everything you need. Tend to the fires of God's love, let the Spirit of Love transform, catalyze, heal you, so that you move from individual empowerment into deeper community. So that you do not just do good deeds, but to that we come to share stories, hopes and dreams with our weary, lonely, divided world. Amen.