

Gracious and loving God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hurting, and hungry, and dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In the opening of the Acts of the Apostles, we find Jesus making his last appearance with the disciples. They were gathered on the mountaintop at Olivet and Jesus final words to them are reported with minor variances in the four Gospels, but there is a common theme. In his final words, Christ commissions the disciples to go and preach repentance in Jesus' name to *all* the nations. In Luke's Gospel, we hear:

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father has promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.

Parallel texts can be found in all of the Gospels and in the opening of the book of Acts.

In John, we hear "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*"

In Mark, "*Go into all the world and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation.*"

At the opening of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we hear "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*"

But the description of the final words of Christ that we know best are found in the Gospel according to Matthew:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

This *Great Commission*, as it has come to be known, along with the other scriptures, call all of us to a life of action. Hear again the action words in the Great Commission.

We are to *go*.

We are to *make*.

We are to *teach*.

And, we are to *remember*.

When Jesus ascended to the Father as it is described in Acts 1, we hear these words: *While he was going and they (the disciples) were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."* The angels were telling them to get off their duffs, to stop looking and start living; living the life that Jesus had called them to live and living the commission that he had given to them.

The disciples returned to Jerusalem, to the same upper room that they have occupied since the time of the crucifixion and they wait. Well, the waiting is over. It's the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit has arrived and the Spirit has arrived with a vengeance.

We're told that like a mighty rush of wind, the Spirit swooshes in upon them, descending upon them like tongues of fire. In that moment, they are seized with a power to speak in other languages... not some gibberish "spirit language," but in the native languages of the folks passing by in the streets below... and the disciples are all telling of the Gospel of Jesus Christ fluently in these foreign languages and the people who hear them are amazed. Everyone wonders what this is all about... some of the more cynical among them speculate that the disciples are drunk.

When Peter addresses the crowd, he reminds them of the words of the prophet Joel...

*In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.*

Your sons and daughters will prophesy.

Your young will see visions.

Your elders will dream dreams...

And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Acts 2:17,21 CEB).

Peter continued the sermon, encouraging those who were listening to give their hearts and their lives to Jesus, to change their lives and at the end of the day, nearly 3,000 were baptized and they became a community of faith.

The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to

everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47).

This was the day that the church was born.

In the past couple of years, we've heard the news from the Pew Study of Religious Life that Christianity is losing ground in America. Almost across the board, the percentages of people in America who identify as Christian are dropping. The number of persons identifying as having no religious preference, the "nones" are increasing...these folks aren't necessarily atheist (people who believe that there is no god) or agnostic (folks who really aren't sure if there is a god or not), they are typically folks who really don't care either way. There is another number that is increasing as well, and these are the "dones" the folks who have just dropped out of the church because they are tired of the infighting, the hypocrisy, and the close alignment between some factions of evangelical Christianity and a social conservatism that is shrill, hateful, and so far removed from the concept of loving neighbor...the 2nd part of the Great Commandment, if you can remember.

Now, I'm not worried about the Church. The holy, apostolic, and universal (or catholic) church. I'm not worried about it because Jesus told Peter in Matthew 16:18 "upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

But I *am* concerned that we in North America just don't get it. Not long ago, Dr Marsha McFee, a leader in worship design and practice presented this thought, "It's ok if people hate you because you are a Christian. It's not ok if people hate Christianity because of you." By the way, this quote came from her atheist neighbor who heard it from who knows where.

In so many cases we have forgotten that the church is *the people*. Broken people who have been empowered in their baptism and in the baptism of the Holy Spirit with gifts that are to be used to build the kingdom of God here on earth. In too many cases, the focus of the church has become the building; in too many cases, that building has either become an albatross or an idol or both and it causes us to lose sight of our mission.

Paragraph 120 in the *Book of Discipline* tells us what our mission is: “*The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.*” That is the mission of every one of us in this room today. The mission might sound vaguely familiar. Matthew 28:19 anyone? “Go and make disciples of all nations...” The Greek can also be translated this way, “As you go, *disciple*” which changes the word disciple from a noun... an object to be acted upon to a verb which connotes action.

With the idea that mission informs vision which in turn generates missions into the world, I want to share the vision statement of the Holston Annual Conference with you... it’s something that we should be hearing often... and believe me, you will:

*God envisions
bold, passionate, and joyful communities of faith
where the spiritual hunger to worship God and to serve Christ
sets disciples on fire with Spirit-filled, risk-taking love for all God's children
until Holston Conference reflects the saving grace
and redeeming justice of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

As we prepare to enter into this new Conference year and as I prepare to enter my second year of service to McFarland UMC, I ask you these questions: Where is *our* boldness?

Where is *our* passion?

Where is *our* joy?

Several years ago, Bishop James Swanson asked us to consider the question, “If your church closed its doors tomorrow, would anyone notice? Would anyone care?” It’s a question that has been haunting me for the last couple of weeks.

First, let me salute the ministries that are being done through the Free Store, through our ongoing partnership with the Rossville Schools, through the Food Box that we supply at the Elementary School, through your active participation in local mission initiatives providing home repair and maintenance, and through our engagement with the community in multiple ways. Your support of the Coats for Kids ministry, the YMCA Backpack food ministry at Christmas, and your response to the Hands on Mission buckets this year has blown me away... by the way, the Scenic South District collected 1355 mission buckets for Zimbabwe - 225 more than last year. Thank you for responding so enthusiastically to this project. We do a pretty good job of caring for each other and, when we see a need we try to help. This not only plays out in the local community, but elsewhere as well.

These ministries are great things, but I think we can do better. I’m not suggesting that we should re-invent the wheel, but I AM suggesting that we can find ways to work together with our other United Methodist churches in the area to make an even bigger impact on the lives of people that we touch.

We may think that we are too small or too old or too whatever the excuse might be to inhibit our ability to reach out to others. But, when the church works together, we can accomplish great things. When the 880 churches in the Holston Conference worked together, we proved that we could accomplish big goals 6 years ago with our \$1 million dollar goal for Imagine No Malaria. We raised \$1.2

million... pretty impressive considering the most that we had ever raised in a conference offering before was \$175,000.

Finding ways to work together with Simpson, Flintstone, Fort Oglethorpe, Newnan Springs, and maybe even St Elmo and East Ridge UMC, we can make a greater impact on the immediate area than we could ever do on our own. It is my hope that we can get some of the grant money that will be funded through the Annual Conference mission offering to serve as seed money to start some addiction ministries that are so desperately needed in our community.

I'm not asking us to work harder, but by breaking down the barriers, whether they be jealousy, pride, or any number of things that provide stumbling blocks to our mission of making disciples and caring for the least of these, I believe that we can work smarter and reach more people who need to see the church in action, but more than that, they need to see Jesus reflected in all that we say, all that we do, and in all that we are.

Craig Leonard, our Lay Leader and Member of Annual Conference, and Barbara are spending some of their anniversary time representing us at Annual Conference at the Lake Junaluska Assembly. They went up yesterday. Charlene and I will be joining them this afternoon. We will join nearly 2000 other representatives from across the Holston Annual Conference stretching from our corner of Northwest Georgia to Wytheville, Virginia. We will worship together. We will discuss what it means to be in ministry together. We will celebrate together what we did right in the past year, we will discuss together what we did wrong, together we will mourn those clergy and clergy spouses who died in the past year. Most importantly, we will re-examine and remember the ties that bind us together as we try to discern what our future will look like as we seek to be the Body of Christ to the world. Pray for us.

Your young will see visions, your elders will dream dreams...

As the body of Christ, we should be in the vision and dream business as we go about seeking God's vision and God's dreams for us and our communities and then making those dreams happen.

We are *not* alone.

We *can* make a difference.

Together, we can transform the world in Jesus' name.

So, what are we waiting for?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.