

Ready to Launch
Rev. Steven M. Conger
May 13, 2018

Acts 1:1-11 (NRSV)

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Saturday, April 28 --- quite possibly the most significant theologian of our time passed away at the age of 81.

And one probably most of you have never heard of

James H. Cone had a huge impact on my life when I was given the opportunity to hear him and read his works while I was in seminary.

Dr. Cone gave voice to the voiceless and is credited with the concept of Liberation Theology.

Most of us here today would not feel very comfortable with what Dr Cone said.

His obituary published by Union Seminary stated:

Cone "upended the theological establishment with his vigorous articulation of God's radical identification with black people in the United States"

James Wallis in his commentary on Cone's death wrote:

The oppression of the poor and black people in particular, was at the heart of James Cone's work, and, as he wrote so prophetically and brilliantly, the love of the oppressed and divine passion for justice is at the heart of God

Cone grew up in the era of lynchings in the segregated town of Bearden, Ark., which at the time had a population of about 400 blacks and 800 whites, and he often feared for his father's safety.

"I had heard too much about white people killing black people ... when my father would finally make it home safely, I would run and jump into his arms, happy as I could be," Cone once recalled.

This was the 50's --- in Arkansas, so maybe not a big surprise.

We have a problem in our country

In too many places, in too many people's attitudes, being "Black" is a crime --- or at least a reason to be suspicious.

We need to learn to not only LISTEN to each other, but to really SEE each other

I encourage you to join us next Sunday afternoon for the ongoing community dialog at St Paul's Episcopal Church on race and reconciliation

Hopefully --- we will learn to SEE each other

On May 4th, following a prayerful process to discern a way forward the United Methodist Council of Bishops, released the following statement.

Having received and considered the extensive work of the Commission on a Way Forward, the Council of Bishops will submit a report to the Special Session of the General Conference in 2019 that includes:

- All three plans (The Traditionalist Plan, The One Church Plan and the Connectional Conference Plan) for a way forward considered by the Commission and the Council.
- The Council's recommendation of the One Church Plan.
- An historical narrative of the Council's discernment process regarding all three plans.

Rationale: In order to invite the church to go deeper into the journey the Council and Commission have been on, the Council will make all the information considered by the Commission and the Council of Bishops available to the delegates of the General Conference and acknowledges there is support for each of the three plans within the Council. The values of our global church are reflected in all three plans. The majority of the Council recommends the One Church Plan as the best way forward for The United Methodist Church.

The question that they are wrestling with is: should people who have different sexual identities be included in the life of the church?

Of course, when I frame the question that way most of us would say SURE.

But the real question confronting us is: should people with different sexual orientations be allowed in leadership within the United Methodist Church?

That is a very different question.

What does it mean to be welcomed --- to be included --- to be valued --- in the life of the church?

It made me reflect on an interesting experience I had.

While visiting someone prior to surgery they thanked me for coming and said that they weren't sure that I would come and pray them since they were not members

If an active attender doesn't feel fully included . . .

Matt and I are working on how we can address these issues as a congregation, knowing that we are all over the spectrum on how comfortable we are with these issues.

But also realizing that this issue will be thrust upon us come February

I would be dishonest if I said I knew or even felt comfortable with how we might deal with these issues. We are praying and trying to discern the spirits movement --- I hope you will do the same.

That is not all that happened a week ago on Friday. At all the Annual Conferences this past year we were asked to vote on 5 amendments to our constitution.

In order to change the constitution, each amendment requires at least a 2/3 majority at our quadrennial general conference (which happened in 2016). Then they must also receive at least 67% of the total votes taken at annual conferences around the world.

Friday, it was announced that three of the amendments passed --- the two amendments that failed to pass dealt with gender equality issues.

Quoting the Council of Bishops:

"While we are not completely clear concerning the motivation that caused them to miss the two-thirds required majority by slim margins, we want to be clear that we are unequivocal in our commitment to the equality of women and their full inclusion in our church".

The bishops added they were recommitting themselves as individuals and as a full council to lead "the church toward the goal which Christ has given us to fully include both men and women in the life and ministry of Christ's church."

One of the amendments asserted that men and women are equal in God's eyes and committed the church to ending discrimination against women and girls. The vote for this amendment was 66.5 percent — 31,304 yes and 15,753 no.

The other would have added gender, ability, age and marital status to the list of characteristics that do not bar people from membership in the church. The vote for this amendment was 61.3 percent — 29,049 yes and 18,317 no.

In other words, we as United Methodists voted NO

And as I stand before you on this Ascension Sunday --- I am heartbroken.

Sad, that as a nation we fail to understand that our attitudes that often lead toward discrimination (often without us even realizing it)

Sad, that almost 70 years after James Cone would worry each night whether his father would come home safe --- that many mothers still worry the same thing this very day.

Not just in the south --- In Mississippi or Alabama
but right here in Indianapolis

Sad that we as a denomination don't remember the words of Paul in Galatians (3:28)
There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

As we wait for Pentecost --- the giving of the spirit and the empowering of the church and the people --- what is our message for today?

Today --- on Ascension Sunday --- as we honor our mothers and encourage our seniors to take flight --- what is our dream for them?

I dream that they will be the ones to bring to pass the powerful challenge of scripture:

- that we are to love God and love others
- that we realize we are all one in God.

I dream that they will be the ones to live out the words of Dr. Martin Luther King:

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I HAVE A DREAM TODAY!

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama — with its vicious racists, with its Governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification — one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I HAVE A DREAM TODAY!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be plain and the crooked places will be made straight, "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

This is our hope.

This is MY dream

I dream we listen to the passionate cry of our young people who seek to change in our society --
- and we help them make it happen!

These young people that we honor today CAN change the world --- I pray that they do --- and that we let them

I want to close with some powerful and disturbing words I came across from Barbara Brown Taylor.

A couple of years ago, as a congregation Anne had you studying one of her books. She writes:

The problem is, many of the people in need of saving are in churches, and at least part of what they need saving from is the idea that God sees the world the same way they do.

I want to close with a prayer that a friend wrote that I have modified slightly:

"As we celebrate on this day the ascension of Jesus --- mother's day and our graduating seniors we recognize the importance of community. While there are different meanings by varied experience for us with the word "mother," we recognize the sacred community the women of the church have built for us throughout the generations from the very first women who followed Jesus and organized his earthly ministry. We grieve with United Methodist women throughout the connection who have not been affirmed in leadership or identity by our own votes. May God forgive us for missing this opportunity to move forward and may the women in our midst never lose sight of Christ who affirms them, even when their tribe fails to do so. For our community and for our families, and for those who will lead us into your dream O Lord, we do pray. Amen.

(prayer is adapted by one written by Matthew Stultz)