

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.

As Jesus made 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 his name to *all* the nations. As Luke's Gospel ends, 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.

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.*"

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, probably 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 now the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit has arrived and the Spirit has arrived with a vengeance.

Luke is at a loss of words to describe it. We're told that like a fierce 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, and at the end of the day, nearly 3,000 were baptized and they became a community of faith.

This was the day that the church was born. Luke continues to describe what this meant as chapter 2 continues:

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).

Wow. Can you feel the excitement? Makes you want to catch the spirit, right?

In the past couple of years, we've heard the news from the Pew Study of Religious Life that Christianity is losing ground in the United States. Almost across the board, the percentages of people in the US 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 referred to as 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 too 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 that "*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. And when it comes to act out that calling, it is expected that it will be done with boldness, with passion, and with joy.

As we prepare to enter into a new Conference year and as I prepare to enter my fifth 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 throughout this pandemic.

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 history of 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 project has blown me away.

All in all, 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. For example, when the 853 congregations in the Holston Conference work together, we proved that we could accomplish big goals 9 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 one year for a conference offering before that was \$175,000.

Finding ways to work together with Simpson, Flintstone, Fort Oglethorpe, Fairview, Newnan Springs, and maybe even St Elmo, Jones Memorial and East Ridge UMC, we can make a greater impact on the immediate area than we could ever do on our own. A priority in the coming year is to take a comprehensive look at the ministries taking place among these churches that I've mentioned so that we can determine the most efficient and effective ways that we can be in ministry together. Reed Shell and I have already had some introductory conversations around the topic of effectiveness.

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.

As you know, Ann Russell and I are leaving immediately after church this morning to travel to Lake Junaluska, North Carolina and the first full in-person meeting of the Holston Annual Conference since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be good to be together again. While we are there, we will worship together - there is nothing like the sound of 2000 voices raised together in Stuart Auditorium. 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.

But as we in the Holston Conference *talk* about being the church, it is our task to just *be* the church. In the light of recent happenings over the past few years, it is a task that should be a challenge. There's been too much fighting, too much division, too much hatred.

We need healing. But we won't experience healing until we are ready to rid ourselves of the attitudes and practices that have led to a national sickness that is eating away at us and our institutions like a cancer. This is all a problem of the heart. And the only source of healing that can change our lives is Jesus and our commitment to follow his lead.

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

We are 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. But our dreams and visions mean nothing until we expand them to include ALL of God's children.

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.