

Who Are We? What Is Our Purpose And Mission In The World? -- address by Charles Crutchfield, 9-30-10

It was the late sixties and we were in a family conversation that resounded with the “psycho-babble” of the day. We were discussing the question of “Who am I?” Finally, my grandmother had enough. “If you want to know who you are, look in the family Bible!”

She was referring to the lists of births and baptisms often found in family Bibles, but she uttered a truth more profound than she knew. We are all God’s family. We are all God’s children.

Near Haran, Abraham is confronted God. In my mind’s eye it is nighttime, darkness has fallen and a soft light emanates from a full moon playing hide and seek with puffy little clouds. In this encounter God claims Abraham and Abraham enters a covenant relationship with God. All Abraham’s children will be/are part and parcel of the covenant relationship and will be blessed to be a blessing to all the world. We are the children of Abraham. That is one reason why we United Methodists baptize children. They are part of that ancient covenant. There is no hint of the covenant depending on what you know, or how old you are or how many Bible verses you can quote. We baptize children because they deserve to be recognized as the children whom God has claimed. We are recognizing God’s claim on our lives/their lives in the Sacrament of Baptism. It is all about God’s action and activity.

This is a long way of saying that who we are begins with the fundamental understanding that we are children of God, claimed by God, endowed by God with mind and body and spirit, with the additional gift of freedom to respond to God. We are *expected* by God to behave like his children, or put another way, we are *expected* to let the mind, heart, spirit of Christ be in us. Christ is the living, breathing gift of God to all humanity. We are called to be as much like Christ as it is humanly possible.

We United Methodists believe that this Christ-likeness entails a life that is focused on doing no harm, on doing good, on staying in love with God by embracing the ways in which God has provided such wonderful access. John Wesley noted the spiritual disciplines necessary for this included, but were not limited to: public worship of God; the Sacrament of Holy Communion; private and family prayer; searching the Scriptures; Bible study, and fasting. These were windows to God. They were not, however the only windows to God. Dr. Richard Heitzenrater has suggested that anything that truly brings you closer to God would have been affirmed by Mr. Wesley as a means of Grace. (I doubt that includes Duke basketball, though it would be close, I'm sure.) These are the minimum disciplines. Wesley would have said, I believe that the discipline of generosity, of tithing opens the windows of the heart and brings us closer to Christ and would thus be a means of Grace.

At the heart of who we are as Methodist Christians is Mr. Wesley's Theology of Grace. I made the statement once that I

felt we have the right theology for the 21st Century, only to have a pastor challenge me by saying that all denominations have that and we are no different, really from the rest of the pack.

Well, I am no expert on the theological offerings of the Baptists or Presbyterians or Roman Catholics or others. I simply know that Mr. Wesley's Theology of Grace incorporating the doctrine of prevenient grace, justifying grace and sanctifying grace coupled with the doctrine of Christian Perfection makes sense in a world of competing -isms and -ologies. It makes sense in a pluralistic world. Our theology of grace enables and encourages risk-taking (a crucial gift in this day). It enhances the importance of personal salvation while never neglecting the fact that social holiness is the sister of personal holiness.

Who are we? We are children of God who have a deep personal discipline of faith, and who take the values of that faith to the public square. It is the political season. But God is certainly not a Republican, or a Democrat, or a Green or a Tea Party-er. To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, this is not about whose side God is on, but rather if we are on God's side. There is loose in our land a terrible fear, even paranoia yielding anger and vitriol and spewing hatred. Attacks are made on those we have long known – integrity is questioned, honesty is challenged, distortions are made. And, attacks are made on those we hardly know, the weakest, the strangers in our midst. How do we speak to this as pastors, laity, as Christians. Christians speak always from the perspective of those whose first allegiance is to the Son of God and the Kingdom of God,

not to some human construct created to advance narrow personal or even national self-interest.

Which leads me to say we are also a world-wide church. We who are privileged to live in the United States are accustomed to thinking the world revolves around the US, but in the world of the church, the fastest growing segment of our church is in Africa. As a result of this we are a people in transition. It is potential that 40% of the delegates at the next General Conference will come from outside the United States. We are a people trying to live into this new reality. The simple fact is that the young church we planted in Africa is growing and is living with a passion and conviction that we seem to have lost.

WHO ARE WE? A good UM disciple of Jesus Christ is one:
--who claims his/her heritage as a child of God;

--who embraces the theology of grace articulated by John Wesley;

--who relies on the grace of God to support and sustain, yet still makes decisions for the Kingdom, even when the choices are foggy and unclear;

--who constantly and consistently digs deep into the means of grace;

--who understands that we are stronger as a connectional church than we are as a collection of fragmented, silo-ed independents;

--who understands that discipleship is more than just a personal, feel-good state of being;

--who understands that the journey of faith is hard and tough;

--who leads a life that embraces the neighbor as if he or she were Christ;

--who is willing to live with hopeful and faith-filled risk in an earthquake kind of world where all the platforms and ways of doing with which we have become comfortable are shifting.

I have become more and more convinced that a living faith is a risking faith. It is about Sarah and Abraham packing up the family to go on a long journey simply because God called. It is about Moses and the Children of Israel being willing to wander in the wilderness and ultimately not lose faith in the “rightness” of the journey. It is about us finding our way through a new wilderness.

That observation brings me to the question of who we are in Arkansas. Seventy years ago, with a much smaller population base, the combined conferences (Little Rock and North Arkansas) showed approximately 153,000 in 1940. Today we are at 136,223 with a much larger population base. Here are some of our challenges:

--Clergy report laity who are more concerned with flat screen tv's than water wells in the Congo;

--Laity report a significant lack of inspiring preaching and lackluster pastoral care;

- Clergy report lazy laity who don't exhibit the spiritual disciplines of Wesley;
- Laity report lazy clergy who don't exhibit the spiritual disciplines of Wesley;
- Laity and clergy both acknowledge ineffective clergy, AND ineffective laity;
- Clergy and laity both request training in evangelism and stewardship, but don't want to attend training events;
- Laity and clergy both despise the clanking of an aging, bloated church bureaucracy, ***BUT***
- Both laity and clergy are comfortable with what they know about the system in which they live and are reluctant to see any change because they may "lose" something. Self-interest, not "kingdom" interest, rules.

So on it goes....

It is an interesting day to be in the church in the first decade of the 21st century. The necessity for change is apparent on all levels. One definition of madness is to continue doing things the way you've always done them and expecting the results to be different. I don't want to be caught in the madness of a failing church. But it means risk and acting in ways which support the whole and that means we may have to act in ways that are contrary to our narrow self interest.

For me it has become more about who we can become than about who we are. If we stay static, we die. So, are we

going to be a movement or an organization. We will always be an organization. Mr. Wesley created an organization that became a movement. It was nimble, in part because there was really only one decision maker. Neither clergy nor laity participated. You were in connection with Mr. Wesley. If you preached a “different gospel” from that of Mr. Wesley’s, you could be dismissed. (CF Thomas Maxfield and George Bell, the former on Christian Perfection and the latter on predicting the end of the world for Feb. 28, 1783 – both were dismissed from the connection!) Now we are confronted with a different historical and cultural circumstance. So, how do we get more nimble? We get clear about our purpose. We look at the issue of outcomes, not input. We throw off some of the structural accretions of recent years. We recognize that the conference structure is about resourcing and not program. We learn to network. We become in the language of *The Starfish and the Spider* a “hybrid” organization, with both structure and decentralization. This requires a common ideology. Example: AA the one constant is the 12 step platform. Ours might be “making disciples.” A good sign is that the language is changing. We talk more about purpose now, not maintenance. But there is the rub. It is in the self interest of both laity and clergy just to maintain. Takes less effort to go along and get along and then die than it does to live.

Why do we tolerate anything that detracts from our mission of making disciples? Question has to be asked what is it that detracts? Apportionments? Against all church expenditures they have remained relatively flat.

Conference program? Name a time consuming conference program from the past six years. We need to simplify our structure. But when we do, you will hear howls of protest. Local churches have only a few restrictions. If you are a small church just handle the issues in the church council, if relevant to the life and ministry of the church. You need Church Council, SPRC, Finance, Trustees, and task forces.

Is there any value in revisiting our heritage? Absolutely. Not only are Wesley's small groups a valuable tool, but the theology that undergird them, the looking after one another, the searching for others to bring into the fold, the accountability for living the faith will be important to us. It was a time when faith was all about knowing Jesus AND REACHING OUT TO DRAW OTHERS TO THE CROSS. Today, it is too much of "all about me." This is true for clergy and laity both. I want to read to you a letter from my files. It is from the elderly Chaplain of the House of Representatives of the State of Arizona to a younger colleague in the ministry:

"This State has honored me in many ways. They elected me a member of the Constitutional Convention when we got statehood. They nominated me for the office of State Superintendent of Education. When I declined that they offered to nominate me for U.S. Senator. I was pondering that, and went to Washington on some other State business on my way to the meeting of the Board of Missions (of the M.E. Church, South) at Richmond, Va. At Washington all the talk and interest was about 'hogs and corn, cows and cotton and money.' At Richmond all the talk and interest was of the souls of men and the conversation of the world, and any interest I might have had in the U.S. Senatorship was swept away in a moment of time."

The most fundamental transformation that must take place if we are to fulfill our purpose is to change our attitudes, to be willing to vote against our self interest. Not to care who gets the credit, but that the achievement or victory is won. To

overcome our innate cynicism. To discover that our value is not in salary or size of church, but in being a child of and serving the God we love in an effective manner. We have got to grasp, understand what St. Paul knew and experienced: one plants, another waters, another reaps the harvest. It is a process and a journey. Wesley understood that.

So, who will we be in 2020 or 2030? We will be who we want to be, who you want to be. If we as a church are to fulfill our purpose you will be the engines of intention that make it possible. You will have to stand up against the “we’ve always done it that way crowd,” the “cynical crowd,” the “one issue” crowd. You will have to be willing to take a lower salary or a smaller church and not lose your sense of worth. You will have to be creative in ministry. You will have to live with three simple rules and two types of holiness and a basket full of the means of grace to be both fulfilled and fed on the journey.

A closing comment.

A conversation has begun in Arkansas that will not end in two years. I will be gone, but the new bishop will bring energy and ideas to build upon the possibility of change and transformation that is before us. There is no going back. The wind of the spirit is blowing, and it is the wind of change and renewal.

