

DANGEROUS DIS-RE-MEMBERING

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Isaiah 43:18-19 and Isaiah 46:8-10 (The Message)

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[SLIDE 1 – title]

*For all the saints who from their labors rest
Who thee by God before the world confessed
Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blessed.
Alleluia! Alleluia! (Bishop William Walsham How)*

My heart is so full this morning: I give thanks, in particular for two saints in my life, who now from their labors rest: For my Granny, the first theologian I knew, who first took me to church on, Easter Sunday 1985 when I was four years old. For my mentor the late Bishop Martin David McLee, who encouraged me and taught me how to encourage myself. For these saints I give thanks.

And this morning, Bishop Bickerton, I absolutely must give thanks to you for this enormously humbling opportunity to stand and preach in this pulpit, where I was ordained three years ago. You inspire me, Bishop. Your episcopal ministry and vision have blessed so many. And my prayer now is that God will unsettle you in such a way so as to lead the people called Methodists of New York and Connecticut with holy boldness and humble grace, indeed leading us in getting down to business. I could not have imagined 13 years ago, when I and hundreds of others voted for you at the 2004 Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference, that you would now give me this honor.

When a black gay elder in full connection gets to preach at a United Methodist annual conference during LGBTQ Pride Month, well...I am learning each day the meaning of that song my Granny used to sing, "Amazing Grace...how sweet the sound."

PRAYER

PART ONE - DISREMEMBERING [AMNESIA]

In her masterful 1987 Nobel Prize novel, *Beloved*, Dr. Toni Morrison writes a story of love so deep that it hurts to the bone when it's lost. *Beloved* is a love story about the pain that comes with loss—the kind of heartache that makes you want to forget, because it hurts too bad to remember. At the conclusion of *Beloved*, Morrison warns, "Remembering seemed unwise."¹

Still, *Beloved* is a ghost story, because the loss of that type of love haunts you. Although it may be

¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 1987 (New York: Plume, 1988), 274.

unwise to remember, our hearts do not allow us to **disremember**—to forget. So the spirits of lost loved ones walk beside us as we journey along the road of life, just like the ghost of the resurrected Jesus on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:12-35).

As we gather here, just days after our celebration of the gift of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost, it seems most appropriate then for us to speak of spirits and of ghosts. Because like Ezekiel, sometimes we gather in the dry places, in the valley of dry bones, in dead places, even in the “sunken places.”² And it is here that we prophesy and we dream dreams and we see visions and we await the promise of the Holy Spirit to breathe life upon bodies that have been “waiting to exhale.”

It is Holy Ghost that restores “the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for,” says Morrison, and calls us—*you and me*—beloved.³ [SLIDE 2]

O, how we have forgotten, we who gather here in this place between Pentecost and Trinity Sunday. We have forgotten the power of Spirit to refresh us and transform us and to make the Church brand new. We have forgotten the *power* that breaks every chain; the *power* that looses every fetter; the *power* that sets at liberty those who are oppressed.

For the spirit is power and “*For where the spirit of the Lord is there is liberty*” (2 Corinthians 3:17). And there is power in the name of Jesus.

O, yes, we have forgotten that. Sometimes have been subjugated and subjected and sup-pressed; op-pressed, re-pressed, and com-pressed, causing us even to become de-pressed. Still the Bible tells us that although we are “*pressed down on every side, we are not crushed; we are perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed*” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

I believe some of us have come to conference for **revival**, *beloved*, because sometimes we just need to be reminded.

Even though these are difficult days for our beloved Church, have we forgotten that there is “*righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost*” (Romans 14:17)? Oh yes, how we have disremembered that the Spirit is love and life and liberty. And the Spirit brings justice for the marginalized; and joy for the brokenhearted.

Yes, Jesus said is best: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me preach to Good News to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*” (Luke 4:18-19).

Ironically, “disremember,” which means “forget,” is a word that we have largely forgotten.

And it is dangerous to forget even when remembering is painful. Yes, sometimes it’s easier to

² Ezekiel 37:1-14. “Sunken places” is a reference to Jordan Peele’s film “Get Out” (February 24, 2017).

³ Morrison, *Beloved*, 275.

forget, because then we can avoid the pain. But George Santayana, the great Spanish philosopher is correct: *"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."*

When we put our heads in the proverbial sand, we fail to learn from past mistakes. As the body of Christ, those who are shaped by remembrance, we cannot afford to ignore past mistakes that would make for brighter future—if only we would learn from them.

As people shaped and sustained at Table by the Lord's Supper, remembrance—the Greek word is *anamnesis*—is at the core of our practice. O, but the opposite of *anamnesis* is a word that we are more familiar with: ***amnesia***.

Here's the point: As people called by Christ to *anamnesis* (remembrance), selective memory—***amnesia***—does not serve the cause of Christ. [SLIDE 3].

This is why Memorial Services are so important for Christ-formed communities. Yes, we honor our dearly departed, trusting that the dead in Christ will rise. And at the same time, we *re-member*—we stitch together that which has been forgotten, that which has been broken. Because as Christians we must confront the realities of our present age, informed by a painful past and in the light of a hopeful future.

PART TWO - AMNESIA AND THE AMBIGUITY OF SCRIPTURE

This is the challenging and beautiful gift of Holy Scripture that comes to us today. What have we disremembered (what have we forgotten), you ask?

Well, I just stopped by to remind you that Scripture is not uncomplicated: During this Memorial Service, on the one hand, the prophet Isaiah tells us to **"Forget** about what's happened and don't keep going over old history" (Isaiah 43:18, *The Message Bible*).

And then on the other hand, and just a few chapters later, the prophet Isaiah declares, **"Remember** your history, your long and rich history" (Isaiah 46:8, *The Message Bible*).

So what are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to judge?

I submit that we must live a **messy faith** where there are no clear-cut answers, no either/or, no simple black/white...but only both/ands.

In scripture, we are given not a single book but rather a collection of books. Scriptures that require reading and interpretation for the present age. You see, the Bible is not a single book, but a series of holy texts written across hundreds of years, across hundreds of miles of time and space. And sometimes Scripture contradicts itself even within a single book.

Yes, Scripture has been used for good *and* manipulated to do great harm.

What have we disremembered (what have we forgotten), you ask? Let me make it plain:

The Church has used Scripture to justify a long history of injustice: from slavery and sexism to segregation and heterosexism. Don't you know that during the Civil Rights Movement, two Methodist bishops signed a statement encouraging gradualism and patience in ending segregation? They told folk that were fighting for the lives just to wait a little bit longer. It is to these two Methodist bishops, and six other clergymen that Martin Luther King addresses his prophetic "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

And we must remember.

It seems that we have also **forgotten** the first General Rule of the Methodist movement, the first rule of the Methodist interpretation of the Christian faith.

The first General Rule is: **Do No Harm. [SLIDE 4]**

The church continues to do harm each time it says again that some are in and some are out; that some are insiders and some are outsiders; that some are chosen and others rejected.

The church does harm each time it favors law over grace.

The church does harm and the church forgets the most basic affirmation of the Christian faith: **Grace trumps the law each and every time.**

On this first week of Pentecost, the message of resurrection that continues to haunt us is plain and simple: **love liberates us from the law.**

In the view of God, there is **no such law** that prohibits some while accepting others.

Because God's law is grace, God's law is *not* church law...because God's law is love. [SLIDE 5]

And the Church has no **authority** that does not come from God. And God is love. Full stop. No exceptions. No qualifications. No prerequisites. No fine print.

Speaking of authority, get this:

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism had no authority, to do what he did to start the Methodist movement. Consequently, his authorization of general superintendents—we know them as bishops—was "invalid." So in my analysis, the so-called "invalid" consecration of Bishop Karen Oliveto stands in pretty good company, and emerges from a **solid history of resistance.**

We should remember that the ordination of Francis Asbury at the Christmas Conference of 1784 by Thomas Coke, Richard Whatcoat, Thomas Vasey, and Philip Otterbein—then two days later the consecration of Coke and Asbury as bishops—we should remember that this whole series of events stood outside of apostolic succession.

In other words it broke the tradition. Wesley as an Anglican priest had no authority to ordain

Thomas Coke, and had no ecclesiastical authority to authorize other priests to consecrate a bishop. This simply was *not* how it was done for hundreds of years in apostolic succession. ***You see, the consecration of the first two Methodist bishops was invalid.***

We've got to re-member our history.

Some are afraid of that the UMC may split. And while this would be tragic, I'm not afraid, because in 1844 the Methodist Church split over slavery. Slave-owning Christians—an oxymoron if I ever heard one—slave-owning Christians in the South broke away from antislavery Christians in the North. And two Methodist Churches were formed: The Methodist Episcopal Church, North and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

You see, I believe that sometimes institutional brokenness is necessary in order for ethical wholeness to come. [SLIDE 6]

Sometimes things must die as we know them, in order for new life to come. **Is this not the message of Easter?** And is this not the message of Pentecost: that the loss of Christ in the Ascension is not a loss at all, but a gain as the Spirit of Christ is poured out on all people for all times.

And in 1939, when the abolitionist Methodist Church of the North rejoined with the slave-holding Methodist Church of the South, Negroes were segregated into a "Central Jurisdiction." When the church finally decided that slavery was evil, many white Methodists still didn't want to pray alongside Negroes. In essence, just like water fountains and bathrooms and sections on public buses, there was a Methodist Church for "whites only" and a Methodist Church for "black only."

And in 1972, the church's prohibition against homosexuality—in the context of the free love and sexual liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s—began. Here's the point: the church's current discrimination against LGBTQ folk comes out of a long tradition of Methodist discrimination—injustice—a history that we have tried to forget. **The history of the United Methodist Church is a living example of a church that has been on the wrong side of history.**

We must re-member.

You see, when you re-member *history* and read the Bible in context we learn two fundamental facts:

- **While God is always right, the church can be wrong. [SLIDE 7]**
- **The Bible is not God's Word, Jesus is.**

Now don't get me wrong, the Bible is beautiful. I read the Bible everyday, and pray that it is written upon the tablets of my heart (Proverbs 7:3). But—and it's a large but—the Bible says some crazy stuff.

And it's complicated. And it's not a single book, but rather a collection of books:

- *The Bible says* that eating shellfish is an abomination (Leviticus 11:10). So as lobster season begins, and next time you go to City Island for seafood, remember that.
- *The Bible says* that women on their menstrual cycles were not to be touched, because they were unclean (Leviticus 15:19-33).
- *The Bible says* in our beloved Exodus story that genocide against native people is okay. (Deuteronomy 1:8; Numbers 33:53).
 - In receiving the welcome yesterday from the Shinnecock people, we have only just begun to wrestle with the violence that Christians have done against people who were here before Europeans arrived.
- *The Bible says* slaves obey masters (1 Peter 2:18-22; Colossians 3:22; Ephesians 6:5-9).
- *The Bible says* women be silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:34). But I'm so glad that there are women who will not be silent.

So, the Bible must always be read in context. And whenever it is dis-connected from the circumstances that give it rise, we risk dis-remembering—forgetting—the power of its words.

Let me make it plain: Jesus did not read the Bible—because the Bible had not been written. Because **Jesus is the Word of God. [SLIDE 8]**

And it is written: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ...and the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:1, 14).

Let me be clear: although brother Paul helped us out a lot, **Jesus**—not Paul—is the foundation of our faith.

O, how we must remember.

Now before anyone goes calling me a heretic—which wouldn't necessarily be the worst thing (Remember, in our reading from Isaiah, it is written, "this is serious business, rebels.") Remember that Our Doctrinal Standards, in particular the "Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church" states plainly in Article IV: "*We believe that the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, **reveals** the Word of God.*" Look it up: paragraph 104, page 73 of the 2016 *United Methodist Book of Discipline*. (We keep wanting to turn to paragraph 304.3 and 2702.1.)

So the Bible gives us clues to Jesus, who is God-consciousness, but the totality of Jesus, who is the Word of God, always **transcends** what we find written in human words. **[SLIDE 9]**

Why? Because God is still speaking and showing up in the world wherever Jesus is.

The Bible itself testifies to this fact: "*Our ways are not God's ways and our thoughts are not God's thoughts*" (Isaiah 55:8).

"Eyes have not seen, nor have ears heard, nor has it entered into the hearts of men and women what God has in store for those who love the Lord and are called according to God's purposes." (1 Corinthians 2:9).

And, for the record, Jesus said not a single word of condemnation to gay folk. To the contrary, he spent the majority of his time with the oppressed, the marginalized, the cast out and downcast.

We must re-member our story, re-member our history.

PART THREE – RE-MEMBERING [ANAMNESIS]

In *Beloved*, that story of re-membering, there is a sermon. Baby Suggs, the wise matriarch, gathers those enslaved Africans in a clearing, hidden in the woods. And out of earshot of the oppressive masters, she tells her people—love yourself.

Never forget who you are.

Morrison writes: *“She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.”*⁴

Morrison writes Baby Suggs’s sermon: *“Here in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it....Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again....You got to love it. Flesh that needs to be loved. And o my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up....You got to love it, you!”*⁵

This too is a message that as people called Methodist we must remember and never forget, always remembering, reforming, re-formed.

It’s a danger to disremember—dangerous to forget who you are. This is a message that the grandmother of the great Howard Thurman knew well, a message she often told her grandkids. She remembered and would often tell her grandson that during the difficult days of slavery, an old preacher would come by at least once a year. And no matter his topic, no matter his text, his ending—the climax— was always the same. The preacher reminded them:

“You are not niggers....you are not slaves...you are God’s children.”⁶

So I’m glad today for my Granny and all the saints who taught me this lesson. And although the ways of the world—even the ways of the church—would have us forget, today we remember:

We are not issues. We are not problems. We are all children of God.

⁴ Morrison 88.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981).

And re-remembering takes work. Memory, memorial, is a practice. It's not something that just happens. And the true memorial will be when the Church calls everyone beloved. This is the memorial—the *anamnesis* (*the remembrance*)—that confronts us at Table. And it sustains us as we wait.

Because one day the church will follow Jesus and realize that “*the religion of Christ is not the Christian religion*” (Gotthold Ephraim Lessing).⁷ [SLIDE 10]

One day the church will remember that it divided over slavery.

One day the church will lament.

One day the church will grieve.

One day the church will be ashamed of its silence.

One day the church will repent for the **harm** it has committed against the oppressed, the marginalized, and the disinherited.

One day the church will celebrate “Acts of Repentance and Reconciliation” for its discrimination against LGBT folk.

One day the UMC will make headlines—not for fighting against each other, but for fighting for freedom for all God’s people.

But in the meantime, let everyone with ears hear: “God is Love” and “You Are Loved.” [SLIDE 11]

You are a child of God. Full stop. And there is nothing that separates us from the love of God.

No one is incompatible with God. And everyone is precious in God’s sight.

So you are invited to remember. “*Because it is written: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God*” (John 1:1, 12).

Yes, there is a Word that speaks over our lives.

Before anything the world says against us, God has spoken a word over our lives. Before any word of condemnation or rejection the world speaks, God speaks. And when God speaks it is the only thing that matters. And God speaks the only Word that matters: you are mine.

So, just be yourself because you are a child of God—“*You are wonderfully and fearfully made*” (Psalm 139:14).

Just love yourself because you are a child of God—“*No weapons formed against you shall prosper*” (Isaiah 54:17).

⁷ See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, ed. H.B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Just speak to yourself, speak over yourself, and encourage yourself because you are a child of God—“*God knows the plans God has for you, plans to prosper you and never to harm you, plans to give you a future with hope*” (Jeremiah 29:11).

And you see, we are called: We must have the Courageous Vision to see Jesus even when the world blocks our view. We must see the Jesus who comes into our midst and stands and walks among us. We must see the Jesus who literally breaks down locked doors in order to be with the people who were scared and who lived in fear...because they've been called problems (John 20:19-29).

[SLIDE 12]

Yes, we had hoped that the church would get it right. But I believe not in a church, but I put my faith in Christ. So I hope you know that yes, sometimes I am disappointed by my church, but I am not dismayed, because we are created for this. And still we rise.

So I hope you know that “*we hope for what we do not yet see, and the Spirit helps us in our weakness*” (Romans 8:26).

And I hope you know that “*suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us*” (Romans 5:5).

[SLIDE 13]

Let us be haunted by the memorial, giving ourselves away not to *amnesia* but *anamnesis*, the remembering.

Let us never *forget who we are*: a memory-formed community shaped by how we re-member.

Let it be so.

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