

A Time to Decide

Joshua 24:1-15, Ephesians 4:1-16, John 13:34-35

A Baptist preacher went into the hospital for a serious, possibly life-threatening operation. He had been in the ICU for nearly a week when the chairman of the deacon board was allowed a brief visit with the pastor. “Preacher,” he said, “I have some good news for you, and I think it will cheer you up a lot. The board met last night, and we voted 5 to 4 to pray for you to get well.”

I’m confident that such a thing would never happen at Greenbrier’s First United Methodist Church... When I was sick last week, you showered me with good wishes, phone calls, e-mail, and get-well cards. Over the past several months, you have received me and Norma with graciousness and hospitality. We are nothing but grateful for that.

Still it’s true that the old divisions and conflicts that crippled the previous two pastorates in our church have reasserted themselves with a vengeance over the past two weeks, and your current pastor has not escaped untouched by the arrows that have been flying back and forth. I’ve been wounded just as many of you have been. What can this wounded preacher say to his wounded congregation about the judgment and mercy of God in times like these?

God has called me to speak the truth to you in love, but this is a time for tough love—and I know that I’m not very good at that. I would much prefer to tell you the good news, to celebrate the positive, to be upbeat and optimistic. What comes most naturally for me is to try to love you into the Kingdom; I’m just not very good at confrontation—it’s not my style. But this is a time for telling the truth even when it cuts and hurts, trusting that somehow the cutting will be surgical and in the long run healing. That is what this hour demands, and I cannot walk away from that assignment. Back in June, when we began this relationship, I was not looking for a pastoral appointment. I came to Greenbrier in response to a call from God and from the United Methodist Bishop of Arkansas. I came here to speak the truth to you as clearly as I understand it and as compassionately as I can express it. That’s what I’m going to do. But make no mistake about it. These are crucial days for United Methodism in Greenbrier, Arkansas. We stand at a crossroads. The previous two pastorates at this church have ended unhappily. We simply can’t afford to let that happen again. *Three strikes and you’re out...*

Our church stands on the brink of what could be an amazing leap forward. The lay leadership here is strong. Greenbrier is growing. People are knocking at our doors. The Holy Spirit is moving in our midst. All of that is encouraging. But I must tell you this, with all the earnestness of a pastor’s troubled heart: If we can’t resolve the issues that have eaten away at the effectiveness of this congregation for the past several years—if we can’t *agree to disagree* and then get on with the work of becoming in reality what God has called us to be as United Methodists, a reconciled and reconciling community, united by a communion that is deeper than all the theological or practical differences that divide us—if we can’t do that, then Greenbrier’s First United Methodist Church is going to take a hit from which it will

not recover in our lifetimes. If we stay locked into our old pattern of factionalism and divisiveness, *this church will die*, and rightly so. If we can't provide an alternative to the godless way in which the world at large deals with disagreements and conflicts—dog-eat-dog, winner-takes-all—then what is the point of being a church, much less a United Methodist Church? The sign outside proclaims that we are a United Methodist Church, but sometimes recently I have found myself wondering whether we are united, or truly Methodist, or for that matter even a church. Do you want to know the definition of a church? Listen: *Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is the one true Church, apostolic and universal*. It's the presence of the Holy Spirit that constitutes a church. And we recognize the Spirit by the fruit of the Spirit, listed by Paul in Gal. 5.22: *Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*. If we can't respond to our fellow United Methodists with whom we have honest differences of opinion lovingly, joyfully, peacefully, patiently, gently—if we can't focus more on controlling ourselves than trying to control each other—then our claim to be the church of Jesus, the Body of Christ made alive by the presence of his Spirit, is bogus. That's why this is such a crucial moment in the life of our church: *the life of this church is at stake* in how we decide to deal with one another across the divide of our theological disagreements. Listen again to the words of our Lord, because they are aimed right at the heart of Greenbrier's First United Methodist Church: *"Unless you repent, you shall all likewise perish"* (Luke 13.3). We will repent of our pettiness, of our anger at our sisters and brothers—we will repent of our harshness toward our fellow-Methodists, our judgmental attitude toward those who disagree with us, our hardness of heart toward those who see things differently, our determination to win and then exclude the losers—we will repent of all that, *or we will die*. And now is the time to decide which it will be.

So God speaks to us today: *"Choose today whom you will serve."* Maybe the prophet Joel had us in mind when he cried out in Joel 3.14, *"Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision!"* For that's exactly where we are this morning—in the valley of decision.

For a number of years there has been a deep conflict among the United Methodists of Greenbrier, and we can't linger in the valley of decision much longer. We've come to the point where we can no longer avoid basic decision about whether to fight this battle through to the bitter end or to try another way—a better way, God's way, the way of reconciliation. If we go the way of the world, so that one side wins and the other side loses, *then we all lose*—and the work of the Kingdom in Greenbrier loses—because this congregation will cease to be the church of Jesus Christ. Listen to the words of Paul to a church in Corinth that was in the very same situation in which we find ourselves now— theologically divided in just the way we are divided over doctrinal issues. In II Cor. 5.20, Paul says to the Corinthians, and to the United Methodists of Greenbrier: *"So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled..."*

If we reject that appeal, if we refuse to be reconciled, if we cling to the world's way of dealing with those who disagree with us—defining them as the enemy,

hardening our hearts, treating them not as fellow-Christians but as members of the enemy camp, seeking to exclude them from the fellowship of our church—*then we will cease to be the church*, because *that is not the Spirit of Christ*. It is, indeed, *the spirit of the Antichrist*. That's why I am convinced that our very existence as a church is at stake. That's how crucial this moment is for us. That is the choice facing Greenbrier's First United Methodist Church.

We stand in the valley of decision. *And now is the time to decide.*

Among the things that have puzzled and saddened me over the past couple of months, let me tell you the one thing that has been most surprising, most disappointing. Often I have received telephone calls or e-mail from people to set up an appointment to talk with me about their concerns, and often people have just dropped in to visit with me in my office. And the most amazing thing to me was that with just a few exceptions, almost nobody said, "*Pastor, I want you to counsel with me and pray with me about my walk with Jesus.*" Almost nobody said, "*Pastor, can you help me with my spiritual growth, my prayer life, my discipleship?*" Almost nobody said, "*Pastor, can you help me understand what God's Word means for me at this point in my journey through life?*" Almost everybody—with just a couple of exceptions—said something like this: "*Preacher, what are you going to do about these other folks? **They** are the problem. What are we going to do about them?*" That has been the single greatest surprise and disappointment of my early months as your pastor. And I'm convinced that *an eagerness to criticize the other guy*, combined with *a reluctance to engage in real self-examination and self-criticism*, is a large part of what has kept this church trapped in an endless cycle of conflicts that paralyzes us and keeps us right where the devil wants us, standing in a firing squad that's arranged in a circle, so busy fighting each other that we don't have time or energy to fight the real enemy of our souls. We'd better deal with our own spiritual problems before we dare assume the prerogative of judging our sisters and brothers.

Hear the words of Jesus: "*Why do you see the speck that's in your brother's eye, and you don't even notice the log that's in your own eye?*" While we are worrying about somebody else's shortcomings, maybe we need to remember God's verdict against us all: "*There is none righteous, no, not one*" (Romans 3.10).

We tend to think that the problem is with *them*, don't we? No, my dear sisters and brothers, the problem is with us, all of us, for "*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*" (Rom. 3.23). In the immortal words of Pogo, "*We have met the enemy—and he is us.*" Every one of us needs to learn how to sing, not just with our lips, but with our hearts, the old Negro spiritual:

It's me, it's me, it's me. O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

Not my sister, not my brother, but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

I've been astounded by the degree to which the Methodists of Greenbrier seem to want to sing a very different song: "*It's my sister, it's my brother, it's not me, O Lord, standing in need of prayer, standing in need of repentance, standing in need of conversion. Somebody needs to change, O Lord, but it's not me. It's them*". But I'm convinced that if we counted up all the hours we've spent complaining about the

faults of others, and just decided to spend that time instead in earnest prayer that God would give us tender hearts and make us more loving, more forgiving, more like Jesus in every dimension of our lives—if we did that, a spiritual revolution would erupt in our hearts and a heaven-sent Holy Ghost revival would sweep this church and light a fire in this community. Souls would be saved—lives would be changed—for all of time and eternity. *If we ourselves would just repent* and let God change the hardness of our own hearts, instead of waiting for the other guy to change, then God would send revival. But if we insist on *holding out for total victory*—if we refuse to be reconciled—then there won't ever be a revival in this church, because we will have in effect ceased to be the Church of the Lord of Love.

We can't have it both ways. We can't serve Satan by hardening our hearts toward our fellow-Christians and still expect God to bless us as the church of his Son. *We will either repent of our hardness of heart toward each other, or else we will die.* Jesus said so: *Unless you repent, you shall all likewise perish* (Luke 13:3, 5). When he spoke those words, Jesus had Greenbrier's First United Methodist Church in mind. Unless we repent, we shall perish. That puts the choice squarely before us.

And now is the time to decide.

Over the past two weeks it has become clear to me that our identity as United Methodists is at stake here. We've got a decision to make about whether we are serious about being a *United Methodist* congregation. We've got to decide whether we want to be a Methodist church in the Wesleyan sense of that phrase or a society of self-appointed judges and critics, masquerading as a United Methodist Church. Several people, in listing various complaints about some of their fellow-Methodists, have recently said to me, *John Wesley would be turning over in his grave if he knew what they are doing.* I absolutely agree that John Wesley would be alarmed at what has been going on here, but what he would be most concerned about is the bitterness with which this battle is being fought and the determination of some to win the fight at all costs and then claim the prize...which is to eliminate—exclude from our fellowship—those who end up on the losing side. Wesley wanted the Methodists to be united in a love that respects differences, a communion of the Holy Spirit that is open to diversity of opinions, so that differences in our ways of experiencing God or understanding God can never break our fellowship with one another. *Diversity* is not a dirty word for Wesleyan Christians. *Openness* is not a dirty word for us: we're all about *open hearts, open minds, open doors*. By its history, tradition, and theology, United Methodism is not one of those churches in which you deal with brothers or sisters who disagree by demonizing and excluding them. *There are churches like that in Greenbrier* that deal with those who don't go conform by breaking off fellowship with them. There are churches in Greenbrier where you can't be member unless you agree with the views of the majority. There are churches in Greenbrier where those who don't see things in the same way as the majority sees them are accused of heresy, accused of introducing a cult into the life the church, made to feel unwelcome, or simply kicked out of the church. *But Greenbrier's First United Methodist Church is not one of those churches.* John Wesley would be appalled to hear some Methodists

accusing other Methodists of belonging to a *heresy* or a cult, or claiming that those who don't see certain doctrinal issues just as others see them are "*Satanic*." Three years before his death, this is what Wesley wrote about the distinctiveness of Methodism: "*There is no other religious society under heaven which requires nothing of men in order for them to be admitted into it but a desire to save their souls. Look all around you. You cannot be admitted into the church or society of the Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, or any others unless you hold the same opinions with them and adhere to the same mode of worship. The Methodists alone do not insist on your holding this or that opinion, but they think and let think.* (Just in case you think I'm making this up, you can find these words in Wesley's *Journal*, in an entry dated May 18, 1788, in *The Works of John Wesley*, IV, p. 419.) In a little book entitled, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, Mr. Wesley said this about what he had in mind when organizing the Methodist societies: *The thing which I resolved to use every possible method of preventing was a narrowness of spirit, a party zeal, a being straightened in our own bowels [or as we might say, "being up-tight"]*, **THAT MISERABLE BIGOTRY WHICH MAKES SO MANY UNREADY TO BELIEVE THAT THERE IS ANY WORK OF GOD EXCEPT AMONG THEMSELVES.**"

There are churches where if you disagree with some of your fellow-members, you simply identify them as heretics and demand that they either change their opinions or leave the church. There are many such churches, some in easy walking distance of where we are right now, *but ours is not one of them*. Now is the time to decide whether we are serious about being United Methodists—not a community of those who don't have to ask questions because they all have the same right answer, but rather *a community of seekers* who realize that none of us has all the right answers and that we all have to be patient with each other, listen to each other, learn from each other, so that we can grow together in our journey toward a fuller understanding of the truth.

The question is whether we are ready to accept each other, give each other some slack, listen to each other, acknowledging that none of us has all the right answers. My opinion is not a litmus test for what it means to be a Christian—and *neither is yours*. We cannot linger indefinitely in the valley of decision. The time to decide is now. The life or death of our church is at stake. The salvation of our souls is at stake.

Recently I have heard some members of this church speaking contemptuously of their sisters and brothers, whom they accuse of straying from the purity of the truth as some understand it. For the first time in all my years as a United Methodist minister, I have had the almost unbearably painful experience of listening to some of my people condemning their fellow United Methodists on charges of heresy and cult. It breaks my heart, and I believe it breaks the heart of the One who shed his blood to open up for us the possibility of a new way of living together in peace and reconciliation. So you say you have serious theological disagreements with some of the other members of this church? *Christ your sovereign Lord commands you to love*

them and pray for them. Christ your King forbids you to judge them or condemn them for failing to be as theologically correct as you think yourself to be.

This much I can tell you for sure: *No one who loves God and God's people will ever go to hell for making a theological mistake.* On the other hand, you may be perfectly correct in all your religious opinions, but if you are hard-hearted and unforgiving toward your fellow-Christians who are not as mature in their faith or as clear in their doctrine as you think yourself to be, *that is the spirit of the Antichrist*, and if you don't repent, it will alienate you from the love of God and the God of love, in whom is our only hope for eternal life. If you don't love your fellow-Methodists, whom you have seen, how can you claim to love God whom you have not seen?

Hear the word of God for the United Methodists of Greenbrier today: *I have set before you life and death. Therefore choose life.* Right now is the time to make that decision, once and for all, for time and eternity.

For Greenbrier's First United Methodist Church this morning, I firmly believe that this is the word of the Lord. Amen.