

What is so Great About Being United Methodist? – Eph. 2:1-10 – June 7, 2009

This morning we start our summer sermon series which I have decided to call The People's Choice. For those of you who have missed what is going on, I have invited all of you at St. John's to offer sermon topics that are especially on your hearts and minds that you would like me to preach on this summer. Let me begin by thanking those of you who have already offered me your requests. I have the first half of the summer pretty much planned but still have room for additional requests or suggestions.

I must be honest about this morning's topic – what is so great about being a United Methodist? It was not so much a specific request from one of you but a regular request of the powers that be of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference – of which St. John's is a part - and subsequently of the members of our very own SPRC – the HR committee if you will of this church. Not so United Methodist beliefs can be shoved down your throats but so that you can better understand and celebrate the many things that make us unique and I believe special.

It made sense for me to start out this way for a couple of reasons – first and foremost because I had to prepare this sermon while attending Annual Conference this past week. For those of you who have no idea what Annual Conference is – which I'm afraid is many of you – it is a yearly gathering of delegates – an equal number of clergy like me and lay people like you - from all the United Methodist Churches basically from I 80 south which is roughly 890 churches. A lot happens in those four days including a memorial service for all the people who have died since our last gathering and an ordination service for those who are following their call into particular ministry.

In addition to worship, we spend a great deal of our time doing the general business of the Conference - hearing reports and presentations, debating and approving budgets and resolutions and this year voting on United Methodist Constitutional Amendments. I would love to tell you that Annual Conference is one of the highlights of the year for me but that would be a blatant lie. Now don't get me wrong, I really do think being a United Methodist is great. I – like many of you – have explored other churches and denominations but have always returned to the United Methodist Church – for reasons that I think will be obvious in a few minutes. But sitting in a big, freezing cold, windowless room in downtown Peoria, IL for hours on end four days straight debating - among other things – how much each church should pay for the pastor's television, cable or satellite is not my idea of fun.

Having said that though, there is much that happens at Annual Conference that is crucial to the work of the church and makes or affirms who we are as United Methodists. Take the theme of Annual Conference this year which was Radical Hospitality: Welcoming all God's Children. Some of you may remember our sermon series on Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations this past fall which included the concept of Radical Hospitality and addressed our Visioning Priority Number Three which reminds us that we must become a more visible church leader in the community through outreach and support.

In much the same vain, the Illinois Great Rivers Conference is working hard to affirm and support all of its churches in radically and faithfully inviting and welcoming all of God's children. I am encouraged by this theme especially when I look around and see that the world is full of walls. Everywhere we go, there are fences, gates, partitions

and other ingeniously constructed barriers - all aimed at keeping something or someone in and keeping something or someone else out. We need walls: walls in our homes to protect us against wind and rain; walls to keep livestock safely in and predators out; walls to help us separate spaces and improve organization and efficiency. But one does not have to be a rocket scientist to comprehend how walls, both literal and spiritual, can lead to grief, division and even violence. All walls serve a purpose, but not all walls serve the purposes of God. Which is the first thing that I believe is great about being United Methodist.

From its early roots, this denomination has attempted to focus on tearing down these walls that divide and instead opening doors to all of God's people. In fact, one of the major United Methodist campaigns for the past several years has been Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors and was grounded in the life and teachings of John Wesley – the recognized founder of the United Methodist Church. John Wesley stressed in his teaching and his preaching that diversity is a blessing among God's people and not a curse. Listen to this paraphrase of one of his most important sermons:

There are all kinds of people in the Christian church with all kinds of ideas; but we don't often celebrate that diversity. Instead, we let our opinions divide us. We become enemies, even in the church. What happened to the Word of God? Jesus tells us to love one another, even our enemies. So I ask you: can we not have one heart, even if we are not of one mind? Can't we love each other, even if we have different opinions?

Do you hear that Methodist claim to open hearts, open minds and open doors? And this has not been limited to any one issue, but analogous of the whole United

Methodist denomination. Research has shown that the people of The United Methodist Church do present an affirming community to seekers by demonstrating a caring heart for those in need; by embracing an open-mindedness that requires no attachment to a mandatory creed; and by opening doors to people with diverse opinions, cultural traditions, and ethnic backgrounds and beliefs.

Have we been successful in this campaign? I believe so but we have a long, long way to go – so much so that the next campaign of the denomination wants to take us another step forward. In their attempt to rethink church, the new campaign asks us this question: What if church wasn't just a building, but thousands of doors - each of them opening up to a different concept or experience of church – and a journey that could change our world? Would you come – or I must add continue to come?

As sinful, human beings opening our hearts, minds and doors – let alone thousands of doors - to those who look, live and think differently from us is not easy. In fact, it can be very difficult - which is probably the main reason I am preaching this sermon this morning – especially as I open this summer sermon series to ALL of you. So far the sermon topic requests have been pretty safe and non-controversial. But I am not going to shy away from some of the tough subjects that affect our lives, our church and our world – be it this summer or in the months or years to come. We don't avoid them at Annual Conference as painful as that can sometimes be and I will not avoid them as your pastor either.

In Ephesians chapter 2, the next verse from what we heard already this morning, we read that Christ has "broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." Sometimes it is difficult to see how and where this has happened, especially today,

when hostility appears to be the bread and butter of human relating and living. And unfortunately the church has all too often helped build these walls. We've built many of them not out of bricks and mortar, but out of the raw material of sin and division. Then we've cemented them with the mortar of name-calling, labeling and prejudice.

I think I am safe in saying that things are going very well here at St. John's but that has not always been the case. I don't need to rehash the past but I do think it can be helpful to remind us that we have experienced our share of walls here and not the kind we hope to build in our commitment to Habitat for Humanity this summer. With God's help, I hope to keep us moving in this positive direction but am not so naïve as to believe that we won't hit some bumps in the road along way – especially if we agree to continue to rethink church and practice radical hospitality by welcoming all God's children. My sincere hope and prayer is that we will continue to open our hearts, minds and doors – all of them – instead of reactively putting up divisive walls that will only serve to block the beacons of faith and service that we are attempting to become as we strive to reflect Christ's light to the world.

How do we assure that happens? I think once again by recognizing and celebrating what is great about being United Methodist. Now explaining who we are and what we believe is not an easy thing to do – and is definitely beyond the scope of this morning's message because we are really a mix of so many things. Adam Hamilton, in his book *Christianity's Family Tree*, describes us as the *via media* – or the middle way – and I agree with him wholeheartedly. I actually think of the United Methodist Church as the best of all worlds or should I say the best of all denominations or Christian faith traditions.

That is not to say that we are better than all the other denominations. I - like Rev. Hamilton – just believe that we have always listened carefully to other faith traditions - thanks mainly to John Wesley - and have attempted to learn and draw the best from all of these traditions. In doing so, we have elements of many denominations in our DNA makeup – Baptist, Pentecostal, Catholic, Orthodox and of course Anglican and Episcopal – to name just a few. And because we do, many of you who grew up in some of these other traditions or denominations or did not grow up in any church at all, have found the United Methodist Church a great place to call home.

Now the major challenge of taking this via media or the middle way is that we attract faithful followers and hopefully seekers with extremely varied theologies or beliefs, spiritual and worship needs as well as different life and church experiences and that can make agreeing and getting along challenging. I am the first to admit that I was disappointed with how some of the votes came out this past week at Annual Conference – particularly in terms of the Constitutional Amendments. But because I am a United Methodist through and through and accept varying viewpoints and different opinions I remain committed to the denomination that I believe is doing what it can to be faithful to the teachings and example of Jesus Christ.

You know why? Because I don't believe Rick Warren in his well-known book *The Purpose Driven Life* was the first to claim that it's not all about me, or if I may, it is not all about us. I believe that is much the same thinking and theology of John Wesley and even more importantly is exactly what Paul is trying to tell us in Ephesians 2. I know this isn't very fair – to build you all up this morning as people of the United Methodist Church and then turn around and burst your bubbles. But again, I don't think it is me – but John

and Paul who are doing the bursting on behalf of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Paul in his words from Ephesians 8 and 9 remind us - for by grace we have been saved through faith, and this is not our own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast. I believe I am correct in saying that this is one of the key scriptures and concepts around which John Wesley developed much of his theology and is therefore a major piece of who we are and what we believe as United Methodists. Simply put, we believe that faith in Christ is a gift. We don't earn our salvation. We receive it without a bit of effort on our part.

I spent a great deal of time this past week – in between votes and discussion and worship - trying to find the perfect story or illustration to end this morning until I remembered that it is a communion Sunday. I knew that time is always a factor on these mornings but more importantly I couldn't think of a better illustration for what makes the United Methodist Church great – at least in my humble opinion.

As we prepare to come to this table in a few minutes, I am reminded that there are no walls, no mandatory creeds or barriers of any kind that prevent you from coming forth to receive this gift from God. I hope that you all know that we practice open communion in the United Methodist Church which means no one is excluded – including those of you who have not yet become official members of this denomination. No one is turned away from receiving this amazing symbol of God's love and grace.

As you come forward this morning, it is my sincere hope and prayer that you will look around and smile at, shake hands with or even hug your brothers and sisters in Christ who may well look, live and think differently than you. As you come forward together as the family of faith called St. John United Methodist Church, please don't

forget that no matter what your past, your present or even your future your God, who is rich in mercy is the one who makes us alive together with Christ. Amen.