

St. Luke's UMC
April 14, 2024

Ancestry.UMC
Giving Hope
Matthew 25: 14-31

Last Sunday we started a short 3-week series leading up to General Conference called Ancestry.UMC. We are considering the DNA of United Methodism focusing on the life of Francis Asbury, the first bishop of the church whose influence is really the reason Methodism became what it is today.

As I mentioned last Sunday, part of my inspiration for this series came from reading a biography about Asbury titled *American Saint*. It mentions that at the end of his life Asbury focused on three things: preaching, collecting money for the poor, and visiting old friends. These three things summed up his faith. I thought how they also sum up our DNA. That describes the origins of our United Methodist identity. So last Sunday we talked about preaching. Today we look at Asbury's concern for the poor.

There is a group of theologians and United Methodist leaders called The Francis Asbury Society. For a number of years their board held a retreat every summer in the mountains in NC. They met at an inn owned by a member of my church at the time. He invited me to join them one time. The teacher that morning offered this challenging thought: "If God answered all your prayers, would it make a difference in the world, or just your world?" I invite you to probe that thought for yourself this morning. **If God answered all your prayers, would it make a difference in the world, or just your world?**

If we keep growing in our faith in Christ, then our Christianity should gradually take us out of our own worlds and pull us into the worlds of others, particularly others less fortunate.

This is what Wesley did in England. As he famously said, "The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness, but social holiness." (*Wesley's Works*, vol XIV, p321) This is why we have a **General Rule of Discipleship in our Book of Discipline: It is "To witness to Jesus Christ in the world and to follow His teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."** In other words our personal world of faith can never be divorced from our social responsibility of compassion and justice.

Here are a few examples of what early Methodists did. **(pic of the Foundry)** In London, they purchased an old munitions building called *The Foundry* and turned it into a multi-purpose community center. It was a place to worship that could seat as many as our sanctuary, but it also housed a school, a medical clinic, and a food pantry.

In Bristol, Methodists started **The Kingswood School** for the children of coal miners who couldn't afford to send their kids to school. This was before government mandated education for all children. Confirmands, does that sound like the good ol days when you

didn't *have* to go to school? It might, until a few years later when you discover that your options in life are very limited. Methodists believed every child ought to have the same options.

In America this is exactly what Francis Asbury continued. Education was an important value of early Methodists. Methodists founded schools wherever they went. You could follow their growth across the country by the universities and colleges they started.

Boston University, Syracuse University, American University, Duke, Emory, Northwestern, SMU, University of Denver, University of Southern California, and hundreds of others in this country and around the world. We currently have three Methodist schools in Indiana: University of Indianapolis, Evansville and DePauw which was first called Indiana Asbury University.

Methodists were also notorious for starting hospitals, like the **Methodist Hospital** in Indianapolis in 1922. Today there are hundreds of hospitals and health systems around the world that have been established by United Methodists.

We have created housing for the homeless, childcare centers, abuse shelters, drug treatment centers, and more. Wesley and Asbury called these "works of mercy" or "acts of piety." They were also considered means of grace. Much like baptism or communion, they were a way in which the grace of Christ was received. In other words, if you want to find God, then serve the poor.

This is what Jesus taught. In a parable that pictured the Final Judgement, Jesus will say to some followers that when they cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the homeless, the sick, the imprisoned, then they were caring for Him. Jesus lives in the poor of the world. If we want to find Jesus, then we need to be proximate to people in need. **If we want to be close to Jesus then we must be active in our faith and serve others.**

Francis Asbury understood this. During the Revolutionary War his life was in danger because he didn't leave America and return to Britain. If captured by British forces he would have been tried and executed as a traitor. He was often isolated in the basements and attics of Methodist people who harbored him. This took a toll on his emotions. His mental health sagged and he fell into depression. Once the war ended and he was able to resume serving others he changed. He said, **"It is my constitutional weakness to be gloomy and dejected. The work of God puts life into me!"** (p128)

When I first read that I thought of the toll that Covid isolation took on people. Mental Health became a significant issue for many folks. And while it's not a cure-all, it is true for many, that the way we find help and relief for ourselves is to look for people we can serve and help.

I've shared this before about my wife, Susan. When she went to college she got lonely and a little depressed. One day she opened a letter from her grandmother. There was a \$5 bill with a note, find a friend and take them to get a soda." There's nothing profound

there, but when we focus on needs of others we aren't as focused on our needs and in fact, sometime find ourselves being lifted up.

So Works of Mercy become Means of Grace. **We meet Christ when we serve others.**

But there is another side to this matter of service and giving hope. It is true that we help people when we treat the symptoms of poverty, but what is truer is that we help people more when we seek to change the conditions of their poverty. This is how cycles stop turning. This is how poverty reduces. This may get political; it may get controversial, but if we don't fear that, and we focus on changing systems of inequity, then this becomes a way of doing God's work as much as when we put food in the mouth of a hungry person. This is our DNA as United Methodists.

One of the great injustices in early Methodism was slavery and its lingering shadow, racism. Wesley was a fierce abolitionist, and Asbury brought that same fire to America. But, many Methodists didn't want to hear it. They felt Asbury and the Church were getting involved in matters they shouldn't. The church should stick to comforting people not disturbing them.

In one instance, after Asbury delivered the recommendation from General Conference that all Methodists should support abolition and request this of their state legislators, a certain Solomon Reeves let Asbury know that he was "quite confident there were no arguments to prove that slavery was repugnant to the spirit of the Gospel," to which Asbury replied "what absurdities will not men defend! If the Gospel will tolerate slavery, what will it not authorize?" (p297) And as proud as that makes me of Asbury and our Methodist ancestors who stood for truth, here is what is sad. Culture won out, at least for a time. Within eleven years statements about slavery were stricken from the General Conference record (p154).

Sometimes people will leave a church and say, "I don't like being told what to do." And I wonder, why come to church? Telling people what to do is precisely what Jesus did. He told his followers what to do. And Jesus wasn't messing around. He didn't state things as polite requests. He put the serious matters of living the faith in terms of eternal reward and punishment. He told people to feed the hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned. Jesus understood that if we do these things we will become concerned for the whole person. We will understand better the causes that lead to people being in such situations. And before you know it our work will include changing systems as much as symptoms. And if we don't do this, it's like destroying our souls.

I didn't say that, Jesus did. But Methodists believe it! Our DNA is to take Jesus seriously and do what he says, even if its unpopular.

This is our calling as United Methodists. This is what God calls us to do. Interestingly the word *vocation* comes from the Latin word meaning to listen. Our common vocation as Christians is to listen to what God calls us to do. This is the job we each share.

This is the job you confirmands are choosing today, to find your vocation in fulfilling God's purpose. No matter what you go on to do in life, whatever career you have, whatever family responsibilities you have, because you make this choice today to profess your faith in Christ and become a member of the called community, you accept a mission. God calls you, no matter who you are or what you do for a living, to be an agent of mercy and justice. You are called to follow Jesus in the world and be His hands and feet.

Today you join the ranks of other Methodists like:

Harriett Tubman—freedom fighter

Sojourner Truth—abolitionist

Richard Allen—first black pastor ordained by Asbury. He went on to become an important leader in the country.

Frederick Douglass—social reformer

George Washington Carver—scientist and inventor

Clementine and William Butler who established the India Missionary Conference and what became United Methodist Women.

Georgia Harkness—led the way for women to be ordained

Nelson Mandela—leader who helped overthrow apartheid in South Africa and became president of the country.

Joe Rand Becket—former member of the Indiana Senate who led the drive to build modern housing for low income residents here in Indianapolis.

Rosa Parks—Civil Rights leader

Jackie Robinson—who broke the color barrier in major league baseball

Harry Blackmun—former Supreme Court Justice

Lee Hamilton—congressman who chaired the 911 Commission.

Suzanne Holder—Moderator of the Interfaith Peace Initiative who works for a just peace in Gaza and the West Bank.

And there are many other United Methodists: Beyonce, Jennifer Garner, Ben Affleck, Kelly Rowland, George Lucas, Stephen King, Pedro Moreno, astronaut Neil Armstrong, Clayton Kershaw, Brad Stevens...I could go on and on.

You are among those who believe their fame, their fortune, their influence, the talents are all part of their common call, to be a witness to Jesus Christ for making the world a better place!

This is why you are here today. Its why all of us are here. To be reminded of our shared purpose—to give hope to others through Jesus Christ. It comes down to our prayers. Do we believe that if God answered all our prayers the world would be better or just our world?