

“Know Your Why”
2 Chronicles 7.14

Upper New York Annual Conference – 2017
Keynote Address

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Video – Together in Prayer

- B. A tale is told about a small town that had historically been "dry," but then a local businessman decided to build a tavern. A group of Christians from a local church were concerned and planned an all-night prayer meeting to ask God to intervene. It just so happened that shortly after that prayer meeting, lightning struck the bar and it burned to the ground. The owner of the bar sued the church, claiming that the prayers of the congregation were responsible, but the church hired a lawyer to argue in court that they were not responsible. The presiding judge, after his initial review of the case, stated that "no matter how this case comes out, one thing is clear. The tavern owner believes in prayer and the Christians do not."
- C. What about us? Do we believe in the power of prayer? Do we believe that our first task in seeking to be the people God has called us to be is to raise our arms toward the heavens or fall on our knees beside one other or lay prostrate upon the floor and pray?
- D. I've seen evidence all around the Upper New York Conference that we are a people who believe in prayer! Individuals and congregations are earnestly seeking God, trusting in God's presence and power to lead their lives and their ministries – and God is moving in a mighty way because of our willingness to pray. In these days that we are together, we will hear from this platform and share with one another amazing testimonies of how lives are being changed through the Gospel of Jesus Christ!
- E. The communities in which we live, work and serve – the world around us is being transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit, as we continue to seek God and say yes to partnering with God in the kingdom work we have been called to. Please, do not miss this truth – We are the Church of Jesus Christ! God is working in us, through us and yes in spite of us! There is much to celebrate. I give thanks to God for the United Methodist Church! I give thanks to God for the Upper New York Conference! I give thanks to God for each and every one of you!
- E. Yet, there is static and noise in the midst of God's work within us and among us. There is a need for us to go deeper together in prayer!

- F. I want to be honest this morning – this message was one of the hardest I have ever prepared. What do you bring to a Church that is anxious, divided, and holding its breath about the future?

How do we share authentically in the midst of deep disagreements that are present not just around human sexuality but in even more foundational matters of doctrine, theology and ecclesiology?

How do we live together as a group of people who are called to love one another, but sometimes fail to treat one another with respect, too often see one another in categories and at times struggle to like one another?

How do we focus on being together in prayer when we are not certain what it means to be together or if being together is even what we want or desire?

How do we seek God together without continuing to harm one another and the world we seek to offer Christ to?

How do we allow our disagreements to be spirit-filled rather than mean-spirited?

How do we find space to celebrate our diversity, follow our convictions and honor our covenant with God and one another?

How do we move forward?

- G. 2 Chronicles 7.14: ***if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.***
- H. As we read the beginning chapters of 2 Chronicles we discover that Solomon is preparing to build a temple for Yahweh in Jerusalem. He completes the temple and dedicates it with a prayer before all the assembly of Israel. Yahweh responds by filling the temple with His glory and making His dwelling there.
- I. After Solomon dedicated the temple, the Lord appeared to him and gave him some warnings and reassurances. Look at 2 Chronicles 7. 12-14:
- “The Lord appeared to him at night and said: ‘I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices.’ When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”***
- J. In 2 Chronicles 7, the Lord simply reminds Solomon of the previous agreement. If Israel obeys, they will be blessed. If they disobey, they will be judged. The judgment is meant to bring Israel to repentance, and God assures Solomon that, if they will be humble, pray, and repent, then God will deliver them from the judgment. In context 2 Chronicles 7:14 is a promise to ancient Israel that, if they will repent and return to the Lord, He will rescue them.

- K. This is a very specific exchange between God, Solomon and the nation of Israel, God's chosen people, the nation that God had entered into covenant with. The prayer in 2 Chronicles 7.14 must not be seen as a magic prayer for another nation or group of people, YET it contains some truth and application for us.
- L. These passages remind us of the constant faithfulness of God – the tremendous mercy, love and graciousness of God. It reminds us of God's desire to be in communion with us. And this prayer offers for us a model that invites us to open our lives to God in a way that the fullness of God's promise and plan will be fulfilled. As we seek to be the Church of Jesus Christ in these days, it is a vital posture to place ourselves in, it is prayer worthy of us praying.
- M. As we live with one another in these days - We must be together in prayer SO THAT the spirit of God will reveal to us the way we move forward together as the body of Christ!
- N. Let us be careful - Prayer cannot be a spiritual exercise that keeps us from acting and prayer cannot become something we use to support our own desires. John Bunyon said: **You can do more than pray, after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.**

We are called to humble ourselves, to stop depending upon our own strength and depend solely upon the power of God's spirit and the direction of God's voice.

We are called to seek God's face – to stop looking for help and purpose in every area of ourselves and life first. The church is not called to seek the ways and opinions of the world, or the halls of academia or politics or the journals of science, first – we are called to seek the face of God!

And we are called to turn from our wicked ways - turn from our sin. We are called to repent - turn from the things that create barriers between us and God. We are called to turn from the things that cause us to get ahead of God – to get in the way of God. We are called to turn from the belief that we know better than God - trusting our mind and intellect over the mind of Christ and the wisdom of the Spirit. We are called to turn from seeing one another as enemies. Turn from seeing conversations as debates to win or lose.

To receive the fullness of God's desire for us and God's healing within our lives individually and together we need to turn from the things that keep us from fully being who God has called us to be.

I am sharing with you my commitment to humble myself, to seek God's face and to turn from my wicked ways. Two very specific ways that I want to turn from our ways that may be applicable for all of us.

II. TWO KEY TURNING POINTS

A. I Need to Turn from a Focus on WHAT to a Focus on WHY

VIDEO – KNOW YOUR WHY

When you know your why, your what has more impact, because you are walking in or towards your purpose.

The primary question facing us, always facing us is not WHAT our church will look like or HOW our church will function in the future, but WHY?

As a United Methodist I am proud of our mission statement – “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” God has called us to do whatever it takes to make certain that others know the amazing, unconditional love of God offered through the person of Jesus. We are called to share the good news of significance, purpose and life found only in Jesus. That’s what our neighbors need, that’s what our co-workers need, that’s what the teenagers who hang around our church buildings are looking for. Sometimes we spend so much time focusing on the what of Church that the why of Church gets lost or confused. Oh, the WHAT and the HOW may change, but the WHY must never change. The WHY must be the rudder that guides us into the future that God has for us.

John 3.16-17: *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”*

John 12.46: *“I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness.”*

John 14.6: *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me.”*

Matthew 5.13-16: *You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden . . . Let your light shine before all in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”*

Matthew 28.19-20: *“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’”*

Acts 1.8: *“but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”*

Our future, no matter what it holds must be driven by a clear understanding of our WHY! We must preach Christ and Christ crucified. We must offer to a despairing world the good news of Jesus – through our actions and in our words. Let us not be ashamed of Jesus! Let us not be hesitant to be the hands and feet of Christ meeting people where they are. Let us be bold in living the difference Jesus has made in us inviting others to be who God created them to be – children of God because of the redeeming work of Jesus the Christ! Oh, Church, let us turn from our focus on WHAT and HOW. Let us turn from the times we forget our WHY! If we keep the WHY primary, I know, I believe, I trust that God will show us the way into the What and the How!

B. I Need to Turn from the Times I Do Not Trust that God is Enough

God is enough for the future we face! God is enough for the future of the United Methodist Church! God is enough for the future of The Upper New York Conference! God is enough for the future of your local congregation! As we seek to live out our why, God is always enough. God gives to us the gifts, energy, and resources that are enough to accomplish the task God has given us. We have to trust that God is enough!

That's the truth throughout the Biblical narrative.

God was enough when Noah built loaded and lived in the ark for 40 days and 40 nights.

God was enough when Abram became Abraham and Sari became Sarah.

God was enough Moses was called to lead God's people out of Egypt.

God was enough when the Israelites wandered the wilderness for 40 years

God was enough when the walls of Jericho came tumbling down

God was enough when David slew Goliath

God was enough when Nehemiah rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem

God was enough when Esther became queen.

God was enough when life crumbled around Job.

God was enough when Daniel found himself in the Lion's den

God was enough when Jonah tried to run away

God was enough when Mary found out she was going to be the mother of God

God was enough when over five thousand needed lunch

God was enough when the blind man wanted to see.

God was enough when Jesus was mocked, tried and crucified

God was enough when the stone was rolled away and sin and death were forever defeated.

God is enough! God is always enough!

As we strive to be the Church that God has called us to be, we have to stop living with a theology of scarcity and start living the truth that God is enough. Whatever God is calling us to, wherever God is leading us, God has already given us everything we need to accomplish God's purpose and plan. God is enough for your life – God is enough for the ministries of your church – God is enough for the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. God is enough for the future of The United Methodist Church!

My bishop for almost 12 years, the bishop who ordained me was Bishop Felton May. Bishop May could preach. Many times when Bishop May preached, he would end with these words. "Do you believe it? Then act like it!"

I need to turn from not trusting that God is enough! We need to turn from not trusting that God is enough. I believe God is enough. I need to start acting like it!

III. CONCLUSION

- A. We have a rich heritage that recognizes strength in our connection to one another. Before Rick Warren coined the phrase, "Better Together", John Wesley taught it. John Wesley taught it because it is the desire and plan of God.
- B. We are the body of Jesus Christ – the ones called to be the hands, feet and voice of Christ. The ones called to represent, live and share the good news of the Gospel to one another and to the world among us. We are called to be one in Christ, one with one another and one in ministry to all the world!
- C. As Wesleyan Christians, we value unity – I believe God calls us to unity. However, perhaps the unity we have been pursuing is a false unity. Maybe what lies before us is the opportunity to trust the Spirit of God to lead us into a new definition of unity that will enable us to be the church God desires us to be and we yearn to be. To continue to be the Church of Jesus Christ together, in a way we cannot today imagine - focusing on the why and trusting that God is enough.

We are called to relationship with Jesus and one another – Together
We are called to a Biblical purpose and mission – Together
We are called to the ministry of evangelism, witness and outreach – Together
We are called to ministries of compassion, justice and mercy – Together
We are called to be peacemakers and proclaimers of God's truth – Together
Together is God's design – Together has strength

D. VIDEO – TOGETHER/TEAM HOYT

- E. Together has power. I don't know what together looks like for us as United Methodists in the future. But I believe this with my whole heart – our best chance of discovering our future in a healthy way is to make a commitment to Be Together in Prayer. Maybe the time has come to put aside for now the resolutions that divide, the conversations that seek to win, to stop trusting first in recommendations and reports as the answer for our future. What might it look like if we made a commitment in these days and the days that follow to make our main task, perhaps our only task to be that of radical prayer, kneeling side by side and trusting that God is enough
- F. 2 Chronicles 7.14: : *if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*