

## Sermon 4-21-24

### Paul Purdue preaching

Last weekend, I joined our confirmation retreat along with 14 seventh and eighth graders, many faith friends and the guides Sarah and Kurt Shepherd, Brandon and Rachel Parker, Lucian and Amy Guise and Emma Bushsong. The teens asked me some of the best questions I've ever been asked. Dayton asked "why is our denomination splitting up?" I felt drawn to the whiteboard and with help from Faith Friend Dr. Micheal Stephens I drew a timeline of church splits: Christianity from Judaism 45AD, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox 1054, Protestant Reformation 1517, Methodism 1730, baptist, anglicans, freewell, church of God, Methodist Episcopal Church North and South 1844 (our youth shrieked with horror when realizing that Belmont's spiritual ancestors once stood with the oppressors), Pentecostal, non-denominational, independent, and since 2019 as before the Civil War the UMC is in a slow motion schism. Since 2019, 9677 churches or about 1/3 of US churches have closed or disaffiliated. Ironically the leaders and churches that pushed for and passed the exclusionary language of the 2019 Tradition Plan are the very churches now leaving. Other local churches have remained despite painful votes and a large exodus of their members.

Looking beyond the dates and data, Michael Stephen's dug down into the why of disaffiliation, schism, or split. When the regional or local churches in places like Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Rome organized together and agreed on a canon of Biblical books, the church decided to include four gospels instead of one. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each came from a different Christian community that loved their Gospel. Have you noticed how each Gospel has differences in style, emphasis, order, phrases, places and stories? Matthew begins with Joseph, Luke with Mary, Mark with John the Baptist, and John begins with "in the beginning the Word..." Each writer's Easter differs a bit too: Joanna or Sussana, Galilee or Jerusalem! Now the church could have argued for one definitive storyline but decided to accept all four Gospels as authentic witnesses of the good news of Jesus Christ. That's a really big deal. The church was saying we don't have to see it all the same way to stay together- we began by honoring our differences. In Philippians 3 Paul shares *not that I have already obtained it, but I press on ... toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those who are spiritually mature think like this, but if you think differently about anything, this, too, God will reveal to you.* (adapted) In some way each church fracture arises from our collective inability to honor differences in how we see Jesus. Too often, we refuse to see that Almighty God might be working with "the other side". That reeks of a spiritually arrogant. It breaks my heart that disaffiliating churches, some of them I once pastored, do not believe they can affiliate or share ministry with congregations like Belmont or pastors like me because we act upon our belief that "all means all".

When the Methodist Church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren instead of rewriting our Constitution and arguing for one Theological statement, we accepted both the Methodist Articles of Religion and the EUB Confession of Faith. I am glad we did,

because I prefer the Confession of Faith's Statement that the Bible "reveals the Word of God" over the wording in the Articles of Religion. When finding my way away from my childhood literalism, I found a home in the UMC. I love how we open the Bible and to discover the Word of God through community, tradition, reason, our experiences, and the presence of the Holy Spirit. 30 years ago the UMC made room for me when I was unsure what I believed about infant baptism, bishops, the Bible, the church year, or clergy deployment by episcopal appointment! Will we make some room in our hearts for other Christians who see Jesus a little differently than we do? Could it be that they may arrive closer to where we are if we see and treat them as people of sacred worth?

On Monday 862 delegates from all over the world will gather in Charlotte NC. From Belmont, Rev Greg Berquest is already there. John Pearce, Rev. Marie King, Rev. Jefferson Furtado, Patty Delbovi, Rachel Hagedwood and others with Belmont ties will be there soon. I am a second reserve and will join them if someone gets sick. The 862 delegates will consider over 1100 pieces of legislation translated into 5 different official languages. Beyond a backlog of 8 years of pandemic delayed legislation they will hold worships, hear addresses, wade through reports and pass a budget. All that needs to be done in 11 days. Let us pray that after a wave of disaffiliation the delegates can begin to rebuild trust and make a way forward so that we might live into our global mission of making disciples for the transformation of the world.

I ask you to pray that the delegates remove the harmful exclusionary language and allow churches like Belmont to do ministry in the way we believe Jesus is leading us to. We believe in Article 4 of the UMC Constitution that states "that all persons are of sacred worth." We believe our baptismal vows call us to resist injustice, evil and oppression inherent in treating gay members differently than straight members in regards to marriage and ordination. As Paul said, "if you see this differently", okay, but let us live out our faith and perhaps God will lead you to a different perspective in time. And if we Belmonter are feeling a little smug and superior for our progress in faith, maybe a look at the Methodist Episcopal Church South on our northernmost entrance may help us have patience for other parts of the world who are not where we are yet.

I am also praying that our delegates adopt a regionalization plan that removes the US as the center of the church and creates equality, decolonization, and also the freedom to do ministry in keeping with the context of various global regions. These regional conferences might be the US, Africa, Europe and the Philippines. This would let the US church be as free as the African Churches are now to contextualize parts of the Discipline.

We do not know what will happen in Charlotte over the next 12 days. But Belmont has set our course becoming A Reconciling Church in 2017 and then in 2020 decided to allow all members in good standing to marry in our church. Because we do not know what will happen in Charlotte, we can not know exactly how to respond. It will take about a year for all the annual conferences to ratify any legislation that changes our constitution. I am hopeful in two weeks Belmont has reason to rejoice, but if we find ourselves lamenting let us leave room for reason, experience, tradition, the Holy Spirit,

justice and Love to guide us. If we find ourselves lamenting GC, then God may be calling us into greater ecclesiastical disobedience or even bolder options. A global church with 862 delegates considering 1000 pieces of legislation in 5 languages may not get as much done as we wish, but no matter what we Belmonter's will be okay if we stay in love with God, love each other, and keep our baptismal vows to resist injustice.

What if our denomination, family, or state tells us we can't be who we believe God is calling us to be? What if the denomination says, Belmont should not live into its understanding of faith and mission? I thought of some ideas and scriptures about Jesus and Love.

1. Lament. Luke writes in Chapter 19, "As Jesus came to the (capital) city (Jerusalem) and observed it, Jesus wept over it and said, "(Jerusalem, Jerusalem) If only you knew on this of all days the things that lead to peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes." Lament- lamenting lets us get in touch with our deepest, most holy and most human feelings. Anger flashes hot- but held too long burns us up.
2. Naming our lament and we may need to be angry. In Mark 3 Jesus faces a church that excluded and judged people Mark reports " Jesus was looking around at them with anger, deeply grieved at their unyielding hearts."
3. In anger or lament we may need to help Jesus flip over some tables. (Matt 21)
4. While lamenting we may need to raise our voices as in Matthew 23, where for the whole chapter Jesus calls out church leaders: "How terrible it will be for you legal experts... You shut people out of the kingdom of heaven. You won't allow those who want to enter to do so." We must speak truth to power.
5. Finally, one sad verse from Matthew 10. As Jesus sends out the 12 in groups of two to make disciples and bring healing, Jesus says "If anyone refuses to welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet as you leave that house or city." If you are not welcomed, if the church can't hear your cry, then at some point move on. I like how they ritualize the moment by shaking the dust off your shoes as you take a new path. We may find ourselves lamenting, angry, ready to shout out, and needing to flip over some tables, break some rules and if we are not welcomed or heard, we may need to shake the dust off our feet. But if we do this while wounded, angry or without actively resisting we may simply add one more splinter to a fractured church.

6. But no matter what we do, Paul writes “If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people... (and) Don’t be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.” (Romans 12) Rev. Dr King loved this verse, and referenced it while speaking about the ends not justifying any means. King argued the means are the ends in the making. If we depart in anger instead of peace, we will plant the seeds of anger wherever we go. If we demonize our opponents and find the demons have traveled with us to our new home. If we judge others severely, we become judges separated from grace and compassion. So let us be people practicing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control so that wherever God plants us the seeds of grace grow up around us. (Galatians 3) amen.

7. I often think of the words of Paul, I am grateful for my childhood literalistic denomination for that. Paul knew something about rejection, once being left for dead after a crowd tried to stone him. (Acts 14) I hope we do not need this encouragement from 2 Corinthians 4 in the next 12 days or in November, but they are here for us: “But we have this treasure in clay pots so that the awesome power belongs to God and doesn’t come from us. We are experiencing all kinds of trouble, but we aren’t crushed. We are confused, but we aren’t depressed. We are harassed, but we aren’t abandoned. We are knocked down, but we aren’t knocked out. We always carry Jesus’ death around in our bodies so that Jesus’ life can also be seen in our bodies... We have the same faithful spirit as what is written in scripture... we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus, and God will bring us into God’s presence along with you. ...So we aren’t depressed. But even if our bodies are breaking down on the outside, the person that we are on the inside is being renewed every day...”

God is with us, we know who loves us, be faithful, do not be afraid. Amen