

**COUNCIL OF BISHOPS  
THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**April 29, 2018  
Chicago, Illinois**

**WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?  
Mark 10:35-52**

**Greeting**

I greet you in the name and spirit of the Risen Christ. Since we have a great high priest, who has passed through the heavens, who is Jesus, the Son of God, let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we, gathered in this historic Council, may receive mercy and find grace to help us in this hour of need. Amen. (Hebrews 4:14 & 16)

**Fight, Flee or Freeze**

Dear colleagues, the church is watching. The world is watching us. The eyes of the entire denomination, and many of our ecumenical partners, are upon us as we gather this week. An anxious, schismatic, yet profoundly hopeful church is watching, waiting, wondering what will be our response to the final report from the Commission on a Way Forward. What will we recommend? What will we discern? What will we decide?

I have repeatedly quoted from Tod Bolsinger's book, *Canoeing the Mountains*, in my addresses to this Council. You will recall that Rev. Bolsinger adeptly uses the Lewis and Clark Expedition of exploring the Louisiana Purchase to illustrate what it looks like to lead off the map into unfamiliar territory. Again drawing upon the leadership example of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Bolsinger makes this observation: "...when we meet those moments of disequilibrium that arise within us because we are in an unfamiliar, anxiety-producing situation, we have to resist the temptation to fight, flee or

freeze... At those moments, the tendency is to double down on doing what we have always done and resist the new information that tells us the circumstances are different and that more drastic change is necessary.” (page 108)

The church is watching. The church is watching, waiting and wondering if we will lead, and more significantly, **how** we will lead. I believe the church, for the most part, will follow its bishops. They will take their cues from this Council and from this meeting of our Council. If we fight and retreat to our various corners and turfs, the church will follow our example and fight. If we flee and pretend we are not in a truly different place as a global church, the church will follow our example and flee. If we freeze and say it is not our responsibility to guide our people into uncharted territory, the church will follow suit, freeze and miss this transformative moment.

It is difficult for the Council of Bishops to not fight, flee or freeze because we have baked into our structure and culture some tenacious previous training, experience, expectations and values. We are a large Council, we meet infrequently, we are elected regionally and generally feel more affinity and loyalty to our residential and regional constituencies than we do to the whole church or even the mission of the whole, global enterprise.

In the past, the Council spent far more time in debate and legislative processes than in building community, trust and mutual respect. These dynamics, and others I am sure you could name, generally result in what some previous consultants to the Council have observed – we are not a leadership group for the church, despite our aspirations and what the *Book of Discipline* says; we are simply a group of leaders.

But, perhaps, the dynamic that can most threaten our ability to lead the church, when confronted with uncharted territory, is the tendency to fall into what Edwin Friedman calls “imaginative gridlock.” Imaginative gridlock leads to a locked-in perspective, or as Friedman points out, “an unending treadmill of trying harder, looking for answers rather

than reframing questions, and either/or thinking that creates false dichotomies” (page 206, *Canoeing the Mountains*) or leads to single narrative thinking.

What our church desperately needs at this moment, 50 years after creating The United Methodist Church, is a Council of Bishops that resists fixing the church, practices holy imagination, refuses false dichotomies and single narrative thinking and reframes the questions. This is the only way to guide our people into uncharted territory and over the obstacles – over the mountains – that cannot be traversed with our canoes.

But to do so, we – as a group of leaders – will need to surrender to the Lord of the Church our personal desires to control or manipulate all the processes and outcomes.

*This is the only way we have any chance to become a leadership group.*

We will have to determine – individually and collectively – if we are seeking a win for the whole church, particularly those on the margins of the church and society and the generations yet to be reached and yet to be born – or if we are only seeking an immediate, short-term win for our constituency, caucus or conference. *This is the only way we will have a chance to become a leadership group.*

We will need to muster the courage to provide the church with a singular clear, concise, unencumbered pathway forward and resist the legislative entanglements and political compromises that have unfortunately become our standard way of maintaining a false unity. *This is the only way we will have a chance to become a leadership group.*

We will need to decide if we want the church to be healed and whole or if we want to begin dividing up the spoils. *This is the only way we will have a chance to become a leadership group.*

We will need to practice and preach convicted humility, reminding ourselves and the church that only God is God, only God is holy, only God is faithful beyond fault, only the

trium God is to be worshipped, only God holds all the mysteries to how each individual is “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). *Allowing God to be God is the only way we will have any chance to become the leadership group the church so desperately seeks in this season.*

### **Reframing the Question**

It is difficult to lead The United Methodist Church – particularly in this high-stakes moment. (Can I get an Amen!) We know many of the reasons for this. Several of you among us have written volumes on both the reasons for and the solutions to leading The United Methodist Church. We live in a post-Christendom era. A significant number, if not most of our congregations in North America have failed to adapt to changing demographics, culture and expectations. We say we want leaders to lead, but we really want leaders to manage and maintain the status quo and, of course, fix our problems. We have allowed our church polity and governance to become driven by regulations, legislative processes and judicial proceedings and decisions. O, come Holy Spirit, come. Come Holy Spirit! Heal us. Save us. Guide us.

I must stop; this list of reasons, or perhaps excuses, could go on and on. Just permit me one additional observation. For 45 years, I believe we have been framing and reframing the questions regarding homosexuality in a manner that leads to false dichotomies, single narrative thinking and trying to fix the church. Some frame the difficult questions we are wrestling with as only or primarily a matter of civil rights and justice. Some as only or primarily a matter of scriptural authority. Some as only or primarily a matter of holiness and purity. Some as only or primarily a matter of unity and harmony within the Body of Christ. Some as only or primarily a matter of missional focus and effectiveness. Some as only or primarily a matter of covenantal or connectional integrity.

This Council, as we articulated a mandate for the work of the Commission on a Way Forward, wove a number of these single narrative approaches into a reframing of the questions. You can all probably recite this in your sleep: *design a way for being church that maximizes the presence of a United Methodist witness, allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible and creates as much unity as possible.* This remains a significant, and I believe, helpful reframing of the questions. I am grateful to the Commission on a Way Forward for taking this framework seriously.

### **Is the Lord Among Us or Not?**

Recently, I have been in several conversations with folks in my Area that are simply reframing the questions with some variation of the Exodus lament: Is the Lord among us or not? This is the question of a wilderness people, wandering in the desert, being forged and formed into the People of God. The Hebrew tribes come to Rephidim. (Exodus 17:1-7) There wasn't a drop of water for the people to drink. The future looked bleak; there appeared to be no way forward. The quarreling and complaining began. They were angry at Moses. (You may want to substitute the Council of Bishops here). So they ordered Moses to give them water. They complained to God and cried out, "Is the Lord among us or not?" I cannot speak for each of you, but there have been moments – some of them protracted moments – when this has been my dominant lens, my primary framework, my over-riding question. Is the Lord among us or not?

### **What Do You Want Me To Do For You?**

But, then I remember Jesus. Then I remember Jesus, the master re-framer of the difficult questions. Jesus constantly used parables and his personal interactions with individuals to break through the false dichotomies and single narratives:

- to invite vulnerability,
- to urge turning toward the Light,
- to release holy imagination,
- to demand justice,
- to offer healing, forgiveness and new birth.

I love how Jesus frames the dynamics unfolding in the Gospel stories we read this afternoon. Jesus and the twelve were on their way up to Jerusalem. Jesus had just told them for the third time about his impending death and resurrection. He was still trying to form this small group of leaders into a servant leadership group. Did you catch that? Jesus was trying to form a group of leaders into a leadership group. James and John suddenly came forward and said, “Teacher, we’ve got a big favor – a really big favor – we want you to do for us.” And, Jesus immediately frames the context by asking, “What do you want me to do for you?” Here is the Son of God, who clearly knew their hearts, giving James and John a transformative invitation to be vulnerable, open and honest about the desire of their hearts. With no hesitation, they reveal their spiritual immaturity and blurt out, “Grant us to sit at your right and your left hands in your glory.” Jesus’ response is sharp, direct, penetrating: “You do not know what you are asking.” But, there is more! Jesus goes on to tell James and John, in essence, that they are not ready. “You are not ready to drink the cup that I drink,” he says.

James and John did not come to Jesus naming their deepest hungers or hurts, their deepest yearnings for healing and wholeness. They came naming their greatest ambitions for power and position. They came seeking what they wanted for themselves, not the vulnerability, conversion, servant heart and kingdom leadership Jesus desired for them and from them.

This gospel story continues after Jesus comes to Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus, the twelve and a large crowd were leaving Jericho. Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus,

a blind beggar sitting by the roadside, also has a big ask of Jesus. He shouts out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Bartimaeus is not dissuaded by the naysayers, those who would keep him in his place on the margins. No, he cries out even louder, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus calls Bartimaeus to the center (the center, friends) of the crowd. Bartimaeus throws off his cloak. And, Jesus once again frames the context, the conversation, by asking, “What do you want me to do for you?” Once again, Jesus, who already knew Bartimaeus’ heart’s desire, creates the space for him to be open, vulnerable, honest, surrendered. And, Bartimaeus’ response: “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus honors Bartimaeus’ faith, his vulnerability, his yearning to be healed. And Bartimaeus is healed and follows Jesus on the way.

James and John desired to come out on top. Bartimaeus desired to be healed. James and John desired status. Bartimaeus desired to be transformed. James and John desired to be served by the leader. Bartimaeus desired to become a servant leader. James and John desired to have it their way. Bartimaeus desired to follow The Way.

Jesus, risen and alive, is standing among us today, friends. He will be among us all week. Jesus is calling us to “come here” – to come and stand before him and throw off our cloaks, our masks, our fears, everything that would shut him out. Listen; Jesus is asking us, “What do you want me to do for you?” My dear colleagues, as we seek a way forward for The United Methodist Church, Jesus is asking: “What do you want me to do for you?”

### **You’re Not the Boss of Me**

Jesus’ question has been the focus of my prayers for several weeks now. I am confident each of you have also been in your own deep prayer in preparation for this meeting. I have imagined myself standing before Jesus and hearing him lovingly speak, “What do

you want me to do for you? What do you want me to do for the Council of Bishops?  
What do you want me to do for The United Methodist Church?"

Three re-occurring responses have filled my heart, my soul, my mind. I do not presume to know how you might respond to Jesus' framing, penetrating, transformative question. I can only share with you what deep desires Jesus' question has called forth from my soul.

My first response is "My teacher, Rabbi, Jesus, heal me from insisting on my own way. Empty me of my preferences, biases, prejudices and need to control so that all of my desires are aligned with your Spirit's leading and God's purposes for the beloved community."

I shared with you at our additional Council meeting in late February about my becoming a husband and father when I married my spouse, Char. You may recall she had two little boys, Lance and Stuart, from a previous marriage. I shared with you about Lance's Easter revelation that he could love both dads. This afternoon, I want to tell you a story about Stuart and what God began to teach me through this precious and precocious four-year-old.

A couple of months after we were married, we were sitting down for dinner one evening and Stuart noticed a sizable serving of cooked squash on his plate. He immediately announced to the entire family that he was not going to eat the squash. Char insisted he eat his squash. Stuart responded with an emphatic "No!" So, Char gave me the look. No words were necessary; I knew immediately what message she intended. "You are now his father; this would be a good time to begin to establish your role and your authority." Now, I didn't need much encouragement, because I was eager to assume the role as Stuart's father. "Stuart, please eat your squash." "No," came the response. So, I tried again and said, "Stuart, your mom has worked all day; she came home and fixed us

dinner; you need to eat your squash for her.” Well, that didn’t work, so I upped the ante and reminded him there were millions of hungry children in the world that would love to have the squash. It didn’t work; it never works. By now we were locked in an all-out battle of wills. I was going to make Stuart eat that squash and he was just as insistent that he was not going to eat the squash. In the midst of our confrontation, he suddenly jabbed his chubby little four-year-old finger in my face and said, “You’re not the boss of me. You don’t own me. I’m the boss of my own self.” I was so taken aback, I abandoned the battle. Stuart ate no squash that night. He is now grown and married with three children of his own. As far as I know, he has never eaten squash.

That incident is a powerful metaphor for my efforts to be an obedient, faithful follower of Jesus. Because time and time again, I find myself jabbing my finger at God and saying, “You don’t own me. I’m the boss of my own self. I’ll control this relationship. You don’t own me.”

Over the past two years, I have jabbed my finger at God many times and told God what the Commission on a Way Forward should recommend. I have told God time and time again what the way forward is for our Methodist Movement. I have jabbed my finger in God’s face and insisted I know best.

Jesus stands before me and reframes the context and invites me to be transformed. “What do you truly want me to do for you?” The response that arises in my soul is, “Teacher, Jesus, empty me of my preferences, biases, prejudices, my need to be the boss, my need to be on your right or left hand, so that I can reflect your heart.”

Tod Bolsinger in *Canoeing the Mountains* says that the most important thing to remember about leadership is that “God is taking us into uncharted territory to transform us. The great discovery in following Christ into his mission is that we find ourselves. And, the beautiful paradox is that the more committed we are to our own

transformation, the better leader we will be.” (page 217) Perhaps, just perhaps, what God is trying to do through the journey we have been on these past two years, is to transform us, transform this Council, into better leaders. Perhaps, just perhaps, God is trying to transform us from a group of leaders to a leadership group.

### **Table Manners**

A second response to Jesus’ question, “What do you want me to do for you?” that has consistently arisen in my soul is “My Teacher, Rabbi, Jesus, heal me from defining and limiting your mission to usher in the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven by my own limited historical, cultural and tribal experience. Help me to live in a state of ‘yes’ to every expression of your redemptive, transforming work throughout all the earth.”

Are you up for another story about Stuart? Are you sure? This address is getting pretty long. Okay, here we go.

While in my last year of seminary at Garrett-Evangelical, I served as an associate pastor at Grace United Methodist Church on Chicago’s north side. One of my primary responsibilities was the children’s sermon on Sunday morning. Stuart, now five going on six years old, loved to come down to the chancel area for this time with the children. In fact, he was a little too eager to come down. He would often run down the long center aisle and literally slide into my lap, as if he had just stolen second base. The first few times, this behavior was cute. But soon it became distracting to me and upsetting to that very dignified congregation.

The first time I was the celebrant for Holy Communion at Grace Church, I issued the invitation for people to come to the altar to receive the bread and cup. As I looked up, I saw Stuart running down the aisle, ready to slide into base. At the very last moment, a

woman in the front pew reached out and grabbed Stuart and abruptly sat him down in the pew next to her. I was relieved. Stuart was broken-hearted and began to sob.

On the way home from church that day, Stuart sat in the back seat of the car, dejected, still crying. Char and I tried to explain to him why it was inappropriate to run down the aisle and slide into base. We tried to explain to him why the congregation's tradition of not having children participate in communion was to be respected for the time being. The explanations were hollow and did not heal his broken spirit. All he could repeatedly ask between his sobs was, "Why can't I come and have some of Jesus' bread and juice?"

Friends, there are tens of thousands of persons within our churches, and many hundreds of thousands more beyond our churches, who are sobbing uncontrollably today because in one form or another, intentionally or simply mistakenly, we have kept them from the table of the fullness of God's grace, love and healing presence.

Jesus owns the table, not us. Jesus owns the sacraments, not us. Jesus owns what is holy space, not us. Jesus owns what are holy relationships, not us. Jesus owns who is welcome, not us.

I love Luke's gospel for this reason alone. There are ten stories in Luke's gospel of Jesus sitting at the table to eat with others. He uses his table manners to shift the paradigm of ministry. His banquet appearances are Jesus' unique cultural critique, social protest and illustration of kingdom inversion. The table is the context in which Jesus raises troublesome questions like:

Whom do you invite to share the meal with you?

Who can be a full participant in your faith community?

Is there an "in" group and an "out" group?

Where is your place at the table – at the head of the table on the

the left and right hand, or at the foot with of the table with  
the least?

Who is included in the Kingdom of God?

Does your table have enough space for everyone?

Jesus stands before me and reframes the context and invites me to be transformed. “What do you truly want me to do for you?” The response that arises in my soul is, “Teacher, Rabbi, Jesus, heal me from defaulting to define your mission by my own limited historical, cultural or tribal experiences. Help me to expand and extend your salvation hospitality to all.”

The church is watching us. But, so is Jesus. I am confident, only by faith and the grace of God, that Jesus will be watching to see if we will expand the table. Will we focus on our public mission, inviting those beyond our tables and altars, or will we cater to our current guest lists? Perhaps, just perhaps, what God is trying to do through the journey we have been on the past two years, is to unburden our church and re-focus and revitalize our witness and mission in every different context our Methodist Movement has been blessed to be sent.

### **Unity in The First Proclamation**

A third response to Jesus’ question, “What do you want me to do for you?” that has emerged within my heart and soul is, “My Teacher, Rabbi, Jesus, heal me from my hunger for harmony that masks the unity found only in you, O Christ. Save me from my anxiety and fear that drive me toward solutions, narratives or actions that simply make my inner tension and fear go away or go somewhere else.”

I consider myself a courageous leader. And, I consistently invite the pastors I am privileged to appoint and guide to be courageous, Spirit-filled leaders. But, what I have learned about myself in my 67 years is that I am courageous by intention, choice and experience, not by natural inclination or personality. I have a desire, like many of us, to avoid conflict and seek harmony. Although I initiate systems change on a regular basis and pray daily for the Holy Spirit to break through in entrenched congregations, I have to also pray mightily for God to grace me with the strength, resolve and focus to remain centered and integrated enough to withstand the fear and anxiety that is an inevitable part of systems change.

In my first President's Address to this Council in November, 2016, I quoted what Pope Francis said in an interview with the Jesuit magazine, *America*, shortly after his election. He spoke directly to my evangelical heart when he said, "The church has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. The most important thing is the first proclamation. Jesus Christ has saved you." John's Gospel articulates the first proclamation this way: Jesus "is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29 NRSV) This is the core of the Good News. This is the proclamation that unites us. This is the core, along with our Articles of Religion, that provides and protects our fundamental unity as the Body of Christ and as The United Methodist Church.

I, for one, maintain the diversity – reflected in the multiple traditions, theological approaches, expressions of ministry, and cultural realities – in our church, and most assuredly reflected in this Council, is what insures the vitality of our church. We are not divided by this diversity, but strengthened by it. The Church needs our multiple expressions and experiences in order to insure the first proclamation is spoken, heard and received in every cultural context in our global church. Efforts to create harmony, or

to enforce uniformity, or to flee from the anxiety and hard work of being the Body of Christ always ends up sowing the seeds of division, not unity.

So, I stand before Jesus and he reframes the context and invites me to be transformed. “What do you want me to do for you?” The response that arises in my soul is, “My Teacher, Rabbi, Jesus, heal me from my preference for harmony that masks or limits the strength found in our diversity and the unity found in the first proclamation.”

### **Grabbing the Chance**

I love the witness of Philip as he interacted with the Ethiopian eunuch. The story is recorded for us in Acts 8:26-40. I particularly love Eugene Peterson’s paraphrased version in *The Message*. Allow me to read several verses.

He met an Ethiopian eunuch coming down the road. The eunuch had been on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was returning to Ethiopia, where he was minister in charge of all the finances of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. He was riding in a chariot and reading the prophet Isaiah.

The Spirit told Philip, “Climb into the chariot.” Running up alongside, Philip heard the eunuch reading Isaiah and asked, “Do you understand what you’re reading?”

He answered, “How can I without some help?” and invited Philip into the chariot with him. The passage he was reading was this:

As a sheep led to slaughter,  
and quiet as a lamb being sheared,  
He was silent, saying nothing.

He was mocked and put down, never got a fair trial.  
But who now can count his kin  
since he's been taken from the earth?

The eunuch said, "Tell me, who is the prophet talking about, himself or some other?" Philip grabbed his chance. Using this passage as his text, he preached Jesus to him.

(Acts 8:27-35)

Philip grabbed his chance! Friends, we were invited by the 2016 General Conference to get into the chariot with our delegates, our churches, our clergy and lay leadership. I want to urge us, as a Council of Bishops, to grab our chance to lead the church off the map into new territory and a renewed, transformed, global witness.

Let us grab this chance with the same joy and anticipation that Dr. Albert Outler conveyed as he preached at the 1968 Uniting Conference that created The United Methodist Church.

"This is the day the Lord has made. Let us *really* rejoice and be glad in it – glad for the new **chance** God now gives us: to be a church united in order to be uniting, a church repentant in order to be a church redemptive, a church cruciform in order to manifest God's triumphant agony for mankind."

If we are to grab this chance to be a leadership group for the church; if we are to grab this chance to be a church united in order to be uniting; if we are to grab this chance to be a church redemptive and a church cruciform, we will need to stand before Jesus, throw off our cloaks, our masks, our hardened positions. And,

when Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” I pray our response will reflect Bartimaeus’ spirit: heal us, transform us, empower us to move beyond one issue to follow you, O Christ, on the one Way.

And, perhaps, just perhaps, this is the ultimate re-framing we need to do for the delegates of the Special General Conference. Perhaps, just perhaps, we are called to grab this chance to remind the church that the Risen Jesus is always, constantly asking: What do you want me to do for you?”

Bishops of the Church, Shepherds of Souls, what **do** you want Jesus to do for you, for us, for the church in these precious days? How will we respond? How will we follow? How will we lead?

**Bishop Bruce R. Ough,  
President  
Council of Bishops  
The United Methodist Church**