

“We Are Being Transformed”

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris



Luke 9:26-36

Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Good morning, church! It is so good to be standing right here in this pulpit this morning, here together with you to worship the God we love, to claim the faith of Christ Jesus, to be filled with the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit.

I will confess to you that it was hard to focus in on just what I wanted to say this morning in this brief homily. The special called session of our General Conference was grueling. There were some high moments of worship and long periods of prayer. And yet, we failed in some critically important ways. We failed to preserve the unity of the church, to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” as Scripture commends. We failed Wesley’s injunction to “do no harm,” particularly in regards to our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, their families and friends, members of our own congregation. We failed to move to higher ground. I dare say we failed to keep our baptismal covenant to resist evil and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. The pain is deep and tears are flowing.

And yet...there’s another story coming out of this watershed General Conference, and it’s a story of new life and hope. Now, trust me...I’m no Pollyanna! Just ask my poor, long-suffering husband who has had to put up with me now through nine General Conferences. I don’t have time this morning to unpack it all—we’ll have time for that in the days and weeks ahead.

So here it is in a nutshell. I went to my first General Conference in 1988. It was in St. Louis. Last week we were back in St. Louis. And you know, St. Louis is called “the Gateway to the West.” It’s known for that gorgeous Gateway Arch, the world’s tallest arch, the highest man-made monument in the Western Hemisphere, at the point where the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers combine. The jumping off point for the Lewis and Clark expeditions of the early 19th century, as our young nation expanded westward. The Gateway to the West.

This General Conference became, perhaps in spite of itself, or perhaps because of all that prayer and worship and the Holy Spirit showing up in ways no one could have predicted, the United Methodist Church’s “gateway to the West.” Here’s what I mean. For the last many decades, the church has gone along doing its thing, as institutions can do. Stuck. Held hostage to out-moded and harmful biblical interpretation that sounds a whole lot more like that of my Southern Baptist relatives than anything truly Wesleyan and Methodist. Fearful of new expressions of faith. Hunkering down in a misguided attempt to keep the lid on, to preserve things as they always have been.

Our Western Jurisdiction has always been different. We have been inclusive from the beginning. From our earliest days, we have always been one of the most ethnically and racially diverse parts of the UMC. Chinese, Japanese, Anglo, African-American, Hispanic, Native American, Filipino, Tongan, Samoan, Hawaiian, Vietnamese, Korean....We have long been border-crossing, partnering with the Methodist Church in Mexico to address need all along our shared border. We do urban ministry, rural ministry, campus ministry, chaplaincy in the military and in hospitals and hospices. We have empowered leadership in women, young adults, and youth. And we have, for many, many years now, extended the ministry of the church to include LGBTQ people and straight people, honoring each and all as beloved children of God. We are diverse in our theology, too--progressives and conservatives, and the vast range of everyone somewhere in between. We are different in many ways. And still, we love one another.

And so, for many years, we have been rather suspect in the eyes of some. Kinda “out there”--interesting, maybe, but there have been those who have wanted to make us go away.

We just kept on keepin’ on. All these years. And here’s the sea-change that happened just last week. We didn’t win the vote. We fell short by only 54 votes out of some 860 or so. You could say, though, that while we may have lost the battle, we won the war. St. Louis became again “the Gateway to the West.” The great majority of the US United Methodist Church stood with us. In fact, they moved us from the margins right to the very center of things. People from Wisconsin and Kansas and Illinois and North Texas and North Georgia and Oklahoma and Florida and Germany and the Philippines...are all saying now “we want to be like you.” “You are the inclusive church we all want to be.” “You are the expression of church God wants us to be.”

And so, we are now called to be bridge builders, linking everything wonderful we have always known about the United Methodist Church to a new future. While in St. Louis, a group of United Methodist youth and young adult collected 16,000 signatures in just 13 hours on their statement supporting unity in diversity across our global church. This is our future, and it made a cameo appearance right there on the floor of the General Conference.

As one of our bishops said this week: “you can’t put that Spirit back in the bottle.” It’ll be a couple months before the legality of the legislation we passed is sorted out. We don’t yet know what new institutional structures will emerge. But we do know that nonetheless, a new church has just been born. We are free and this new church will be our witness to the world. A church where there’s a place for everyone at the table, just as there is here each time we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion to remember our Lord Jesus Christ.

The road is long, and there are many set-backs along the way. Sometimes it feels like we’re never going to get to where we need to be. It was just the same for those first disciples, Peter, John, and James. Jesus knew they might be flagging in zeal. So he gave them a very special gift. He took them up to the top of the mountain to pray with him. And while he was praying his face was transformed. And just for a moment they got a glimpse of who he really was---the Messiah, the Savior, the Christ. They saw the light of God shining in his face. They saw his glory. They heard God’s voice saying: “This is my Son, the Chosen. Listen to him!”

And then they had to come down from the mountain and get back to work, but they would never be the same. There was no going back now. They were changed from within. The light of God burned bright within them now, too. And really, that’s the moment the church was born.

Friends, over these next months, we will continue to listen and talk with one another. We are on this journey together. Our First UMC Church Council voted unanimously in 2012 that all the ministries of the church are open to all God’s children. Together we will create a new way forward. We will keep on keepin’ on, doing what we do here week in and week out in the powerful name of Christ Jesus. We’re going to keep trying to do our best to embody the big beautiful love of God in this congregation of the United Methodist Church. We’re going to continue the mission of the United Methodist Church to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” We’re going to worship and pray and sing and learn. We’re going to keep serving God’s people, right here and all around the world. We’re going to try as hard as we can to listen for the voice of Christ, and heed his words, and follow where he leads. We will continue to love God and love one another as fervently and passionately as we can.

This is our story, this is our song.

Thanks be to God!