

Epiphany 7 B
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39
February 8, 2009

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
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Notes not for publication

Last Sunday morning I was worshipping at a hotel in Jacksonville, Florida with several hundred other United Methodists. That day's total was way down from the 1300 people who had attended the conference, which was entitled, "Living the United Methodist Way: Turning the World Upside Down." I'm so grateful to have gone—I got to hear wonderful presentations and workshops, full of practical teaching and resources, not just the kind of conference where you come home and stick the binder up on the shelf. The training was crafted around what the church is calling "four areas of focus," which are sort of like honing down the big mission statement of the church down to four big goal areas: **developing leaders, creating new places for new people, eliminating poverty, and improving health globally.** These are not temporary initiatives that we'll drop after four years, but tasks that our leaders believe are central to our identity as United Methodists.

The word we heard, over and over, boiled down to this: God is calling the church out into a new place, into a new day, into a new community, into a new way of seeing ourselves. It's exciting and promising, yet it also feels disturbing and overwhelming. Kind of like having a baby is a wonderful event yet one that rocks the foundations of your life. And yet, when all seems so new, so disturbing, if we step back and look, what we find is that God is actually just calling us back to our roots. In a day when denominations mean less and less, it's still important for us to remember where

United Methodists came from. We were born from the work of John Wesley, who was very smart and committed and who gave the church a lot of gifts. I want to lift up three of his central principles today.

One is that he left the walls of the established church, to take the gospel to people outside the church, to the poor and the worker and the marginalized, with concern for their whole being, not just their souls. Wesley was a priest in the Church of England, and they were, as you might imagine, pretty particular about what qualified as appropriate worship practices. But Wesley, driven by a desire to spread the word of God as far as he could, went outdoors, to places like big coal mining pits, to preach. He went where people were in order to share with them the good news he was convinced they needed. And he brought with him a commitment to the prophetic word of shalom, the fullness of life that Jesus proclaimed and worked for.

People couldn't live as God intended, Wesley believed, if they were sick all the time or too hungry to learn, or if their housing was falling down around their ears, or if their kids were having to work long, dangerous hours in factories, or if the working poor couldn't get a loan or a leg up. And such was the case for a whole lot of people in the late eighteenth century in England. I heard this week one scholar's opinion on Wesley's efforts to address the needs of the poor and in fact to reform society itself, by working against unjust laws—he said Wesley's work was a large part of the reason that England didn't suffer the same bloody revolution as France in the late 1700's. But whether that's true or not, Wesley definitely left us a legacy of seeing the Christian life from a full, human perspective, leaving no part of our lives outside Christ's circle of concern,

nor any place or person in the world outside our circle of responsibility. "The world is my parish," Wesley said.

A second commitment was to a life based on, patterned on what we refer to as the means of grace. John Wesley would have a conniption fit if saw the way we have long done church in this culture. Church membership has been for us one more association, alongside other civic and community organizations that are also very important. The joke has been that the only requirements for becoming a member of the United Methodist Church are a pulse and the ability to walk to the front of the room. That's generally not what we find in this church, thanks be to God, and we've got people joining today who bring way more than just a pulse. But for Wesley, being a part of the church meant engaging regularly in practices that we call "means of grace"—things like Bible study and worship and Holy Communion and prayer and service to the poor and giving financially—because doing these things, he believed, keeps us connected to the love and power of God. And the love and power of God transforms us and helps us work to transform the world. The way we cooperate with that action of God is to stay engaged, to show up with our full self, to ask, where does God want to take me today? That's why we commit to do these Christian things regularly.

Finally, the movement Wesley created was based on mutual accountability. The mission was so important in his mind, and so easy to let slide, it mattered enough for Christians under his care to help each other do what they said they were going to do. So he organized people into classes and bands that met regularly and checked up on

each other. This wasn't some sort of prying, judgmental checking up, but just the question, "How goes it with your soul? Where have you tried to serve God this week but had trouble? Where have you encountered Christ this week?" In these organized groups, people inquired of each other where they found success and challenge as they tried to hear the voice of God and do what they believed they were called to do. But they were instructed to inquire with mercy and grace and humility, again remembering that none of us can do any good thing without the help of God. We're all in the same boat, trying to help each other row in the right direction.

Some of you will have heard some or a lot of this information before. You might recognize it if you're in an Emmaus group or have been Methodist a long time. Or maybe you've never heard any of it before. The point I'm trying to make is that this heritage is the groundwork for the call we're hearing now from God and through the leaders of our church. The call is to a new vibrancy to our own faith, a new depth of outreach, a renewed commitment to the fate of the world around us. And the Wesleyan principles and patterns we have inherited will equip us to receive the power of God to answer the call of God.

We heard in the scriptures today a description of the need in the world around us and a model of ministry for engaging that need. In the gospel passage, "the whole city was gathered around the door" of the house where Jesus was, so many people who were sick and lived with demons. And we hear that Jesus healed the sick and cast out the demons and taught the people in the house of God; he also drew away by himself to pray and gather the strength he had to have for his work. Paul writes in his letter

that he did whatever he had to do to meet people where they were. As he preached the gospel to the people around him, he became as they were in order to help them believe—when with Jews he was a Jew; when with people who followed no religious law, he followed no law; when with the weak he became weak. “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might share in its blessings” (I Corinthians 9:22-23). This is the task we have inherited—to seek the blessing of the gospel by engaging in ministry in the world.

And the way our brother John Wesley taught us to do these things is in Christian community, holding on to one another. We will be commissioning, or sending into service, the leaders you elected for 2009 at our church conference last November. I say “you;” all members of the church were invited to be there, but the ones who showed up are the ones who got to vote. They are the ones who will help us move into and live out of the will of God this year. Your leaders over the past couple of years have been looking at this thing called the Transformation process to see what it means for us, and they’ve identified a list of priorities to work on in the coming year. We’ll also be looking at those four areas of focus I mentioned and asking ourselves, “How is what we’re doing as a church raising up new leaders? How is it making new places for new people? How does it address issues of health, globally and right here at home? And how are we working to eradicate poverty, even if just one family at a time?”

What I want to say clearly today is that we’re not in charge of the future. We’re not in charge of predicting, nor even of making certain things happen. All we’re in

charge of is showing up, fully, bringing with us all that God has given to us. All we're in charge of is seeking God with our hearts and minds, hanging on to each other, and looking and reaching out beyond ourselves. The results are God's job. If you'll take the time to pray; if you'll think of a gift God gave you and use it; if you'll look for God in the ministry you're charged with; if you'll think of a risk you're willing to take on Christ's behalf; then there is no doubt in my mind that your leadership and the efforts you make will bear good fruit. It may not be the fruit we would look for, but it will be what God knows the world needs. I'm excited about future that lies ahead of us, and I'm deeply grateful for all those who are so willing to share and serve God in this church.