

A Reflection on “A Gift to the World: Co-Laborers for the Healing of Brokenness”

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The Urgency of Communion

The work that leads to full communion between us, the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church, is urgent. Healing is always urgent. If you have been in an emergency room, or suffer from a chronic illness, healing is urgent. Do we see ecumenical work as an urgent task? In the gospels, a story that Jesus tells about a knock at midnight (Luke 11), to borrow the title of Dr. King’s well known sermon, which itself was based on a sermon by the evangelist DT Niles, “Summons at Midnight,” and included the memorable line, “Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where to find the bread.” This is urgency. In many communities the presence of Episcopal and United Methodist parishes is an essential part of the healing and the feeding of the diseased and the hungry. We are indeed the co-laborers, we do the heavy lifting. I do not intend a pride or arrogance. This was my experience across 29 years or pastoral ministry.

In this instance the practice precedes the theory. This is ecumenism from the ground up. Here the professional clergy catch up with how the laity are leading us. At our best, there is an experience of unity among followers of Jesus as a by-product of joining Jesus in his mission.

Of course, we are not always at our best. Sometimes there is a lack of urgency. The lack of urgency is due to the normalization of our divisions. In time, with some self-examination, we discover that the normalization of our divisions has more to do with our preferences and styles;

in the words of Flannery O' Connor, it has more to do with the manners than the mystery. But the normalization of our divisions can also be seen as an accommodation to divisions in the culture.

And thus we may be prone to exaggerate our differences. This was a luxury in a church culture, but we no longer live in a church culture; at least for most of us that is the lived reality. And so there becomes an urgency, which is grounded in what we believe about the gospel itself, which saves (heals) us; about the imperative of unity of the one Body, in a divided, even self-gerrymandered culture, with growing chasms of equity and justice; and about the clarity and capacity such a realization grants to join the missionary Holy Spirit, who is always going ahead of us, in the world. If there is a fracture, in the church, in the world, co-laboring together in the ministry of healing is urgent.

When Communion is Contested

The work is urgent, but the work is also contested. The work itself is contested because the descriptors, “we”, “us”, and “our” are contested. We are each of us in a time of redefinition.

These words appear in the document in an almost unexamined way. And yet our communion, our connection, is contested. A Gift to the World notes that there are no “church dividing issues” between us (59). And there is a great deal of substance upon which we can agree, most of the time. I call it the great tradition, it is broad and generous and spacious. The Jesus of the latter portion of Ephesians 2, who breaks down the dividing walls of our hostility; the Jesus of Colossians 1, in whom all things hold together. I could go on. In the document these are present in the foundational principles (116ff) and the affirmations (185ff).

And yet this work is contested. The unity we *have* is contested and the unity we *seek* is contested. Within our own communions we are an outward and visible sign of “the fractured human community”. The divisions mirror those in a nation of red and blue states. And the divisions arise from different conceptions about the nature and purpose of the church. The document Evangelicals and Catholics Together speaks of a fundamental vocation of those expressions of the body of Christ—“we contend together”, in other words, we form an alliance. Clearly we as United Methodists and Episcopalians do this work toward full communion in an ecosystem, both internal to our ecclesial bodies and in the US landscape, that has an alternative ecumenism, of evangelicals and catholics, and there is some overlap in those expressions of church with us.

In our ecumenical work we speak at times to the nation. But we are not a state church. We are each of us in a church that is at the margins of a culture that we seek to influence by our unity (“for the well being of all”, 12). So how do we do this essential work in more modest, even provisional ways? A modest, provisional posture would also reflect our present reality, in relationships evangelicals and catholics. How do we learn from these brothers and sisters and how do we teach them of our own riches?

The Marks of the Church

As we are critiqued at times from the more traditionalist side, we will need to draw upon these riches which we share in common with them. And so how do we recover and claim the language of what it means to be *one, holy, catholic* and *apostolic* (181)? To be one, or to seek unity, is often the stepchild of truth. And yet the truth of the gospel cannot be separated from Jesus’ prayer for the disciples in John 17, or the common baptism that is named for us in Ephesians 4.

+The church is *one*. The unity of the church is grounded in the One God (Deuteronomy 6), affirmed by Jesus (Mark 12), and in the teachings of the apostles in Ephesians 4 (there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism). This unity is a gift of God (I Corinthians 12), and is never a human achievement, right or claim. The practical expression of unity is the love of God and neighbor (which is also the practical expression of holiness.). Our complacency with division indicates a lack of love, and is finally a barrier to the mission of the gospel in the midst of unbelief; I pray, we hear Jesus saying in John 17, that they may be one, so that the world will believe that you have sent me. Thus unity needs to be visible.

It is true that we are connected with each other in the one body. When one suffers, all suffer. When one rejoices, all rejoice. In the United Methodist Church we have a term for this: the *connection*. It expresses our unity, our oneness. In the UMC we might identify the instruments of our unity as the itineracy of preachers, the superintendency, which includes bishops, and Christian conferencing.

We are one. But it goes far beyond being a Methodist. The One body of Christ includes all who profess the name of Jesus: Catholic to Pentecostal, house church to cathedral, urban to rural, conservative and liberal, if we must use those words! There are not many churches; there is one church, because there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

+The church is *holy*. We could ask a question at this point. Is the church holy? I remember early in our ministry an evening in which Pam and I had dinner with two women, sisters, who were the daughters of a minister and had grown up in a parsonage. It was an evening I will never forget---they rehearsed, through our four hour conversation, one negative experience after another across a number of churches---judgmentalism, mistreatment, inhumanity.

I left wondering---what am I getting myself into? Of course, the church is a human institution, and most of us are some combination of saint and sinner. The church's sins are often spread out before the public: clergy misconduct, financial scandal, racism, exclusion, unbelief. Some of our sins are more hidden---competition with other churches, or consumerism of religious experience, which is the dark side of attractional church, a dominant way of functioning in a market economy.

So what does it mean to say that the church is holy? The church as an ideal is holy, and yet even scripture confesses that "we have the treasure [of the gospel] in earthen vessels (2 Corinthians 4). One dimension of this holiness is that the church is set apart for a particular purpose; this is variously defined as word and sacrament, the body of Christ, and as a sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God. This holiness is both personal and social, evidenced by prayer and service, action and contemplation.

This requires an inner strength, a discipline. But this is a mark of the authentic church; Paul came back to this, over and over again, in I Corinthians. In an immoral culture, he called the followers of Jesus to holiness, and in a deeply divided society he reminded those who had been baptized that they were one.

+The church is *catholic*. I remember attending church as a teenager, and we would come to the place in the Apostles' Creed where we would say "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church", and there was always a slight hesitancy in that deep south congregation. In our hymnal there was an asterisk, beside the word catholic, with the explanation at the bottom of the page, "universal". And while we may not understand, when we say those words, what we mean by catholic church, they are deeply embedded in our tradition as Methodists.

One of John Wesley's most famous sermons was entitled "The Catholic Spirit". He said, in that sermon,

*"if your heart is as my heart, and you love God and all humanity, I ask no more: give me your hand"...*this love, implied for Wesley, the following: treating each other as a brother or sister in Christ, praying for each other, provoking one another to love and good works, loving not only in words but in actions and in truth. And he said, in a very revealing and profound sentence: *"So far as in conscience you can (retaining still your own opinions and your own manner of worshipping God), join with me in the work of God, and let us go on hand in hand."*

The church is catholic, or universal, in that its core identity is found in the whole and not merely in the fragments of its local expression. This resonates with Paul's image of the body in I Corinthians 12 and his meditation on love in I Corinthians 13. To do the work of God is, in the language of the Preamble to A Gift to The World, *"is to bring our churches into closer partnership (koinonia) in the mission and witness to the love of God"*.

+Finally, the church is *apostolic*. The church is apostolic as its life is traced to the teachings of the apostles. A Gift to the World does take up the matter of the historic episcopate (145ff), with the definition "succession in the apostolic faith—that is, to believe, preach and teach the faith that the apostles held" (156-157). This differs from literal apostolic succession, with the Pope being the historical successor to Peter of the New Testament, although this would be the conviction of Catholics, and I honor this tradition. The church is a family tree whose roots go down deeply into the apostles teaching about the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus, and how this event has already changed the world. I think of words at the end of the second

chapter of Acts: they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers.

What was the apostles' teaching? Well, they did have a need to answer that question, and so these short summaries circulated, from generation to generation, first in creeds within the New Testament itself, later in the Nicene Creed and then the Apostles Creed. The tradition of the apostles certainly has, as its core, the Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican expressions, and each stream has shaped the Wesleyan movement. This living tradition contains many of the resources that sustain our faith; at the same time, there is always a need for reformation, for prophetic witness, for what my friend Greg Jones calls "*traditioned innovation*".

And so we might then ask: What are the missional needs (274) that call for our adaptation? What might the work mean from the ground up? This is about the ministry of the laity (222), and how a text like Matthew 18 teaches us to be reconciled in our communities, and with this historically black churches, noted helpfully in 88ff. In my own episcopal area I have benefitted from conversations with Episcopal Bishop Dabney Smith, about human trafficking and with Episcopal Bishop Greg Brewer of Orlando about the vitality of the church.

The document speaks of adaptation to the post-revolutionary America (US) and the implications of our racist legacy. What are the present missionary needs that require our adaptation? This is clearly at the heart of our conversations about human sexuality, which continue in each of our traditions, and elicit different perspectives within our denominations and beyond them.

The church is apostolic as it carries on the teaching of the apostles; but it has another meaning. To be an apostle is literally to be "sent" into the world. "As the Father has sent me", Jesus says

in John 20, “so I send you”. The mission of the United Methodist Church is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world”. We acknowledge in our thinking about mission that we are sent from “everywhere to everywhere”. The global nature of our churches—in some sense the fruit of the apostolic mission—is also at the heart of many of our internal divisions. “The healing of the nations”, from Revelation 22 and the preamble of A Gift to The World, is some of the core work of the United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church in the U.S. What can we learn from each other?

In the fractured human community that is the UMC, one expression of our body is seeking to define itself (in an over and against way) as the church that is *one, holy, catholic and apostolic*. And the inference is that another stream of this same church is not. Much of this has to do with how we define holiness, and how the pilgrimage to holiness remains our calling.

To Rediscover Our Holiness

Can the United Methodist Church help the larger body to rediscover its holiness? And can we live, each of us in relationship to each other and within our different traditions, with differing conceptions of holiness? In what is, for us, an ecclesiology in progress, Wonder, Love and Praise, we speak of the saving love of God, that is for all (158); of the grace of God that transforms or changes us (168); and of this the saving love of God that forms community (179).

First the saving love of God that is for all. The word “all” is prominent in the writings of Charles Wesley, whom I often refer to as our greatest theologian, but of course the Episcopal brothers and sisters may lay a greater claim to him. But hear the words of the great writer of hymns and poetry:

“Jesus, thou art *all* compassion”;
“God hath bid *all* humankind”;
“truth and love let *all* men see”;
to me, to *all*, thy mercies move”;
“o may we *all* the loving mind that was in thee receive”.

I have often spoken or read these words, from the Book of Common Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ,
you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross
that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace:
So clothe us in your Spirit
that we, reaching forth our hands in love,
may bring those who do not know you
to the knowledge and love of you;
for the honor of your Name.

The grace of God through Jesus Christ is for all; at our best we can agree on this.

This grace also transforms us. I think of the Collect for Purity, a prayer with origins in 10th century Northern Europe, shaped by Thomas Cranmer and a prayer that John Wesley would have said as a common spiritual practice:

Almighty God,
to you all hearts are opened, all desires known
and from you no secrets are hidden.
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts,
by the power of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The cleansing of our hearts, the aspiration to perfect love—-which for the Wesleys was no more and no less than the love of God and neighbor.

So how might this aspiration to perfection or holiness unite and not divide us? The Episcopal Church speaks of communion, the United Methodist Church more of connection. But embedded in each is the reality of social holiness, which is the conviction that I cannot

be holy without you and you cannot be holy without me. I have been haunted, encouraged and convicted by these words from the Rule of Taizé:

"Never resign yourself to the scandal of the separation of Christians who so readily profess love for their neighbor and yet remain divided. Make the unity of the body of Christ your passionate concern."

To rediscover our holiness is to know that it does not separate us from each other. It draws us into a deeper love for each other, and by necessity, into a deeper love for God. And this leads to a final implication.

Repentance, Humility, Purgation

The call to repentance is in light of the absence of fully sharing this beautiful gospel, entrusted to our traditions, in the United States context. We have not always lived as if the gospel is for all. Here I am not talking about words printed on banners. I am talking about who hears the word of God preached, and who kneels at the altar to receive the grace. Repentance might lead to a humility, even a purgation. I think of the Fresh Expressions movement in the United Kingdom. Bishop Graham Cray told me that British Methodists were full partners with the Church of England from the very beginning in this movement. The presenting issue was the realization that the un-churched and de-churched were not likely to cross the threshold of the doors to many of the churches, and thus fresh expressions would need to be planted in the culture. But note: in the definition of a FX, they would exhibit the marks of the church—one, holy, catholic, apostolic.

Fresh Expressions, because they are an innovation of the tradition, require a humility, a looseness with many of our structures, practices and assumptions about everything from

formation to leadership to sacraments to authority. The Episcopal Church's willingness to reimagine the historic episcopate in A Gift to The World is an extraordinary act of humility and even purgation. It reflects a maturity and an urgency in the gospel. And to the degree that we can be flexible and adaptive, we can be truly apostolic and catholic. And we can be present in the margins where our traditional structures have a muted presence.

A Gift to the World

The motivation to be the churches God created us to be, and to see this as a way of walking together, will require a sense of urgency. Our nation is fractured. Our denominations are fragmented. This has almost become normalized. A Gift to the World, as a document but also as a lived experience, is rooted in our gospel, in our life together, and in our mission. Yet we must also acknowledge, perhaps more than we have in the past, that this work is contested. For this reason we will need to articulate the ongoing ministries of the UMC and EC as very clearly what we claim it to be, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

Speaking from the Wesleyan tradition, and knowing that our deepest birthright gift was to be a holiness movement within Anglicanism, we will need to lean into the unique facets of what we can offer: grace is for all, grace transforms us, grace forms communion and connection. We will also need to quickly confess that holiness is not arrogance or separation. Instead, holiness is the love of God—searching the scriptures, kneeling to receive the bread that is always our urgent need, singing the hymns of Charles Wesley—and love of our neighbor, which is increasingly the healing of divisions in a violent and fractured nation. At our best,

we can be a gift to the world. And in the present moment, yes, this is to co-labor for the healing of brokenness. We have receive the grace of God to do this work, together. Amen.

Resources: A Gift to the World: Co-Laborers for the Healing of Brokenness. The Episcopal Church and The United Methodist Church's Proposal for Full Communion. The Book of Common Prayer. The United Methodist Hymnal. John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit". Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Knock at Midnight". D.T. Niles, "Summons at Midnight". The Rule of Taize. Evangelicals and Catholics Together. Wonder, Love and Praise: Sharing a Vision of the Church. Graham Cray, Mission-Shaped Church. Stanley Hauerwas, "Which Church? What Unity? Or, An Attempt to Say What I May Think about the Future of Christian Unity".