

The Reign of God: Expanding the Mesquite Tree

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Bueno tardes. This is the day to consider the church: trick or treat.

When I received that information I panicked because I don't know how to do the party thing, the fun thing. My twelve-year-old daughter says, "Mom, you've got to get a life. You really do." So I struggled with it – until last night. As I was going to bed, releasing the day and thanking God for the day, I realized it did indeed make sense for my spirit and for my soul to consider the church and to consider whether it is a trick or a treat.

As a woman, a woman of color, a person who decided to say yes to God's call to ordained ministry I have been to a lot of church meetings where I have experienced the evil tricks of the institutional church. My heart and my soul are scarred by those evil tricks. Though my experience among you as the treat of being part of the church, the people of God, the disciples of Jesus Christ who yearn and seek to be people of love – of that transformative love of God's grace and God's mercy that excludes no one. I am blessed by your welcome, by your hospitality, by your courage, by your passion, and by your commitment. I thank you for that.

Beginning under the Mequite tree

One summer day, a young woman, who had recently married and who had walked from Mexico to a little town in south Texas, found herself sitting and visiting with her husband, with her sister, with her sister's husband, who happened to be her husband's brother, and with many other members of that community. The community was on a sharecropper's farm. It was Sunday afternoon, the time when they had free space and opportunity to just rest from the toil of the week. It was a very close-knit community.

But all of a sudden one of the men noticed that there was a billow of dust rising on the horizon. It was a surprise, for no one came out to that sharecropper's farm very often and certainly not on a Sunday afternoon. But that billow of dust just kept rising, rising and coming closer. So one of the men, accompanied by a friend, got up and went to see who it was. They came back with a person who would become a very important person in the life of that young woman and her husband and her extended community.

It was a local missionary from a brand-new Methodist mission in the little town that adjoined that rural area. His name was ___ Rodriguez. ___ Rodriguez had been touched and transformed by the loving grace of Jesus Christ. He was so passionate about this transformation, about this new relationship with God and with Christ that he wanted to share it.

He had a deep passion for sharing this transformation and this word of good news. He had asked around town, "Who has yet to hear the good news of Jesus Christ?"

Finally, someone said, "Well, you know there is this farm with these sharecroppers and no one seems to be ministering to them."

He got out of church that Sunday and walked the distance to that share-croppers farm – not knowing a soul, but knowing that they were daughters and sons of God in need of hearing the good news. He shared the good news and he continued to go out there every Sunday afternoon to be present with these families, these sharecropper families.

One day, feeling the movement of God's Holy Spirit, he asked them if they would mind gathering for worship. And the people said, "Yes." They said, "yes" before thinking about where they would meet. Suddenly they discovered there wasn't a house on the farm big enough to hold all of them. So, for a moment, they were stuck. But soon enough one of them said, "Well, why don't we just meet under the branches of the mesquite tree?" And so they met under the branches of the mesquite tree and there heard the good news proclaimed, there prayed together, there began to raise their concerns and joys before God and one another, and there they sang the hymns of faith.

That woman would later say, "It was a wonderful afternoon. It was a glorious afternoon. I was moved by the presence of God in a way that I had never experienced. It was the hymns that touched my heart. It was through the hymns that I could hear the voice of Christ Jesus calling, and even calling me by name, and I could do nothing other than respond."

That young woman and her husband and that great extended family on that sharecropper farm all became members of that Methodist mission and lived until their dying days as disciples of Jesus Christ, passionate, passionate about loving God and about loving neighbor - knowing absolutely no distinction between word and action, but, rather, seeing them as integrated in one. It was because of that brother Rodriguez who went out and shared the good news.

It was into this family that I was born. It was in this family that I came to know Christ Jesus. It was in this context that I came to know the church. It is this church that I yearn to see before us. It is this church that I, with many, many others, am trying to create as I live and breathe the breath of the Holy. A church that meets persons where they are. A church with an itinerant core of ministers, both clergy and lay, who are committed to going where persons find themselves in life. A church that embraces its context for ministry as a gift, as an opportunity, rather than as an affront to its institutional structure and ways of being.

Dis-invited: A sign of the times

Over the last ten years I have been giving more and more thought to the church, about the church. In part, because of serving on general church agencies and commissions that have been asked to study the church and its mission. But more importantly, I've been giving more and more thought to our ecclesiology, our community, and the body we call the church because of the decline I am seeing among us. We have had a numeric decline, but the decline that I have been most concerned about has been a decline in spirit – a sense of stagnation, a lack of vision, a loss of joy and hope. With this condition of spiritual decline I have also experienced a growing narrowness of spirit.

General Conference 2000 was a clear sign of this narrowness of spirit – a spirit that is exclusive rather than inclusive, judgmental rather than welcoming, limited in grace, void of the love of God, self-serving, and fearful. I was not ready for what

happened at General Conference 2000, but I should have been. I should have been because all the signs were there. In January 1997 in support of the 15 bishops of our church who, at the 1996 General Conference, dissented publicly on the exclusionary status of our denomination on homosexuality, a small group of clergy person, of which I was a part, wrote and signed a statement supporting our 15 bishops. The statement was made public with all of our names – hundreds later joined us by adding their names to the statement.

I had been scheduled to teach a course on evangelization for laity in the District where I was disciplined for the first 21 years of my life. I was looking forward to going home. I was looking forward to being with old friends, friends who are so close to me, and I to them, that we consider ourselves family with each other.

Well, a few days after the statement I and others had signed in support of our brave bishops had been made public I received a two-page, single-spaced letter faxed, ASAP, disinviting me to teach. The letter from a good friend - a good friend whose many secrets I know was writing to me and saying how wrong I was, how out of touch I had become with scripture, how I had lost my way along the journey of faith.

He knew I was a good-hearted and well-intentioned person, but I was wrong and so I was being disinvited. The letter concluded by giving me a long explanation about the fact that they had already called someone who had accepted to do my part, therefore there was no need for me to call. So no engagement, no conversation at all.

But the worst part of it was that he said to me, “And we have done all of this to protect your mother, your mother who lives among us. Your mother whom you have shamed through your statement and through your action.” They didn’t want my mother to know what I had said. The truth was that I had never had this conversation with my mother about my stand on the issues and concerns my brothers and sisters who are gay, bisexual, and transgendered.

It became one of those redemptive opportunities that Dr. Marshall was talking about this morning. I had to let my mother know that I wasn’t coming because I was scheduled to go home and be with her. So I called her and said, “Mother, I have been disinvited and so I am not coming.” Of course she wanted to know why. And so I gulped and I told her. And she said, “How dare they speak for me. They never asked my opinion. We’re all children of God and in God’s house there is a place for everyone.” And then she said, “And what if one of my children were gay, or lesbian?” I sensed a deep pain in her spirit.

My brothers and my sisters in that District had been self-serving in using my mother’s feelings as an excuse in the way the person in the pew is being used today. Just wait, just wait and we’ll begin to hear it all over again as we approach General Conference 2004. In regard to statement that the average United Methodist in the pew opposes homosexuality, I beg to differ. I disagree. I believe that my mother represents the average United Methodist sitting in the pew.

An Inclusive Doctrine

Of course there is the deeper argument not just representing the person sitting in the pew back home, but also representing and protecting our doctrinal identity. The District that I came from is now a Confessing District and, of course, their mission

statement, with many others in the Confessing Movement, is “Confessing Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord, The Confessing Movement exists to enable the United Methodist Church to retrieve its classical doctrinal identity, and to live it out as disciples as Jesus Christ.” They say that this purpose statement comes not only from Scripture, but also from our Wesleyan roots.

I went back to Wesley’s 74th sermon that he entitled, “Of the Church.” I want to read for you a paragraph about these doctrinal roots of ours. I want the opportunity to explain it a bit.

He says, “I dare not exclude from the Church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines, which cannot be affirmed to be the “pure word of God,” are sometimes, yea, frequently preached; neither all those congregations, in which the sacraments are not “duly administered.” Certainly if these things are so, the Church of Rome is not so much as a part of the catholic Church; seeing therein neither is “the pure word of God” preached, nor the sacraments “duly administered.” Whoever they are that have “one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all,” I can easily bear with their holding wrong opinions, yea, and superstitious modes of worship.”

What I want to say is that John Wesley was totally wrong about our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, but his spirit was right on target when he said, “I dare not exclude anyone who professes this one spirit, this one hope, this one Lord, this one faith, this one God, this one creator of all.” That is an inclusive doctrine if I ever read one.

A Spirit of Fear

The other interesting thing about my brothers and my sisters who disinvited me is that they were so fearful. “We’ve already got someone coming, you don’t need to call us. We’re not available. You don’t have to write back. You don’t have to answer this letter, just pray on your knees so that God might redeem you.”

What was their spirit? It was a spirit of fear. That is a rather ironic thing since they were convinced that they held the truth. I thought the truth was supposed to make us free of fear. The experience was a forewarning of what was to come at General Conference 2000.

But a narrow spirit is not aimed only at our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered brothers and sisters. A narrow spirit divides us among our selves over issues of power and possession. A narrow-spiritedness leads us to reject the core. A narrow spirit leads us to continue to manifest the evils of racism. If we are to be disciples of Jesus Christ in this new age, we must learn anew to be the church.

Hearts Transformed

I would hold up the following suggestions for our being the church.

First of all, we must remember that the purpose of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. The true disciples – true disciples are persons whose hearts are transformed by the saving grace of Jesus Christ and turn outwardly in love of God and neighbor. It is a rather counter-culture perspective on life.

I grew up with a person I love dearly. A person named Javier Laba. Javier was a person whose life had been transformed as a young child. His passion for Jesus Christ

was contagious. There was a joy about him that made us all gather around him wanting to hear his experience of God in his life. I grew up with him in MYF. But I lost track of him as we went on into college and into creating families and moving on with careers and the like. I got back in touch with him when he called me one day and said, "I've been to Hell, and back."

Javier Laba had left behind the church, had left behind his relationship with God and neighbor, and had succumbed to the thrill of becoming a corporate person. He had begun to climb the ladder in a particular corporation and had done rather well – rather well at the cost of his marriage, the cost of his family, the cost of his relationship with this great community of friends that he had had all throughout his life. But one day corporate America decided the needed to downsize and so they eliminated his position and he was left without a job. As hard as he tried to find another job, he could not find a job. He lost his home. He lost all of his possessions. He ended up living in a little house on the outskirts of a "colonia" in south Texas.

Along the border those colonia, those unincorporated areas where developers have come in and have built a whole community – houses that are simply shells, with no infrastructure, no water, no electricity, none of the things that you and I are accustomed to. The developers say, "Later we will come back and put all of that in." And they never do. So you have persons who are living without heat, without electricity, without water, without drainage, and without all the consequences that come from that level of poor living, a deep poverty. Javier found himself on the outskirts of a colonia, but it took a year before he even realized where he lived – he was so depressed.

But one day he began to come out of the depression and saw some children playing right around his house. Something stirred within him. He decided he would befriend the children and see what he could do to be in relationship with them. He didn't know what that looked like. He didn't have any sense of where he was going, but he had this sense of pull toward these children. He took some old boards that had been lying behind his house and built a couple of benches. Later he went down to the dumpsite close to his home and got some more boards and built a picnic table. He invited the children over for cookies and punch.

In the meantime, as he prepared for the visit of the children, he thought, "Why don't I just tell them a children's story from the Bible?" When they got there, he did that. The children were so excited they wanted to know when they could come back. So, he invited them to come back the next day, and the next day, and the next day. After a week or so of doing this he decided that he needed to find out who their parents were and whether this was acceptable to their parents. He went with each of the children to their homes, introduced himself, and said, "This is what I'm doing to be in relationship with the children in this colonia. Do you mind?" They said, "No, we don't." They would welcome him into their homes and he could see the stark poverty in their homes.

He took a second step. The second step was to begin to gather food and bread for these children and for their homes. The families received this with joy and with thanksgiving, and they wanted to know what motivated Javier Laba to do what he was doing. They wanted to know what he was sharing with the children that made them come back happy and joyful and wanting more and more of what Javier Laba had to share with them.

To make a long story, short, Javier Laba organized what is now a United Methodist congregation in the community of Mesa, in south Texas, through that work. What he says of that experience of falling down the corporate ladder, of hitting rock bottom, of becoming depressed – what he says of that is that it was those children who saved his life, those families that helped him get regrounded, because it was through his engagement with those families and those children that he found himself anew and he found God anew and found purpose and joy and hope for his life.

We must remember that the purpose of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ in this way that turns our hearts to God and outwardly toward our neighbor.

Live Inclusively

Secondly, as I consider our denomination, I am convinced that it will require that we seek to be less dependent on church legislation and programming and more dependent upon the movement of God's Spirit. It's not that we cease to do our very best programming, it's not that we cease to work on legislation to lead our church on to God's perfection, rather it is about a deep commitment to the holy among us that transcends our programs, that transcends our legislation so we are not left hopeless or joyless when General Conference decides to do otherwise.

You know what that's about. You have come together to be the people of God, to move things along in spite of the church.

I moved to the Western Jurisdiction about two and a half years ago. I went there because I could no longer live in the South Central Jurisdiction. I could no longer live under the programming of that Jurisdiction or the legislation of that Jurisdiction or the institutional rules of that Jurisdiction with all of its exclusivity. I went to the Western Jurisdiction because there I saw a community that was heeding the call of the Spirit. In fact, after the last General Conference they wrote a statement – the statement they have called “We Will Not Be Silent” is a declaration of our brothers and sisters of the Western Jurisdiction. It states, “We of the Western Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church have heard the call of the prophet Micah "to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." We have heard Jesus' invitation for all to come to the banquet table of God's abundant grace.

“Certain actions of General Conference 2000 have caused tremendous pain for individuals and communities and have resulted in an attempt to suppress our prophetic and pastoral ministries among all people, regardless of sexual orientation.

“The votes may have been cast but our voices will not be silent. Our jurisdictional vision calls us to be "a home for all God's people, gathered around a table of reconciliation and transformation.”

My brothers and my sisters, I would say, “Let's just do it.”

Let's just live inclusively wherever we are – inviting all God's people to the table, inviting all into this community that we call the church. The transformation of the United Methodist Church, the transformation of any community that calls itself the body of Jesus Christ is going to come about because at that very most basic, local level people will live the faith. That's where it's going to happen.

The Reign of God: Expanding the Mesquite Tree

Thirdly, I would say to us that being the church today requires that we cease to compartmentalize our lives and recognize that all is under the reign of God. The way we use our time, the way we spend our money, the way we share our gifts and talents, the way we live in relationship or the way we do not live in relationship with each other, all demonstrate whether we truly believe what Jesus said: That in his coming the reign of God had arrived and, thus, both mercy and judgment had come to redeem and reclaim all things to God.

I pray for The United Methodist Church to truly believe and live in the reign of God. Unfortunately I don't think that we are there yet. If we were there we would live out of a sense of abundance and not out of a sense of scarcity.

Some expressions of this – First of all our stewardship is pitiful. It is truly pitiful. Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist of religion at Princeton University, a few years ago did a study on stewardship in the church and discovered that preachers do a great job of promoting stewardship. They study it, they think about it, they explain it well, but he said folks don't get it. Though many of us are well intentioned, we have invested our lives in consumerism, he said, we have a love affair going on with "more." And we will never have enough. Consumerism is not simply a marketing strategy, it has become a demonic spiritual force among us and the theological question facing us is whether the gospel has the power to help us understand it. Javier Laba can give you witness to this because he has been to Hell and back with this god of consumerism. Under allegiance to the god of consumerism we will never have enough and our idolatry leads us to live as if we were afflicted by scarcity rather than blessed by abundance.

I hear it all over our denomination. We say our churches are inadequate, our buildings are too small, and they are not big enough to do that which we are called to do. My brothers and my sisters, I remember my grandmother, that young woman under the mesquite tree, I remember the mesquite tree, and I remember the melody of the hymn that touched her life. If the branches of the mesquite tree can be covering enough, sanctuary enough for the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ, if the melody of the words of a hymn can touch a life and transform a whole family, generation upon generation, then how much more can we do with the abundance of what we have? But we are living with the mentality of scarcity rather than giving God thanks for our abundance.

What is beginning to happen in our denomination is that we are beginning to see power maneuvers. The power maneuvers: The General Council on Finance (GCF&A) and Administration has decided that we have so little resources and we have all been such bad stewards that they have got to take control. They are proposing that the GCF&A now run the mission and the ministry of the church. They are now transferring to Nashville, Tennessee, the Bible Belt, giving very little thought to what is going to happen to the Commission on the Role and Status of Women and leave them without a place. Convinced that we are in days of such scarcity that they must leave and so the plan for ministry and mission that is being proposed is that we let the dollars determine what we are going to do, regardless of what God is calling us to be about. GCF&A is also the body that is recommending because we have such few dollars that we eliminate some of the Episcopal areas in our denomination. Interestingly enough, if their proposal were approved at General Conference then four out of the five Jurisdictions would lose an Episcopal area.

If you come out west you'll see what that means. You'll see that it means the decline of the presence of the church all from people who would say all we have got to do is to be about the work of the Lord. Well, how are we going to be about the work of the Lord if we keep reducing our presence in those communities where the population is exploding? A mentality of scarcity rather than a theology of abundance. We say we don't have the resources to do mission and ministry but I would say that we are wealthy beyond our imagination. The real issue is whether we are willing to use our resources and whether we are willing to share those resources. Apparently we have not yet gotten there.

But it is not just a problem from the top down in our church; it is also a problem from the bottom up. Have you seen the disparity in clergy compensation across our church? We have some clergy making close to \$300,000 a year while other clergy, particularly women and people of color, are barely making it. I know clergy in the Rio Grande Conference and the Oklahoma Missionary Conference who are living on welfare. There is something wrong with that picture. And we want to convince the world that we love the world when we don't even show signs of loving each other?

Oregon is a wonderful place to be. The Oregon-Idaho Conference is a very progressive Conference, but even there I have seen this mentality of scarcity, the resistance to sharing. We have been moving into inviting all of our churches to be connected to at least one other United Methodist church in a cooperative style of ministry - inviting all the churches in the Oregon-Idaho Conference to move in that direction as an affirmation of our connectionalism and a way to do better, more effective, ministry in the communities where we find ourselves. But do you know the resistance I am finding is from the big churches, the big churches that say, "You mean I am going to have to leave my church to be connected to that little church that is just going to drain all of our resources, take all the things we have been working so hard to attain?" That's a quote. The big churches where the lay leader got up at Church Conference recently and said, "If you're going to make us carry those other churches, then are you going to pay our clergy person more?" It comes out of this mentality of scarcity rather than abundance. We have been suckered in, royally, by this consumer god and we need to break loose.

John Wesley said on many occasions, "Make all you can, save all you can, and give all you can." I believe this came out of a conviction that we are truly living a life of abundance. Wesley said that Mammon would control our hearts and that we would lose our souls. If ever there was a time to fear the loss of soul it is now. This leads us to our next suggestion.

Servant Church of the Poor

The fourth suggestion is that we must again become the servant church of the poor. For Wesley money was not evil in and of itself, but when its purpose for use is ignored then it does tend to create evil circumstances. Money, not only according to Wesley, but, more importantly, according to Scripture is intended to serve as a primary vehicle by which people help one another and thereby grow in faith and love. The Wesleyan movement begins through servant ministry to the poor in the culture of the industrial revolution. If we are to renew our spirit, we must place ourselves, the church, at the service of the poor in our culture today.

A few years ago, while pasturing an ecumenical parish on the south side of Albuquerque, New Mexico, I began to sense that something was changing in the economy of this country. Church members were working hard but not making it. In some families, not only were the father and the mother working, but so were one or two other family members, usually teenagers in the family or extended family, members living in the same household. Even when these families were working this hard, with this many people at jobs, they were barely scraping along. I confess that I wondered whether these families worked hard enough. Questioned whether they were making wise employment decisions. Doubted that they were being totally honest about their income when the stewardship card went out. In other words, I was placing the blame for their economic predicament on the very families that were being affected. I never stopped to question the economic market.

Every once in awhile, though, my judgment would be shattered – shattered by a family that without a doubt, without a question, without any possible room for wondering, did not fit my growing stereotype of the poor in that community. These families were some of the most hard-working, most dedicated persons I knew, but they lived either in poverty or on the very border of poverty, dreading a potential financial crisis that would plunge them into the despair of utter poverty.

The poverty or near-poverty level of these families made no sense to me, for, after all, were we not living in the land of opportunity, the land where persons are paid fairly for a good days work, where, if one will simply work hard enough, try hard enough, one will surely succeed. In retrospect I realized how dense I was.

I had grown up in poverty. I personally knew what it meant to be poor, to work hard, and still barely make it economically. But I, too, had been co-opted, seduced by the great myth of the last decade of the twentieth century.

One day, participating in a church-based community-organizing seminar on work and job training, my vision was restored and the myth was revealed. Listening to a panel of nationally recognized economists I came to understand the nature of the new marketplace. You see, there was a time in this country when to speak of the American Dream was to understand that there was an implicit social contract. The social contract meant that society was committed to the security and dignity of its workers. This contract promised that families who worked hard enough, paid their dues, played by the rules they would earn the reward of an income sufficient to support a family, buy a house, send their children to college, and retire with dignity. Employers, government, and labor unions in the post-World War II shared responsibility and mutual commitments to the welfare of families. Employers, in negotiation with labor unions, provided employment opportunities for families through which they received wages, pension, and health care benefits. Government regulated work-related relationships through institutions such as the National Labor Relations Board. The government also established broad national commitments to the well-being of families through policies. The Employment Act of 1946 gave the federal government responsibility for promoting employment. The Housing Act of 1949 committed the nation to a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family. The GI Bill opened higher education to millions of people. The Civil Rights Act of 1965 broadened the promise of the American Dream to many who had been excluded.

Today, however, families now find that the social compact has been broken. Even though they are working harder they are earning less. Even though they play by the rules they can no longer count as much on the security of their work. When one factors in the cost of living and inflation the 1990's witnessed the first generation of workers in the last century to live poorer than their parents.

Some of the manifestations of this broken social compact include the downsizing of companies without adequate care for workers. The movement of U.S. industries to places in the world outside of the U.S., where labor is paid less, causing subsequent unemployment of U.S. workers and raising the issue of fair wages for employees in other countries. The reorganization of the workforce in some companies of hired full-time employees to temporary workers, consultants, and part-time workers in order to reduce wages and avoid paying benefits.

Opportunity in the United States, as it is in the new global economy is a systemic problem that will only worsen unless strong moral, ethical, and practical forces are brought to bear on companies and the government. As one who chooses to live in the reign of God, I believe that the church must be a moral, ethical, and practical force in favor of the poor.

In the 1990's a number of studies were done about The United Methodist Church and its historic roots in this country. One of the threads that runs through much of that research showed that the Methodists helped to shape the culture of this country. We were very proud of that and we continue to be proud of some of that shaping, but we are at a different place now. We no longer shape the culture, but we certainly have the privilege, the opportunity, and the responsibility to be a mediating agency, institution, with and for the poor. We are called to do that.

Of course, some view this perspective as too political with political advocacy that goes beyond what people prefer in the separation of church and state. I prefer the opinion of the biblical scholar, Walter Bruggemann who says, "Christians have a long history of trying to squeeze Jesus out of public life and reduce him to a private little savior." To do this is to ignore what the Bible really says, what Jesus says. Jesus taught a great deal about the kingdom of God and what he means by that is a public life reorganized toward neighborliness. If we are to be the church, truly be the church, we must again be that servant community that serves the poor. Simply to be the church, that community of the reign of God we must overcome not only our homophobia or our broken covenant with the poor. With our broken covenant with the poor we must also address our racism, our racism that is still very much alive and very active throughout the United States, throughout the United Methodist Church, and in the world.

Overcoming Racism through Integrity

When I was going to Portland people were saying, "Oh, you are going to find a community that has overcome all the -isms." Well, they are working hard but they are not quite there yet. Now I am part of them that need to work hard. Let me share with you a sign of the fact that not even Portland's quite there. Because I was new to that Annual Conference I had about a six-month period in which I could walk into a room and nobody would know who the heck I was.

So I took advantage of that and began to visit all of the churches. Well, the churches where someone knew who I was were very, very loving and very gracious. I had the best seat and the best cup of coffee and the biggest plate of cookies. But the churches where people did not know who I was – no one said “Hello,” no one welcomed me, no one received me, no one made room for me, no one shared a bulletin when all the bulletins had all be given out, no one invited me to coffee-time, no one told me where Sunday School was. People, for the most part, didn’t even look my way. I felt racism all over again. We must overcome our racism if we are to be the church. It must be an overcoming of racism with integrity. Our Book of Discipline and our Book of Resolutions are filled with statements about our commitment to overcoming racism. But I believe that we are having trouble because our first step forward was not a step of integrity.

Among those studies of the history of Methodism in this country I read the article by Dennis Campbell on, “Does Methodism Have A Future in American Culture.” This paragraph grabbed my attention. He was talking about slavery and he said, “At first, following the leadership of John Wesley himself, Methodism in America was absolutely opposed to slavery. Wesley’s famous “Thoughts Upon Slavery” was written in 1784. Asbury indicated his opposition to slavery and the Christmas Conference specifically forbade it. The Discipline of the church was clear. In regard to slavery, Methodists were “admonished to recognize a most bounden duty to extricate this abomination from among us.” By 1808, however, the General Conference authorized and printed copies of the Discipline for South Carolina leaving out references to slavery. Similar action followed for Georgia and North Carolina. General Conference action in 1816 represented a change of approach. The evil of slavery appeared to be past remedy. Emphasis changed from opposition to attention to the church’s mission to the slaves. There followed aggressive evangelization among blacks, both slave and free. The priority of evangelism necessitated access that required accepting terms set by slave-holders.”

We must overcome racism but we must take this fourth step anew and it must be a step of integrity.

Overcoming Globalization through Community

On the first evening we were together, Dr. Emilie Townes mentioned the concern about globalization and I would raise globalization as the new form of racism. At this point I want to quote Bishop Aldo Etchegoyen, a leader of the Council of Methodist Churches of Latin America and the Caribbean. He spoke to the Commission on Religion and Race not too long ago and he said, “In a global vision of the world we can see the following: Globalization shows us that led by the United States economic, technologic, military, and political power concentrate in the north where the majority population is white. The countries that suffer the consequences of this concentration of power are the countries on the periphery: blacks in Africa, indigenous people and mestizos in Latin America and the Caribbean. After September 11th the war against terrorism has targeted poor countries, especially those within the Islamic tradition. Globalization benefits the white population and disempowers indigenous people, blacks and other ethnic groups. The scheme shows us the terrible division between the rich who have the power and the poor on the margins. In the world today we can talk about a dominant race and about

dominated races. In that manner we arrive at the same conclusion that the Racism Task Force of the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, Switzerland arrived at – Globalization is an expression of racism. But our Lord shows no partiality among people.

We've been talking about the global nature of the church in The United Methodist Church. It has caused a lot of distress as we seek to understand what it means to be responsible as a communion that has presence in different parts of the world. I've been wondering about globalization and the fact that we have a presence in several places in the world as United Methodists. I've been wondering what it would be like to engage our sisters and brothers in Africa, in Latin America, in Asia, in Europe and have them engage us back in a conversation about what the world community would look like, what kind of a global community we might be able to create if we were led by the love of God. That might be yet a contribution we can make to the issue of globalization.

Mission as Christian Vocation

Finally, I believe that if we are to be the church in this day and age we must find a way to affirm our missional vocation of being Christian. John Wesley, late in his life, would say these words, "How great a thing it is to be a Christian. To be a real, inward, scriptural Christian confirmed in heart and life to the will of God."

Now, I am not speaking of an imperialistic Christianity or an imperialistic Methodism. As Methodists we are but a mere part of the body, of the greater body, of Jesus Christ. As Christians we are but a mere part of the world community of God's children. Rather, I am speaking about embracing our missional vocation as Christians and disciples of Jesus Christ for that is the gift that we bring to the table of this human family. Wesley's vision was of a world transformed by the love of God. It was a vision that transformed his own life and enabled him to live in the reign of God in this life and, we trust, in the next. My prayer is that you and I, as United Methodists, might be so fortunate. Thank you.