

General Conference Prayer Service

Sunday, February 24 | Rev. Meredith Gudger-Raines

The people of God struggle to find the way

Scripture: Exodus 14:10-14 (*All Scripture, NRSV*)

When Moses was leading God's people away from slavery under Pharaoh, there was a moment where Pharaoh pursued the Israelites into the wilderness. In a moment of fear and uncertainty, the Israelites wavered. They complained to Moses, their liberator, for liberating them. From Exodus 14:

10 As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. 11 They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? 12 Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." 13 But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. 14 The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."

The people of God have often struggled to find the way. And when they have found it, it is still a struggle to actually follow it. In the Exodus, it is clear: God wants to lead the people out of slavery and to freedom. It is a central theme in all of Scripture. And yet, even when it is so central to the character of God, the people have trouble unifying around the call to go in a clear direction. Faced with the uncertainty of freedom, they complain to Moses, "Why did you bring us all the way out here just to die? Were there not enough graves for us in Egypt? It would have been better to live as slaves than die in the wilderness!" They wanted to be faithful, but in their fear, they couldn't figure out which direction was the faithful one.

Here's the good news: God doesn't give up on a people just because they have a hard time following. God tells Moses: "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to keep moving forward." Their fear was not a good enough reason to stop. It took them 40 years of wandering in the wilderness to fully live into God's freedom, but they did keep moving forward.

Let us pray.

Dear God, like the Israelites, we are afraid of the uncertainty of the future. We are unclear about the way forward. We are angry, scared, and tempted to give up and declare that our present graves are preferable to the freedom of the future. But what we know of you from the Exodus story is that you don't accept our fear as a viable excuse for staying still. Instead, you call us to keep moving forward. Help us to calm our fears and trust that you will lead us. Amen.

Hymn: Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah, UMH 127, verses 1 and 3

The early Church divides

Scripture: Acts 2:43-47

Acts 2 tells the story of the birth of the early church. The Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples, empowering them to proclaim the word in ways their neighbors can hear. The result is that people came into the church because it was a "foretaste of glory divine." They came to be part of the kingdom of God, and the end of the chapter describes how they lived in unity and harmony:

43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Wander through many United Methodist churches, and eventually, you will come across some historical pictures. Maybe it's the Men's Bible Study class from 1923 or the children's Sunday School from 1954. There they are in black and white, in formal hats and gloves and ties, spread out in a panorama across the church's front steps. And there are hundreds of them, people standing five or six rows deep, seemingly everyone in the town a part of the church.

These pictures can be like the end of the second chapter of Acts--inspiring, but also discouraging. Why could those Christians live in such harmony and abundance while we seem to know only division and loss? This scripture and these stories leave us feeling like we must be doing something wrong, "failing" at being church.

What we don't see in these snapshots are the conflicts that *are* present. In those historic panoramic photographs, where are the people of color? Segregated in their own churches. That struggle for inclusion would come, and while it would be a struggle for greater unity, it

would feel divisive. The end of Acts 2 describes unity, but we know that just a short while later, the disciples would be struggling to figure out if Gentiles could be part of the church without converting to Judaism first. The disciples would be divided on this before Peter's moving dream and experience with Cornelius would lead him to declare that "truly, God shows no partiality."

Students of church history know that the church has always divided. Martin Luther thought he was helping his church to be more faithful; the church thought he was being heretical. The global church divided in what we know as the Protestant Reformation.

John Wesley also knew about church division. When the Bishop of London refused to ordain more clergy for the brand new United States, Wesley did it himself. He had no authority granted to him by the church to perform such ordinations, and so his act, which he saw as furthering the unity of the church, was seen by the church as a sign of division.

While this moment feels precarious to us, and it is, it is not unique in Christian history. In fact, these moments where we are caught between theology and relationship, justice and unity, seem to define Christian history. Is this discouraging or hopeful, that we are so often plagued by the tension between unity and division?

Let us remember Jesus' words to his disciples: Love one another as I have loved you. There is so much that keeps us apart. We do not understand each other's different values and customs. We disagree with each other about theology and ideas, and not just about little matters, but about big ones. And yet, Jesus' words to love one another have continued to call to us. Imagine how quickly we would have given up on each other if it weren't for his commandment to love. In a world that divides and goes to war seemingly non-stop, the moments of division in Christian history stand out because we are at least trying to love one another despite and through and because of our differences.

Let us pray.

O God, this moment is painful because we are trying to be faithful. There are times we think how easy it would be to divide up and be done with each other. There are other times when we grieve all the separations throughout Christian history and are embarrassed that we seem to be doing no better. O God, use this time to help us grow in our faith. When it is most difficult, help us remember Jesus' command to love one another. Help us to see that our desire to love one another is itself a witness to your love. Amen.

Hymn: O God our Help in Ages Past, UMH 117, verses 1, 3 and 6

Those suffering among us

Scripture: Luke 7:36-50

Brian McLaren reminds us of all the people Jesus saw when they were ignored by everyone else. He reminds us of the woman who was bleeding and reached out to touch the hem of Jesus' garment. McLaren says, "She didn't think she was important enough to ask for Jesus' help. Jesus healed her [and] publicly affirmed her value.... Little children, a Samaritan, a man who might today be classified as 'disabled' and 'unemployed,' a frightened and 'unclean' woman, a little girl ... they all mattered to Jesus." (p. 107).

Remember this story:

36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. **37** And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. **38** She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. **39** Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." **40** Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." **41** "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. **42** When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" **43** Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." **44** Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. **45** You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. **46** You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. **47** Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." **48** Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." **49** But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" **50** And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Simon did not really see the woman. He saw his thoughts about her. He saw what he thought was wrong and jumped to what he thought would be right. But Jesus saw her. He saw her value, and he stopped Simon's thoughts so that he could help Simon see her value also.

We pray for those who are part of the LGBTQIA community. We remember that as our whole church comes together, they feel talked about, but not talked with. Judged, but not seen. We imagine what it might feel like to have one's identity or even existence questioned, judged and put on trial. We lament that we struggle so mightily with Jesus' seemingly simple command to love one another.

Let us pray.

Loving God, as our church gathers together in a deep divide over human sexuality, help us to see those people who are hearing their lives analyzed and evaluated. We lament their pain. We pray for them, our siblings in Christ. We pray that we can work toward a day when, like Jesus, we can publicly affirm the value of every child of God. Be with them, O God. Amen.

HYMN: Blest Be the Tie that Binds, UMH 557, verses 1, 2 and 4

Christ comes in final victory

Scripture: John 13:33-34

On the night in which Jesus gave himself up for us, he desired to have one last supper with his friends. He took on the role of the servant, and served each one as he washed their feet. Then he broke bread and poured the wine, and told them that his life was given for each of them, and for many others. At the end of the supper, he told them,

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

Every time we gather at the table and we tell the story of God with us, we ask the Holy Spirit to make us One: one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world. We ask the Holy Spirit to make us one until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

We don't know exactly how or when it will work, but we have a firm belief that God's creation has a direction. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long and it bends toward justice." We are headed, ultimately, toward a final victory. And that final victory is a feast at Christ's table. When we gather at Christ's table, we will no doubt be surprised by who we will meet there. We will sit down together in joy, fully seen and seeing fully. Divisions will be no more; the unity of the kingdom of God will be realized.

This is not to say that our current struggles or decisions do not matter. They do. They matter to real people, to their lives and to their communities. Rather than minimizing our current struggles, remembering Christ's ultimate victory illuminates them. If the end is to all feast together at Christ's table, what can we do here and now to embody that feast?

Let us pray.

O God, our sight is limited. We cannot see our way forward. And yet, we trust the image you have given us of the place we are going. We are tempted to cry out, like Thomas the disciple, that we do not know the way. But you remind us that we do. You are the Way. Help us to remember that we have been served by you, and help us to serve in your name. Help us to receive your love for us, and help us to love in your name. And, O God, make us one until we feast together at Christ's heavenly banquet. Amen.

Hymn: Hymn of Promise, UMH 707