

“God’s Generous Heart”

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Jeremiah 7:5-7, 11

If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. . . . Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?

Romans 10:8b-13

“The word is near you,
on your lips and in your heart”

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

People in the Wednesday study group read this text last week. We’re studying Jesus’ last week in Jerusalem according to Mark’s gospel using the book *The Last Week*. We looked at Jesus words about turning the Temple into a den of thieves as he upset the moneychangers’ tables. We learned that the “thieves” isn’t the most important word here, rather it’s “den,” which often gets overlooked. The authors explained that Jesus is referencing today’s text in Jeremiah where that prophet also uses the wording, “den of thieves” or robbers.

I bring this up because the authors – both of them Bible scholars – make an excellent case for the idea that rather than the overturned tables being a complain about buying and selling, Jesus is taking up Jeremiah’s 400-year-old prophecy that just because the Jewish people have the Temple and are God’s chosen people does not mean that they should rest on their laurels. God expects them to act with justice even more than God expects them to give offerings in the Temple. God is distressed by their behavior.

“The people’s everyday injustice makes them robbers and they think the temple is their safe house, den, hideaway... The temple is not the place where the robbery occurs, but the place the robbers go for refuge.”¹ Think Butch and Sundance’s hideout in Wyoming. Or the closet or the treehouse where you would hide out as a child when you’d done something you knew you really shouldn’t have.

Kurt Howard came up to me after the session and said he had trouble with the idea of an angry God. He thinks of his prayers that God has answered. He held up the picture of him holding his daughters when they were young, saying he sees God like that. God loves like he loves his girls. I agreed. Yes, God loves... all of us. And it’s wonderful that God answered his prayers. But

there are other children who don't have a parent to care for them like he cared for his girls. And there are other parents whose prayers seem to go unanswered as they watch their children die from polluted dirty water or war or starvation. God loves those ones too. We need to see the bigger God who expects us to do practice justice.

I believe, if you'll pardon the anthropomorphism, that God gets angry. I believe God cries. And I believe God cries during – and since – the special General Conference (GC) a week and a half ago.

I did you a disservice last Sunday. With Scott Carlson coming to present our MCCI event, I felt I had to keep things moving. Yet I wish I had found some way to honor our feelings and concerns after that GC. From what I have heard, I know that some of you breathed a sigh of relief that our denomination preserved language excluding certain persons from ordination. Others of you cried for friends or family members who had their exclusion reaffirmed. Some of you have said that this marks the death of the UMC.

For the first few days, I did not know what to think. I grieve that this Church I was baptized and grew up in still behaves like it knows more than God. Since then I have come to see this as an opportunity for rebirth. We don't know what is ahead and the unknown can be scary, but we can have hope. The Church is not what it was 100, 60 or even one year ago. A hundred years ago, we were still two North and South denominations; only 63 years ago did the Methodist Church grant full clergy rights to women. Last year, we believed the One Church Plan might hold the Church together.

Yet this GC may be a birthing pang for something new. The UMC has spread God's good news worldwide for over 200 years. Now some will seek to be their own Church apart from us. Think of it like teenagers who in their efforts to become individuals apart from the family, sometimes make their parents miserable in the years before they move out. I don't mean to tell you how to feel but I believe we can have hope that this denomination which we love is changing, and that it's changing for the better.

But again, I did you a disservice. The UMC is a big umbrella. Even within this congregation are some who are quite conservative in their understandings of God and the church and how we relate as God's people, while some are in the middle and others are quite progressive. We are all welcome; we all find community here. I need to be pastor to all of you. And to do that, I have been taking the *via media*, the middle road. Yet the person who does not stand for what is important ends up standing for nothing.

I have done you this disservice because I have not honored my belief that the Bishop's Cabinet appointed *me* to be your pastor. Did you know that the cabinet waited through months of the appointment season because they had not yet found just the one they believed to be that right person? To Serve. With. You. Until they came to my file.

I was appointed for my unique gifts and skill set – and by extension, for the ones that I do not have. For my passions for justice and mission, worship and discipleship. For my tenacity, my willingness to do the hard thing for the good of this church. I was appointed to serve with you from my own center, just as God calls you to serve from your own place of inmost joy. Too

often, I have failed in this – I have been silent when I was moved to speak, a sin in the Quaker understanding, and in mine. And my inmost being cries.

I know in my bones that every single person is a beloved child of God. I know that none of us are equipped to judge anyone else. Thankfully, we're not called to judge; we are called to practice love in justice, as Jeremiah reminds us. To practice love, or to practice worship, without first practicing justice is against what God wants from us. This is because God does indeed have a generous heart. God is the creator of the entire cosmos, not simple of people who think like me – or you – or just the straight people or the white ones or the ones who think that this or that verse in the Bible is more important than all the rest. As followers of Christ, we are expected to work on practicing it.

The first of John Wesley's Three Rules is to "Do No Harm" yet our denomination has done harm. We know this. People are hurting on both sides of the question. Many feel rejected. Again. Even if the Church is not substantially different than it was before GC they have been told again that they are only marginally accepted.

I listened as one woman at GC said that she loves her niece but not her choice. I was reminded of Chris Smith, preaching professor at UTS. Chris is the most pastoral person I have ever known. She's a UM Elder but has never served a church because she is lesbian. I'll never forget her words one day, "People don't choose this." I think of another who is facing changing their identity – their name, their very body – everything everyone has ever known them to be, because they finally realized why they never felt at home in their skin. They know now that they're someone different. I marvel at this person's courage! Especially in world, a nation, a state, that still rejects transgender persons.

Many of you have no qualms about accepting and loving any GLBTQIA+ person that might walk through our doors. Indeed you have nurtured them as they grew up among you. If they wanted to get married, you'd hope for an invitation. That comforts me because speaking from my center, I believe that love, the love that builds strong relationships, is always a God-gift. I would risk my elder's orders (i.e. the right to continue as a UM pastor) to marry anyone with that kind of love, I simply haven't been asked yet.

I've talked about myself a lot today, but only to talk about the church that we all love and we want to continue. Strong. We've been praying for Breakthroughs for ourselves and our church. And God is revealing them. God will also be revealing them for the UMC. So keep praying.

You are the face of the UMC and you are *all* beloved of God. We surely don't agree on everything but I love you. And I pray for you. I also pray for the ones who are not here – and I don't mean the homebound, though I pray for them too. I mean the people in our neighborhood who don't give us the time of day because we don't give them the time of day. I pray for the ones who come to the give-away which is what they call the PNC. I pray for the ones who reject God or the church before we have a chance to reject them. I pray for the ones who only know what they hear in the media and so believe that First Church does not accept them.

I hope you pray for these people too. But, especially after the GC, praying is not enough. We need to get the word out that this is not us – to post it on FB, to tell people when we're getting

our hair cut, buying groceries and getting an oil change. We need to tell everyone that First UMC accepts them! Just like we always have. Loves everyone. Includes everyone. We need to tell them that we're a place for anyone who wants to connect and for anyone who is trying to figure things out. Anyone.

ⁱ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's' Final Days in Jerusalem*, HarperOne, 2006, 44.