

If My People

2 Chronicles 7:12–16 (NRSV)

Then the LORD appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: “I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. **13** When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, **14** if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. **15** Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place. **16** For now I have chosen and consecrated this house so that my name may be there forever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time.

What Lies Ahead.

In two weeks 864 United Methodist delegates from around the world, half lay and half clergy, will gather in St. Louis, MO for a called General Conference to discuss and make decisions regarding some questions on human sexuality and how we will be organized. What is decided there will have a rippling effect in every UM congregation around the world. For some, the decisions will feel like a tsunami and for others it was they will feel like a gentle rolling wave. Regardless of the decisions that are made, some will not be pleased and may change their relationship with the denomination. This is truly a big matter for our Christian tribe.

All of this is especially significant to me because I am a lifelong Methodist. As I once heard a colleague share long ago, "I am a Methodist born and a Methodist bred and when I die I will be a Methodist dead." You see the United Methodist church is the body of people God has used to introduce me to the Faith and nurture that faith. It is in local UM churches where I met Jesus and have fallen deeper and deeper in love with Him. All of my higher education has been done in institutions which have strong UM connections. I met my bride in a UM church. This tribe has given me the opportunity to live out my calling a pastor and been the means by which I have supported my family. I have two sons, a daughter-in-law, a father and brother who have and are living out their calling to pastoral ministry in the UMC. I have tons of friends and colleagues I admire and love who are part of this tribe. A lot is at stake for me personally.

Many of you here have a huge connection and investment in the UMC because you are lifelong Methodists or been one for many years. I imagine there are a few here who this is the first time you have been exposed to a UM church. Regardless of where you are, what happens at this General Conference will have some impact on you as well as our church.

Over the past 45 years, our denomination has been having important conversations regarding human sexuality and its implications for our belief and practice. It is clear that there are differences of opinion on these matters and we have not been able to find the common ground where we can move forward on these matters. These matters have reach a type of impasse which has an adverse effect on our accomplishing our mission.

One place where the denomination and I believe the vast majority of UM's agree is that we are to welcome and love all people, regardless of their sexuality and orientation. We believe in opening our doors and ministry both to and with all persons.

But there are two areas where we as a group have been unable to find common ground over the past 4 decades.

- Should we allow self-avowed and practicing gay and lesbian individuals to serve in pastoral leadership in our churches and denomination?
- Should we officiate over and allow our facilities to be in same sex weddings?

The answers to these question vary across our denomination. Some say, "Absolutely," while other say, "Absolutely not." Then there are many who answer somewhere between those answers. Even within this congregation, people have different responses to these questions.

As a congregation, we have attempted to inform our people about these matters. Back last fall we had two gatherings to share the details about these matters. Starting in January, Bob Lockaby and I have conducted a Bible study to explore matters of human sexuality and our responses. We have announced with our conference has offered information as well.

I have come to an important understanding related to this matter. I/we cannot control what is decided at the General Conference. The decisions rest in the hands of these 864 delegates. I/we cannot control how other UM churches and annual conferences respond to what happens. I cannot control how you will react to that takes place. I cannot control what will be the impact on OUMC. But I believe we are not powerless in all of this. We can tap into the greatest resource which can see us through to healthy places where we can thrive in Jesus Christ.

The Call.

King Solomon undertook a wonderful project for God and his nation – to build a temple where God’s name would dwell and the people would gather to encounter Him. When this multi-year project was completed, the grand dedication was performed and no expense was spared. God responded by filling the sacred place with his glory. It was truly an overwhelming experience.

After all the people had returned home and the noise had calmed down, God spoke to Solomon. God shared with the king that he had chosen the temple as this special place for worship and prayer. No doubt, this gave Solomon reassurance all the efforts and sacrifice to build the temple were worthwhile. His mission had been fulfilled.

What God said next to Solomon transcended the holy structure that had been built in Jerusalem. It was a message that revealed the heart of God not only for Solomon and his people, but for the people of God all time. God share that when we face situations beyond our control that threaten our well-being, we do have some valuable resources to which to turn. These steps not only have broad implications for us as we face the Way Forward General conference, but for all of us as we face huge issues in our life and world.

If you knew you could take 4 steps that could change you, your situation and give you hope and joy, would you take those steps? If we as a people knew 4 steps would change our situation and give us hope, would we take those steps together?

Humble yourselves.

During the College Football National Championship, Alabama was humbled by Clemson. It is difficult to remember a game in recent history when the Crimson Tide took such a beating. Most of us know something about being humbled by some event – failing an important examine, not getting the job we applied for, failing to achieve the expected results, having her to say, “No” to the question of marriage, being pulled over by the police.

Here the step is not “being humbled” by that outside force but humbling ourselves. Taking actions which leads to our being humble before God and others.

Humbling ourselves involves admitting we need help. “God we cannot control this matter in the UMC. Our plots to get our way will not work. Lord, we need your help.”

Humility comes as we accept our limits – not only the limit of what we can do but our limit of our understanding. In the discussion of human sexuality, many on both sides of the spectrum are convinced their position is correct. There is nothing wrong with personally being convinced and my hope is one earnestly seeks to know until they are convinced. Yet all of us must admit our knowing and understanding is limited. We do risk being wrong at some points.

During our Way Forward Bible Study, we spent a session exploring a huge reality – all of us are flawed creatures. We all make mistakes. All of us have sinned. When we acknowledge this, we place ourselves in a humble position. I can’t look down on someone else for their faults because I am flawed as well.

Pray.

The second step for us is to pray which is in itself an act of humility. “God, this is what is happening. Please help.”

During a tough time for the Jewish nation when many were in exile in Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah delivered an important message to the people. He encouraged them to pray for the “welfare of Babylon.” That really felt like an odd prayer because Babylon had been their enemy. But he reminded them that their welfare was associated with the welfare of Babylon.

Here is an important element of pray for us as the UM Church faces this matter. We do need to pray for our denomination because our welfare is tied to that of the United Methodist Church. We need to pray that good will come in and through this.

Turn from you wicked ways.

“Wicked” is a strong word. Probably few of us would consider our “ways” as wicked. Most of us would admit we do some things we ought not do and fail to do some things we should do but “wicked” is another story. How I am to turn from my “wicked” ways?

Actually the Hebrew word translated as wicked, רָע, ranges in meaning from what we might regard as “wicked” to what is “bad” or “wrong.” As I reflect on this matter, I look at my own thinking and actions. I am often hesitant to listen carefully and respectfully to those who may have a different opinion. I am sometimes quick to condemn folks who behave outside certain perimeters of what I believe is right. I need to turn from my “wicked” ways.

Knowing what actions and attitudes are unhealthy and “bad” often requires they be revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. It is at this point we ask God to show us what we are doing and thinking that is bad. As the Spirit reveals, we turn from these. (By the way, that is seldom easy because often these “ways” are the ways we have been doing for a while. It takes some time of persistent recognition, honesty, prayer and grit to turn from them.

Seek God’s Face.

This final step is so very important. Often when go through difficult times, our reaching out to God consists of our seeking relief, deliverance, understanding or an answer. While nothing is wrong with these, there is a much higher search. It is the quest to be in God’s presence. This idea of being in God’s presence is profound.

When any of us are able to come before God’s face, we know God is with us. God has us and God has our back. Things may not turn out the way we hoped, it may be a long and roughed ride but we are safe in God’s presence. God is with us.

God’s Promise.

God gave to Solomon a beautiful promise when God’s people humble themselves, pray, turn from their wicked ways and seek His face. Listen and think about God’s great acts of love.

God will hear.

All of us want to be heard when we have something important to express, particularly when times are challenging. Imagine God is truly listening to what we are saying. Our words and thoughts are important to God.

The hearing spoken of here though is deeper than God listen to our words. This type of hearing means God understands what is being said and intended. When God hears, God then acts on behalf of those He has heard.

Forgive our sin.

This process of turning to God in humility brings forgiveness. Nothing stands in our way in relationship to our heavenly Father. We are forgiven by God. To be forgiven is to be set free and liberated.

Heal their land.

God promises to heal what has been broken and damaged.

When Judah was facing destruction at the hands of the Babylonians, God spoke these words through Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 33:6 (NRSV) *I am going to bring it recovery and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security.*

I can imagine God bringing healing to our Christian tribe, the UMC. In the early days of the Methodist movement, people in England and America were turning to Christ. They were connecting in meaningful community and being disciple and growing in their faith. What if God were to bring healing and do this again within our ranks.

Taking Steps to Align with God

Humbling ourselves:

(As an act of humility, please remain seated.)

Lord, clothe us with humility and love

As we seek to value others about ourselves;

As we bear with others in love;

As we realize we only know in part;

As we acknowledge we have sinned and fall short of your glory.

Silence

(Please stand and let us pray)

Pray

Lord, we give you thanks for the United Methodist Church. We thank you for how the church has sought to lift up the name of Jesus and to make disciples throughout its history. Thank you for how the United Methodist Church has blessed our lives.

Lord, hear our prayer

Lord, we pray you would be present with all who part of our tribe as The Way Forward General Conference is held in St. Louis. Bless our bishops with wisdom and pure hearts as they seek to lead. Bless each delegate with wisdom and insight into your desires and designs for us moving forward. We pray you would guide every decision and work through all that take place.

In the days that will follow, help every local church and church related institution understand what has taken place and the implications. Let each process the information and be led by your Spirit to make decisions that need to be made so as to continue our mission of making disciples.

Guide Ooltewah United Methodist Church so we can continue to be a faithful witness in this community. Help us to continue to serve you and our neighbors across the street and around the world. May many come to know you and grow in you because of our witness and ministry.

Turn from our wicked ways

Lord, show us we pray, how we have thought, spoken or acted in ways that have been hurtful to others and to you.

Silence

Lord have mercy upon us. Forgive us we pray. Give us the courage, will and power to turn from our wicked ways.

Seek God's face;

Sing "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus"