



Transfigured Faith

Luke 9:28-36

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This past week, the United Methodist Church held a Special Session of the General Conference. The called purpose of the gathering was to focus specifically on one topic: knowing that as a global denomination we do not agree on matters regarding same-sex marriage and the ordination of gay and lesbian persons, the General Conference was called to seek a future for the United Methodist Church that resolved our disagreements while allowing for as much unity as possible, and for the church to maintain its mission in as many places as possible around the world. That was the named purpose of this General Conference gathering, as was voted on by the 2016 General Conference. The named intent was to find a unified and far-reaching way forward that resolved this ongoing argument among the General Conference.

At the end of four days of prayer, legislative action and voting, four pieces of legislation passed. The first secures up pension matters for pastors and churches if the pastor and / or church decides to leave the denomination, or is exited from the denomination.

The second allows that the Central Conferences of the United Methodist Church, that is, for the United Methodist conferences outside the United States, to have 12 months after the close of General Conference to decide if and how they will implement any changes passed by the General Conference. Central Conferences are given the authority to make such rules and regulations for the administration of their work within their boundaries including changes and adaptations of the General Discipline – meaning everything but the Constitution and Social Principles – as the conditions in their respective area may require, so long as it falls within the normal powers of the General Conference. The passed legislation says the Central Conferences have until February 26 of next year to decide if any how they will implement changes made at last week’s General Conference.

The third motion passed was titled the Traditional Plan. The plan was a conglomerate of 16 changes to the Book of Discipline that collectively seek to strengthen the church’s stance against homosexuality, including a more clear definition of what the church means by saying, “self-avowed practicing homosexual,” and by adding stricter punishments for those who are found to disobey the Discipline regarding same-sex marriages and the ordination of gay and lesbian persons – both of which are already prohibited in the Discipline. Of the 16 petitions, 8 were found to be unconstitutional *before* legislative action began on Tuesday. Only one of the 8 was amended, and it is unclear at this time if that amendment will fix the unconstitutionality of the petition. The entire plan was referred to the Judicial Council, which will make a final declaratory decision regarding the constitutionality of the plan when the Council meets the week after Easter. More on this in a moment.

The final motion that passed is a plan for disaffiliation. The plan offers a way out of the United Methodist Church that does not require a legal battle surrounding the Trust Clause, but allows for churches to discern whether or not they can maintain the Discipline, and if not, to exit the

Denomination. The plan had been ruled unconstitutional heading into Tuesday, but there were some alterations to the plan before it was passed. It is unclear if the plan as adopted is constitutional, and while this happened officially yet, I've heard that the Council of Bishops will refer this plan of disaffiliation to the Judicial Council for a declaratory decision as well.

Based on the voting margins, it's clear that we have a very divided body. In almost every final vote, the margins were roughly 53-54% to 46-47%. Studying that vote, it's also clear that the church in America has a vastly different perspective than the church around the world. It is estimated that about 2/3 of the US delegates voted against the Traditional Plan, while roughly 90% of the international church voted for it.

Given the action of the General Conference, while the purpose, as named by the 2016 General Conference, was to find a way forward that maintained unity and sought to extend our missional reach, the passed legislation fractured unity, and invited churches who disagreed to leave, limiting our reach. While there was no official split voted upon (as many news sources have published), the division that the General Conference has caused has spurred many clergy and laity to call for a denominational split going forward. Even those who voted in favor of the Traditional Plan, who seemingly passed the very legislation they wrote, are still claiming they may leave the denomination themselves.

In the past five days, I've heard from clergy and laity alike, I've read emails and social media posts, and I know there are people who are leaving the denomination as a result of General Conference. Regardless of the expressed intent, many fear the impact of the language of delegates from the floor of General Conference and the more strict punishments of the Traditional Plan will further harm and exclude LGBTQ persons from the church. I lament these words and actions, and grieve the hurt, pain, and aggression of our denomination toward LGBTQ siblings. **I want to be clear**, the actions of the General Conference and the hurtful speeches against the LGBTQ community are not reflective of the mission of *this* church. When we say we are *Making a Place for Everyone to Know God's Love*, that means **everyone**. Lesbian, gay, bi-, trans, queer, you are welcome in *this* community – you are welcome to participate, you are welcome to lead, you are welcome to belong. The church is not ours, it is God's, and no matter how traditional or progressive your view may be, the Biblical witness makes clear that no person is to be excluded from the love of Christ. God so loved the world that he gave his son so that whosoever believes in him may have eternal life. There are no stipulations on who-so-ever ... it is a love that is extended to everyone, and so we will continue making a place for everyone to know God's love.

Now, back to the Traditional Plan. Beyond the exilic language that I fear goes against God's work of reconciliation as we see witnessed throughout Jesus' ministry and the ministry of the early church, including the welcoming of once-outcast Samaritans, and once-hated Canaanites, and the Gentiles who were claimed to be in direct violation of the religious rules, and the bleeding woman, and outcasted lepers, and exempted eunuchs ... I could go on, and on, and on ... but I have a greater problem with the passage of this plan because it was passed even though it was known to be against our Disciplinary Constitution. I have a hard time understanding how even a slim majority of our global church could be ok passing legislation to make the church more legalistic, knowing that to do so they would be voting against the law of the church. Even if one were to agree with the intent of the plan, I just can't understand how adopting greater rules makes sense if you have to violate the rules to pass them.

In the midst of all of last week's events, I had to write a sermon for today. Today, in the liturgical calendar, is Transfiguration Sunday. I did not hand pick today's text, it was provided by the ecumenical church. And as God does so often, the text has a fitting word to offer.

Quick context – Jesus has, up to this point, spent all of his time in ministry on and around the Sea of Galilee. He's preached, healed, and tried to help his followers, most closely his 12 disciples, understand who he is and why he has come. Just before going up the mountain in today's text, Jesus claims for the first time that his ministry will not end in the way many might be expecting. He says, just a few verses prior to today's text, "The Son of Man must undergo suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priest, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

He continues, "If you want to be my followers, you must deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow me. If you want to save your life, you must lose it. What does it profit you to gain the whole world, but lose yourself?"

Just eight days after making this first claim of the coming passion, Christ goes up the mountain with Peter, James, and John. This is the climax of the account dealing with Jesus' identity.

On top of the mountain, the three disciples find themselves exhausted, perhaps from the climb. They were nearly asleep. Jesus is transfigured – the appearance of his face is changed, his clothes became dazzling white, and a great light shone around him. And then two men show up, Moses and Elijah, and the two were speaking with Jesus. They were talking to Jesus about his departure, and about what he was to accomplish in Jerusalem.

Moses and Elijah are said to represent the full of the Hebrew Scriptures – the law and the prophets. It makes sense that they would be able to tell Jesus about his departure and his purpose in Jerusalem, for Jesus' work is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. I imagine that the conversation they had on that mountain top was very similar to the conversation Jesus had with the two disciples on the walk to Emmaus; the conversation pointed to how Jesus was the fulfillment to the claims of the Hebrew Scripture's promise. In some ways, I wonder if their conversation with Jesus was as much a pep-talk as it was a word of clarity. Like when Jesus cried out to God in the garden, "If it is your will, take this cup from me," was this moment of transfiguration a time for God to affirm Jesus' self-understanding, as much as it was a time to proclaim to the disciples Jesus' ministry?

The disciples, exhausted though they may be, are awake, and see Elijah and Moses standing in glory with Christ. As Moses and Elijah began to leave, Peter musters the energy to speak. "Master," he says, "it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." The Greek word for dwellings here relates to a similar noun meaning booths. The Festival of Booths was a historic Jewish celebration, which was a celebration of Israel's journey to freedom in the Exodus. Perhaps Moses' presence elicited this response from Peter. The text says that Peter didn't know what he said, meaning his words were more of a knee-jerk reaction to an unknown situation than a well thought out response. He responded with what he knew, without fully grasping what was taking place.

While he was still speaking, Moses and Elijah depart into a great dark cloud in the sky. The disciples were terrified. Being fearful in the transfigured presence of Christ is a common reaction by the

disciples – like when they feared the winds on the sea, thinking Jesus to be a ghost walking on the water. Standing in fear beneath the shadowy clouds, a voice from heaven beckoned aloud, reminiscent of the voice that spoke at Jesus’ baptism, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

These leading disciples, those who time and time again be called Jesus’ favorites, including the one whom Jesus will call the rock of the church, are gifted not only with a visible sign of Christ’s glory, but with the voice of heavens offering a word of affirmation to Christ’s identity. Christ is surrounded by Elijah and Moses, who connect him with the historical faith. Christ is transfigured, and seen in dazzling white and glory. And God’s voice declares that indeed, Christ is the Son of God, and that the disciples should hear his teaching and listen to him. What more do the disciples need to be sure that they should listen to Christ and follow in his ways. Isn’t this the very kind of event we all have at one moment in our life begged for or desired? A moment of clear and definite promise that Christ is who he says he is, and that his teaching is truth and worthy to be followed?

One would think that given this kind of moment, given this kind of clear demonstration, given this kind of God-affirmed identity, the disciples would have no problem following Christ’s teaching. Isn’t what we claim? God, if you would make clear your will and your way, I will follow. But then the disciples descend the mountain, and it’s like they hadn’t even seen Christ glorified. The text says they kept silent, and spoke no word of what they had witnessed. And their silence wasn’t their only betrayal.

In the next few stories following the transfiguration, in the events that follow their descent down the mountain, Jesus chastises the disciples multiple times for a failure of belief and understanding. First, the disciples failed to cast out demons. Jesus rebuked them, and asked, “How much longer must I bear with you?” ... Shortly after, the disciples had an argument about which one of them was greatest. Jesus again rebuked them, saying, “the least among you is the greatest.” ... Again, shortly after, the disciples complained because someone else was casting out demons in the name of Christ – something they had failed to do themselves. And Christ again lamented, claiming, you don’t get to control who preaches the good news. “Do not stop them; whoever is not against you is for you.”

They came down from the mountain of transfiguration, having witnessed Jesus in full glory, and having it confirmed by the voice of God in the heavens that he was indeed the Son of God, and that the call to be a Suffering Servant was indeed his purpose and his call, and they failed time and time and time again to act in a way that showed a true understanding of his teaching and his purpose. Even after receiving confirmation of Christ’s identity, the disciples continued to wrangle over rank and precedence, to try and limit who had the ability to speak God’s good news to the world, and they failed to exercise the power of Christ in their daily living and ministry.

And this is why I lament the work of General Conference. Because we spent four days arguing over rank and precedence, trying to control who can and cannot speak the good news of God in Christ, and failing to realize our invitation to be part of sharing God’s good news into the world. We passed legislation that knowingly went against even our own historic rules, against our own definition of how we are to be church, against our own profession of how we are to live as a global denomination, just so a slim majority could maintain power over the work of the church. Such action seems to mimic the very failures of the disciples, even following the clear identification of Christ as the Son of God to whom we should all be listening.

I've asked myself many times over the past five days, given the events of General Conference, where do we go from here? What does this mean for us?

The very next passage in Luke 9, after these failures of the disciples to respond to God's proclamation of Christ as the glorified Son, comes in verse 51. It reads, "Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem." I do believe, this is our answer. To Jerusalem, that is where we will go.

Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. We will gather Wednesday night for Ash Wednesday, and then we will journey toward Jerusalem, where we will remember, reflect on, and mourn that our brokenness meant the death of our Lord. When the disciples could not grasp their call to faithfulness ... when the disciples could not grasp how to respond to God's claim of Christ's identity ... when the disciples could not set aside their own desire for power and control to accept God's power in the person of Christ ... Christ knew there was but one way to offer salvation and new life, and that was to give *his* life - to fulfill the words of the law and the prophets, and to do for us what we are incapable of doing for ourselves.

Broken as though we may be, I invite you to journey with me in this coming season. Let us in our failure, remember that we will be redeemed. That at the end of the journey there is an empty cross and an empty tomb. And that while death and destruction are worth grieving, if there is no death, there can be no resurrection. And we are a people of resurrection. We are a people who claim God's victory in Christ. We are a people who seek the good news of God in the glorified One, who claims that in his work, all people will know the great love of God.

Journey with me friends, and let us claim God's glory together. Let us proclaim God's love for all people together. Let us walk with transfigured faith, that though we may fail, so shall we be lifted up by the eternal love of the Lord. We are not there yet, and it will not be because of our doing, but with God's help, we will make a place for everyone to know God's love.

Amen? ... Amen.