

Connect with God
Luke 9:28-43
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In February and March we're exploring who we are as a church. We're asking "what is our unique way if making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?" The answer is we invite people to ...come as you are....be inspired... explore faith... connect with God.....join together... help others. To connect with God is part of our core identity.

Jesus' identity is the focus of the reading from Luke's gospel. It begins "Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray." The number eight is important. On the eighth day of his life a Jewish infant boy is marked as a member covenant with Israel through circumcision. Baby boys are given their identity on the eighth day. Jesus' identity is revealed eight days after Peter declared Jesus to be "the Messiah of God." The transfiguration happened eight days after Jesus predicted he would suffer, be killed and be raised three days later. That's why baptismal fonts have eight sides. Baptism marks our identity as Christians.

Today is the last Sunday before Lent begins: Transfiguration Sunday. To be transfigured means to be made into something more beautiful, more elevated. The transfiguration is a story about Jesus' identity. His appearance changes ("the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white"). Moses and Elijah appear (representing the law and the prophets). Moses was there at the beginning of God's covenant with Israel and Elijah will be there at the end of time. The three talk of Jesus' impending departure (his "exodus") in Jerusalem. When God's voice is heard from the cloud, there's not doubt about who Jesus is: "this is my Son, my chosen, listen to him!" Jesus' appearance changes but he's still the person he was before: the healer, the one with power over evil. In the second part of this reading, Jesus comes down from the mountain where a father and son are waiting for him. "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; suddenly a spirit seizes him and all at once he shrieks. I begged your disciples to cast it out but they could not.... Bring your son here....While he was coming the demon dashed him to ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father." Jesus is not only the one who is revealed in splendor and glory on the mountain. He is the one who helps us see the possibilities for hurting people to be changed into something more beautiful, to become elevated too. Jesus leads us into the real world of suffering people, and challenges us to act as agents of healing. Here the disciples couldn't cast out this demon; all they could do was bring this father and son to Jesus.

Part of how we make disciples of Jesus Christ here at First United Methodist Church Baraboo is we connect them to God revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus is our window into God. He heals our brokenness. He washes away the effects of our sin. He helps us see what God looks like through his way of being with people of power and people without power, his willingness to give his very life for us and for the salvation of the world. We connect people to through worship and education ministries for adults and children.

When United Methodists talk about connecting people with God we're talking about using the "means of grace." This was a term John Wesley used. He wanted Methodists to live by the general rules ("do no harm, do all the good you can, stay in love with God") and Wesley wanted people to use means of grace: tools to connect them with God. Some of the "means of grace" were individual (like weprivate devotion and prayer), others were communal (worship, the sacraments). Works of mercy focused on meeting the needs of individuals; works of justice addressed societal needs (like ending slavery). I believe works of mercy -- serving others -- is a primary means of grace at First UMC Baraboo. You do a really good job of seeing the beauty -- the sacred worth -- in other people. As a church, you connect people to God through your relationships. Last year the design team was struggling to come up with wording that describes our unique way of doing ministry. (The result of our discussion is the value proposition you have on your bulletin.) The idea of hands-on mission and service in the community kept coming up as something this congregation believes in very strongly. Connecting with God for you means being in relationship, and helping people discover they can be transfigured -- elevated beyond the struggles of everyday life -- so they can glimpse who they really are: people of sacred worth. Ones for whom Christ died. In the process of doing works of mercy, those who serve receive the gifts the poor have them. John Wesley believed the poor have a charism -- a gift -- that those who are not poor desperately needed. So, works of mercy can transfigure -- elevate -- those who are bound by oppression, poverty, illness, addiction, neglect.

On this Transfiguration Sunday, we celebrate Jesus' identity as the one who is both divine and human; both the glorious Son of God **and** the one who comes down from the mountain to battle evil forces harming human beings. Today we celebrate our church's identity as a place where people connect with God through worship, education and works of mercy. As a church, you know who we are. The welcoming statement you passed in January, which we used as our call to worship today is part of your identity. Soon, the Administrative Council will be discerning how our congregation's works of mercy and justice can touch even more lives, and what it means to move forward as a Reconciling Congregation of the United Methodist Church.

On this Transfiguration Sunday we lament that the identity of our beloved United Methodist Church is not as clear as either Jesus' identity or our identity as a congregation. Let me now shift to talking about the special session of the General Conference which took place this week. I thought I knew who the United Methodist was. This special session in St. Louis does not reflect the UMC I know and love. This is not the United Methodist Church I first got to know in 1981 at Boston University School of Theology starting; nor is it the church I joined as a member in 1994; nor is it the church I have served as a pastor since 1997. That United Methodist church has always had generous spirit, a desire to foster in others the ways of blessing others through living a practical faith, touching lives with mercy, grace, and hope. This was a faith that allowed for a variety of Biblical interpretations, a faith that wasn't focused on assenting to correct doctrine but passionate about serving the world in Christ's name. The church on display in St. Louis was not that church.

General Conference voted to adopt the most restrictive and regressive of the three plans put forward for the future of the UMC. The Traditional plan calls for punitive actions against those who violate only the parts of the *Book of Discipline* relating to homosexuality. The Judicial Council won't rule on what parts of the traditional plan are in line with our church's constitution until the end of April. Parts of this traditional plan that violate the church's constitution will ever end up in the book of Discipline. It's possible that if the provisions in the traditional plan can't be enforced, those who pushed for the Traditional plan may yet exit and form a new Methodist denomination. We just don't know.

The One Church Plan was supported by a majority of bishops and favored by the 70% of the American delegates. The One Church Plan offered space for a variety of approaches to ministry regarding LGBTQ persons. This plan wasn't even brought to the floor for discussion. Through what I saw on-line this week, I came to believe the General Conference of our church was possessed by the unclean spirit of homophobia (the dislike of or prejudice against homosexual people). I confess, deeply grieve and lament that I am part of a denomination that continues to cause such harm to our LGBTQ siblings. This unclean spirit of homophobia is just one of many ugly examples in our world today of how fearful people scapegoat a group of people and label them "other" – which gives them (or others) permission to deny their sacred worth at the very least, and commit acts of violence against them at the worst. From what I'm learning from those who were in St. Louis, there were many moments when LGBTQ people were disregarded, disrespected, harmed. All this left many people wondering: is this really my church?

For those of us who longed for a transfigured United Methodist Church where we can undo the harm done to LGBTQ people, this has been a deeply disappointing week. But we are not without hope, nor are we without a path forward. If nothing else, this week has helped me see more clearly who I am: a heterosexual, white, privileged woman who grieves at the thought of losing the church I have loved. I

have tried to be and want to continue to try to be an ally to our LGBTQ friends/siblings who have felt all along they are alienated from the church they thought they knew. When I joined the United Methodist church, I joined the loyal opposition seeking to cast out the demon of homophobia that I knew was present. I remain committed to being part of that loyal opposition. I plan to do all in my power to resist the provisions of the legislation passed at General Conference.

In light of the special session of the General Conference, some will be tempted to leave our church, to leave the UMC altogether. To those I'd say this: I invite you to come with me on a journey of resistance to homophobia wherever it takes us as a church. The voices of resistance to what happened at the special GC session are starting to be heard. The Board of Ordained Ministry of the Wisconsin Annual Conference, the Western Jurisdiction and the North East Jurisdiction of the UMC church are among them. Our LGBTQ siblings are asking us to stay and fight. To leave now would be telling those who have caused harm that we've given up. As for me, I'm ready to lead this congregation in listening for God's call and making strategic decisions about how we as a church move forward from here. By adopting the welcoming statement, you have said you as a church are part of this loyal opposition and want the church to be more inclusive. This is to act in accordance with who we are: people who "embrace the diversity of human nature, and celebrate the inherent uniqueness, potential and contributions of all persons, regardless of age, race, national origin, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, family structure, economic status, and physical or mental ability.

I deeply believe in our mission of offering people the means of grace so they can connect with God: worship, Christian formation ministries for children and adults, opportunities to serve others in Christ's name. You do a great job of connecting people with God by helping them look into the faces of strangers and see people capable of transfiguration. By God's grace, more often than not, you connect with God by reflecting the light of God back to each another. That is your identity.

In a few months' time we'll know whether the legislation passed at General Conference will become church law or not. We have to wait for that clarity. What we can't wait on is doing our ministry – our work of casting out the demons of evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves, and working towards a world of justice and peace.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.