

Gracious 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 hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The events of the past few years have been on my mind lately. We have seen division in our world, division in our nation, division in our community, and division in our church. For me and many others, The division in our United Methodist Church has been most distressing. First with the called General Conference in 2019 that was to end for all time the debate over some of the issues that have been divisive for the past 50 years of our life together. Of course, in what would be described by our delegates to that Conference, it was one of the most acrimonious gatherings they had ever been part of. And the decisions that they made in 2019 went beyond the pale for the majority of United Methodists in the US and around the world as we saw in the backlash of delegates elected by the Annual Conferences for the regular meeting of the General Conference that was scheduled for 2020... and then there was COVID - the worldwide pandemic that turned everything upside down.

Of course, we pivoted, we scrambled, and we found ways to connect when we could not gather together. As an aside, had I known that I would ever need to have the skills of a TV editor and producer, I would have minored in Mass Communication back in college.

As the 2020 General Conference was pushed back, twice, the leaders of a movement that was designed to cause disruption in the United Methodist Church decided that they would form the Global Methodist Church and started a campaign to strip as many local churches away from the UMC as they could.

They succeeded in the US of encouraging around a quarter of the US churches to disaffiliate, or separate, from the UMC. In the process, they spread rumors, half-truths, and in some cases spread outright lies in order to create as much grief and distress as possible. And I, for one, can never forget the damage that has been done.

You see, the United Methodist Church has been unique in the diversity of its membership. People of all political persuasions, people from across the spectrum of society coming together for what many have referred to as a big tent. For example, we count both former Vice President Dick Chaney, President George W. Bush and former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton as members of the United Methodist Church. A big tent indeed. And I am sure that within this room this morning, or listening to this sermon online there is a broad spectrum of opinion on all sorts of issues as well.

We've heard all sorts of things about the most recent meeting of our General Conference which took place in Charlotte, North Carolina just a few weeks ago. From all accounts, it was a gathering that came with a strong spirit of calm and a strong spirit of unity that has been unusual over the past few quadrennia. The changes to remove harmful language in our Book of Discipline were overwhelmingly endorsed by delegations from around the world. Did everyone agree, no, but they acknowledged what has been known for some time, that we are not all in agreement on many issues. But we stay together. Like family. The bottom line is that nothing will change here at McFarland unless you want it to change. That's the bottom line.

I was speaking about a big tent, But I don't know that "big tent" is the most appropriate description of what we Wesleyans are attempting to do. As I prepare to leave McFarland following my retirement and say goodbye to you all on June 16th, I have begun watching the worship services from Christ United

Methodist Church where I will assume the mantle of Director of Congregational Care on July 1. I will have to adjust to being part of 3 very diverse worship services on Sunday morning. So much for retirement.

In watching Nathan Malone's sermon from last Sunday, I was inspired by the story that he told about Jesus' table... a big table, that welcomes all, that engages all, and challenges ALL of us. In that sermon, Nathan talks about the expanding tables that many of us knew from our childhood... in fact, some of us may still have tables like I remember from my grandparents. Tables that could take additional leaves in order to accommodate additional people when company was coming. And it required a concentration of effort and people working together to make that happen.

We had to find the additional leaves usually hiding in a closet somewhere. We had to pull the table apart, which in some cases was no easy feat. Then we had to carefully place the additional leaves in place, lining up the tongue and groove joints just right for the wood pieces to slide together. It took intentional effort on the part of several folks for the enlarged family to gather around the big table.

As we see in our lessons for this morning, Jesus was not one to color within the lines. He tended to push the boundaries, especially with the proper religious folks. He was constantly expanding the table, inviting diverse groups of people to sit with him and share a meal together. He constantly pointed out that God is calling all of us to come together, to work together, and to do so in spite of our differences.

As we prepare to gather around this table in just a few minutes and share in the sacrament of Holy Communion, we come from different backgrounds, from different perspectives, and from different life experiences. We acknowledge that, but let us also acknowledge that we come as family. Family that doesn't

always agree, but I hope that we stay together. For we are better together, working together, serving together seeing to live out our calling to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world... together.

Let us pray:

Almighty and gracious God,

we're the first to admit that we don't have all of the answers, we don't even understand all of the questions. But we seek to do our best to get to know you better. As we come to your table, fill us with your Spirit, help us to see your image in everyone that we meet, and help us to understand that you draw all people to you. Help us to be part of that draw. Ease our fear and anxiety and prepare us to move forward in your grace and love... together.

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