

Signs of Hope in United Methodism

The collection of essays that constitutes this book was written, here and there, now and then, over the course of thirty years. An early piece came out of reflection, in student years, on a 'religious' gathering at Kent State. Later chapters evolved out of conversation and debate over particular occasions (like General Conference) or specific issues (like church renewal or gay rights) or personal interests (theological resolution). One even dares to 'look back' from twenty years from now (2030)! As a group, I hope that they will provide insight and inspiration for those many partners in the gospel who look for signs of hope in their beloved denomination.

Some of these chapters originally appeared elsewhere (e.g. the articles on EMLC and UM colleges support for clergy dependents, in *The Circuit Rider*). Several (*Think Twice, Merrywood, God at Dawn, others*) began life as sermons. Others are journal entries or letters to friends (*May 2005, Incoming*). Church newsletters originally hosted a few (*The Gathering, Pastoral Proverbs*). While they are similar in length to one another, their places of birth do vary.

All of them come from a long, personal, and loving commitment to the ministry of the gospel within the history and life of the United Methodist Church. From family members over many generations, I have received much insight, encouragement and inspiration. Our family has now four generations of women and men who have been under appointment, have compared one parsonage to another, have paid annual apportionments, chosen hymns to sing at Annual Conference, have exchanged Methodist handshakes with other singing Methodists, and have packed their books and moved when asked. Itinerancy, appointment, apportionment, conference—these words they defined by their manner of life. This book I dedicate to one of their number, my beloved wife, Janette Pennock Hill, whose spirit is sunshine and whose life is a song God is singing.

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Table of Contents

1974: Kent State:	1
1986: Why I Am a Methodist.....	4
1987: Five Questions About the EMLC Missional Priority	8
1988: Signs of Hope in Methodism	11
1992: Help from UM Colleges for UM Preachers' Kids.....	16
1994: Incoming	21
1995: Erwin Church Today	24
1996: The Top Ten Needs of a District Superintendent	32
1996: Ministry	33
1996: Preaching for a New Age	36
1996: The One Thing Needful	38
1996: Brown Sale, Wing and Wing, Nassau	42
1999: The New Creation	48
1996: Think Twice	54
1999: A Whole New Life	61
2004: Two Beggars	67
2004: Pastoral Proverbs in Pittsburgh	75
2004: Episcopal Prospectus	79
2005: The Gathering	85
2005: May 2005 Cabinet	87
2006: To Reform the Church We Love	89
2006: God at Dawn	90
2006: Asbury First United Methodist Church	97
2007: The Partnership of the Gospel	105
2008: Remembering Chalmers	111
2009: Merrywood	117
2010: The Demise of Methodism	123
2011: Servants of the Word	128
2012: New Year's Theological Resolutions	132
2030: After Twenty Years	137

Kent State: May 4, 1974

May fourth's conglomerate political protest at Kent State University commemorated Kent's 1970 student shootings in an appropriately religious manner. By combining passionate speeches based on the personal witnesses of the speakers, and well-performed, earthy folk music, the demonstration fed its participants an apparently much needed, long awaited, spiritual meal. The crowd was not large, and so ate peacefully while enjoying what became a clean, clear, cool day.

The Kent State Student Union, and the Indochina Peace Campaign, co-organizers of the rally, must have welcomed the favorable weather, since it permitted lesser concerns to set up booths and distribute pamphlets explaining their interests, thus swelling the crowd. For this rally brought together practically every notable organization of the protest caste. Placards proclaiming Jesus ("Get Smart, Get Saved"), defiling Nixon ("Nixon Eats Lettuce"), arguing against involvement in Vietnam and Cambodia ("No More Arms for Saigon"), supporting grape pickers, and honoring Timothy Leary, seemed to represent the varied interests present. One sign said simply: "Avenge. Eat the rich." The Socialists Workers Party and Spartacist League each made an appearance, as did the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. The only interests conspicuously absent were "Women's Liberation", and "Amnesty".

Nor were the demonstrators – children, people in wheelchairs, elderly people in turtlenecks and wool suits, tennis players, dogs – of one type. However, as people milled around the rolling, green, tree-spotted campus, some common characteristics were apparent. These were not poor people; nor were they working people; rather, they were people with expensive bicycles and reflector sunglasses, with Wizard-of-Oz T-shirts and metal tennis rackets. They had dope to smoke, beer to drink, and time on their hands. And this is why they especially were ready for the message of this protest.

Judy Collins set the mood of the afternoon, as the first "speaker", by performing a song whose first line was, "A man of words and not of deeds is like a garden full of weeds". Through an amplification system that easily could be used for a rock concert, Collins' soaring voice served as an introit to the following program, and as an introduction to Julian Bond, who followed.

In the midst of the passionate character of the rest of the program, Bond's soft delivery and polished style alone added a note of rationality to the proceedings. He read quickly, but carefully, his written speech – one that had probably been used often before – and just as quickly left, giving the impression that his real work was elsewhere, and that all this, while very nice as far as it went, but was rather wearying. Still, his address was not so discursive that it could not be followed. He said: the problem of the twentieth century, as Dubois pointed out, is and will be that of the "color line"; it is a problem whose solution will require a good deal of hard work on everyone's part; we don't need, then, students who think they can smoke America into the ground (it is fitting that just after this comment a familiar pungent odor invaded our section); and, a revolutionary's worth cannot be determined by the intricacy of his handshake; we need people who are willing to use their lives in

an attempt to make this country better. After a few more well-turned phrases, and some illustrations of his ideas from his own experiences in Georgia, Bond left, giving way to a succession of whining special interest spokesmen.

The first of these, one of the students wounded four year ago, and an advocate of the lettuce boycott, mixed tired ad hominem attacks on Mr. Nixon with equally worn out revolutionary clichés (“All power to the people”) in an attempt to take his audience four years into the past. Since most of the crowd seemed more interested in the future, he was received cordially but not wildly. After Bond, he was certainly anti-climactic. He in turn was followed by a Cambodian official, a member of the party presently not in the Pentagon’s favor, whose name I did not understand and whose speech I did not follow because his English was poor. The Cambodian reviewed the war atrocities he had experienced, and emphasized the role the United States had played in the destruction of the Cambodian countryside. The speeches dragged on, as a Kent State graduate student attacked the Ohio state government’s past stand on the relationship between police and students. He had done some research, so his rambling paper included many quotes from various civil records. By this time in the afternoon the sun was high in the sky, and clothes were being discarded in favor of better suntans.

Only just in time did Judy Collins recall the audience’s attention to the issues at hand in another musical-verbal interlude. While tuning her guitar, Judy extemporized about the difficulties involved in trying to honestly live. In her own disconnected way, she asked again for committed, deliberate life on the part of the audience. “What is so terrifying about life?” she asked. Concomitantly, she suggested that the real task of the revolutionary was to show his oppressor that he, the revolutionary, could live and live well; this purposeful life would melt the status quo.

This thought was followed (after the “collection”, taken by men with red buckets for the benefit of peace, or something equally vague) by Daniel Ellsberg’s own vital attack on “the system”. Ellsberg’s speech was a collection of quotes from his own *Pentagon Papers*, and from the transcript of the Presidential tapes, recently released by the White House. He used these to show that, in both domestic and foreign affairs, the “big” United States government is, in the words of Orwell’s *1984*, trying to control the future by distorting the past, and trying to distort the past by controlling the present. “Our ability not to forget”, he said, is the only weapon against such an attack, and both the *Pentagon Papers* and the tapes, if not forgotten, can be a means for our defense. He closed on a hopeful note by arguing that the 1970 Kent State killings had had a direct effect on the congressional passage of an act (Church-Cooper) which sought to limit the President’s war-making powers.

The afternoon came to a close with Jane Fonda’s exclamation, “Come Alive, I Did!” In an exhortive extemporaneous sermonette, Jane criticized the college community for its “glazed eyes”, and meaningless, wasteful existence. Her recent visit to Vietnam, where she found that more Vietnamese have been killed since we left Indochina than the total American dead for the entire war, again showed her the hard row the Vietnamese have to hoe due to our interference. And yet, she posited, our own democratic job of urging Congress into action toward the right ends is just as challenging. “Don’t be numb”, she pleaded, “write your congressman”.

Since the local crowd was already leaving for dinner, and a fading sun was giving way to cool air, the protest quickly came to an end. The unison singing of “Amazing Grace” served not only as a quasi-benediction, but also as a reminder of what had transpired that afternoon. As the standing mass of people clapped and hummed its way through the well-known hymn, one realized that each person had been reminded that there is indeed importance, meaning, substance above and beyond his own finite self. And this view of the outside, this feeling of unification, of connection with another and the other, focused at the end by the myth of democratic participation, is more spiritual than political in nature.

Why I Am a Methodist (On Being an Ecumenical Christian)

Methodism, it has been said, is 'Christianity in earnest.' I have found this to be true in my life so far. The people, congregations, leaders, and programs that I have known in our church have had "the love of God shed abroad in their hearts for all the world to see." Men and women earnestly seeking after the salvation what comes from the one God and His Christ. As always and as should be the case, it comes down to personal experience. It did not hurt me to be baptized in the Methodist Church by Dr. Warren Odom. It did not hurt me to grow up in a Methodist parsonage. It did not hurt me to attend a Methodist college, Ohio Wesleyan, or to work at a Methodist church camp, Casowasco, or to serve Methodist churches prior to ordination. I am a Methodist of the Methodists, to paraphrase St. Paul. And yet, don't you know, sometimes it's hardest to appreciate what is closest at hand. Why else do we treat our relatives worse than we treat complete strangers? I have always been hyper-critical of my own church. I know its faults better than I know its virtues. Why, then, have I chosen ordination to gospel ministry in the Methodist branch of the Christian family? Because as a Methodist I am free to enjoy the best parts of the other traditions. With Wesley I can affirm "what has been believed always and everywhere by everyone." Methodism takes the wheat of the other churches, and leaves behind the chaff. As a Methodist I can have what is the very best of the other churches: Catholic tradition, Reformation message, Anglican ecclesiology, Puritan discipline, pietist feeling.

I. Catholic Tradition

As a Methodist I am a Catholic. My church is world-wide and rooted in history. It has breadth and depth. I am free to draw on every good part of church history from the time of Jesus of Nazareth. I find my place right in the middle of that history, not out on the fringes. I am a brother, not a shirt-tail cousin, and so I am not liable to be unbuttoned and thrown away. A big problem in our country right now is a disrespect for history – in politics, in culture, and in religion. As a nation, we're kind of like an adolescent boy or a freshman in college – we think we know everything. But History is a great teacher. As Santayana said, "He who does not remember history is doomed to repeat it." We need to know history and we need to know church history. The church of Jesus Christ did not come up quick as a summer storm. It is not based on Native American revelation. It is not based on scripture alone without tradition. Our foundation is scripture within tradition. We have a history by which we size up Joseph Smith and James Jones and Billy Graham and Robert Hill. When we hear the Southern Baptist Convention makes the Nazi-like statement, "God does not hear the prayer of a Jew," we have not only scripture but history as well by which to prove him wrong.

My spiritual ancestors are all of the Catholic tradition. I can use the prayer of St. Augustine: "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee." I can use the prayer of St. Francis: "Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace." I can revere Pope John 23 as a good Christian man. I am a Catholic without the Roman defects: without

the hideous idea of a sacrifice in the Mass; without the absurdity of papal infallibility, without the cruelty of enforced celibacy of the priesthood; without the injustice of the subordination of women.

II. Reformation Message

As a Methodist I stand at the Gospel of Christ as Martin Luther knew it. “By grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God.” I know I can’t work my way into Heaven. I work out of gratitude for what God has done for me through the blood of His Son. It is not by accident that the best loved hymnals in our church include “Rock of Ages” and “My Hope Is Built.” They have the best theology:

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly lean on Jesus’ name.
On Christ the solid rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand
All other ground is sinking sand.

And

Could my tears forever flow
Could my zeal no languor know
These for sin could not atone
Thou must save and thou alone
In my hand no price I bring
Simply to the cross I cling.

My oldest son’s middle name is ‘Whitefield.’ One pronunciation of this name harks back to George Whitefield, the Welsh Calvinist Methodist, a fiery preacher, who convinced something John Wesley to take up open-air preaching: that method which gave birth to Methodism. Benjamin Franklin had a few words to say about Whitefield! By baptism and belief (MK 16), Methodists hold to Christ hearing and re-hearing the gospel call through bible preaching. So, the pulpit is in the corner of most of our sanctuaries: we prize the spoken Word of truth. So, much of the time that our ministers lay aside the clerical collar: we are preachers first and priests second. By preaching, the church has been, is, and will be fed what it needs to hear: the Reformation message that the world is under attack by the sovereign grace of God in Christ Jesus. [ongoing criticism of all religious language and form]

III. Anglican Ecclesiology

Although some Nashville Methodists try to hush the Word, and although the stress of frontier living pushed this truth into the background, and although it may be news to the Archbishop of Canterbury, I as a Methodist have inherited an

Anglican understanding of church life. I take the sacrament of Holy Communion every week, and with baptism it is a means of grace to my soul. [G. Wainwright, a 'mere Methodist,' has done us proud on this score with his new book *Eucharist and Eschatology*. So, many of the chancels in our churches are divided. So, many of our ministers regularly wear a full clerical collar. So we are ordained primarily in order to administer the sacraments.]

Until we started playing with names there were two big Episcopal churches (Methodist and Methodist South) and one small Episcopal church (Protestant) in the U.S.A. In our liturgy I benefit from the richest, oldest English-speaking church order. "We do not presume . . ."; "we acknowledge and bewail . . ."; "Lord, have mercy . . ." The damage done to our sacramental life by the 1968 hymnal is not permanent. Wesley commanded us to use the menus of grace. We need work here. Why are our people disheartened when they see an order for communion in the Sunday bulletin?

We still unabashedly call our leaders 'bishops'. Parenthesis in original (An occasional ugly "Episcopal leader" evangelism notwithstanding, they still can lead and appoint.) They have even come to address, albeit of years late the issue of nuclear holocaust. Those Methodist innovations build on our inherited Anglican ecclesiology.

IV. Puritan Discipline

We do not know what a day will bring, but only that the hour for serving the Lord who saves us from sin, guilt, and death is always present. This is the day which the Lord has made!

John Wesley's own personal self-discipline is well-known. Up at 4:00 A.M., he preached nearly every day at 5:00 A.M. morning prayer. Presumably he followed the routine which he demanded of his preachers: reading and writing and prayer from 6 A.M. until 12 noon, visitation from noon until 6 P.M. hours of evening meditation. (This schedule survives today in the general work pattern for ministers: morning study/afternoon calling/evening meetings). Wesley enjoined physical discipline upon his workers according to the ancient truth that a sound mind is only found in a sound body. How slovenly we have become since the days of John Wesley and Cotton Mather!

Physical, mental, spiritual discipline – how we need it today! Discipline regarding work habits, sexuality, and money. Hear how Alexander Solzhenitsyn warns us:

The majority of your people have been granted well-being to an extent their fathers and grandfathers could not even dream about; it has become possible to raise young people according to these ideals, preparing them for and summoning them toward physical bloom, happiness, possessions of material goods, money, and leisure, toward an almost unlimited freedom in the choice of pleasures. Even biology tells us that a high degree of habitual well-being is not advantageous to a living organism. Today, well-being in the life of Western society has begun to reveal its pernicious mask.

We are getting soft. Too much beer, too much disco music, too much television, too much sleep, too much lust, sloth, and avarice. Too much self-fulfillment, not enough self-denial. Too much c to get back to the simple clothing, frugality, and discipline that made us strong.

Why? Because the Lord has need of your pleasure to use to feed hungry sheep around the world.

Here is Wesley's slogan:

Do all the good you can
By all the means you can
In all the ways you can
In all the places you can
At all the times you can
To all the people you can
As long as ever you can.

V. Pietist Feeling

We can as Methodists kneel with the Catholics and be quiet with the Quakers. The same land that produced George Fox an generation later produced John Wesley. Both Quakers and Methodists are firstly concerned with a vital religion of the heart. He read from the Bible and he spoke from the heart.

1. George Fox
The Lord showed me so that I did see
Clearly that He did not dwell in these
Temples which men had commanded
And set up, but in people's hearts...
His people were His temple and
He dwelt in them...
2. John Wesley on Aldersgate Street
His life could make a difference!
3. Hymns and Spirit: Every time I feel the Spirit!
4. Train at Times Square: You've got it in you.

Five Questions About the EMLC Missional Priority March 1987

Eighteen months ago I came home. The bishop and cabinet appointed me to a church in the neighborhood where my wife and I met and where we attended high school. Our daughter began elementary school last fall. During her second week I requested an interview with the principal. Halfway through this conversation the principal volunteered this assessment of our neighborhood: "I must tell you, Rev. Hill, those who choose to live in this neighborhood do so with a commitment to integration. One must have that commitment to liver here."

In this neighborhood racism might not have disappeared, but integration has won the day. Our schools, homes, parties, bars, stores, and clubs – social, academic, and business life – afford a rough and ready kind of integration.

For instance, a drive through our neighborhood on an autumn afternoon would show the following scenes: a football game on a vacant lot, half Black, half White; a couple walking down the street, mother White, father Black, child Brown; a fight in a back yard, one Black and one White, broken up by a White mother who cuffs the Black boy, calls him son, and takes him indoors; hopscotch, three White girls, two Black.

This neighborhood now has four United Methodist churches. In the shadow of the three existing churches, the conference has started a new congregation with funds from EMLC. I observe the consequences of this decision, and I wonder:

1) Is this strategy Christian? We are told that congregations, such as our new one, are to be built upon "the black experience." Granted that Christian people do and always have shared a common experience, is experience of any sort the foundation for our common life?

Two years ago I read Wayne Meeks' important study *The First Urban Christians*. Meeks brings all of the latest sociological tools to bear upon our understanding of the congregations formed during Paul's ministry. Two important conclusions arise from this study.

First, the early congregations from the start exhibited a range of membership unlike any other social gathering in the Greco-Roman world. That is, they included in their fellowship rich and poor, male and female, free and slave, Jews and gentiles. Human experience was not their foundation. If anything, according to Paul's letters, human experience was their adversary. The cross and resurrection provided their foundation.

Second, speaking purely in a sociological manner Meeks shows that the early church afforded its members a means for social mobility. That is, those whose personal attributes on the one hand afforded them potential in their culture, but on the other hand denied them access to portions of their culture, found a home and, more important, a path for movement in and through the Christian congregations. Can we imagine the Paul of I Corinthians 1 or II Corinthians 1 teaching a liturgical division according to ethnic, racial, social, economic, political, or historical divisions?

2) Does the EMLC promote integration? This question I have raised in the past. Two bishops and one layperson, all heavily involved in the EMLC, have

responded alike. They argue, the issue is not *integration*, it is *empowerment*. Now anyone who went to seminary in the late '60s or early '70s, as I assume many of the readers of this publication did, will find it hard to argue against empowerment. Empowerment is to our generation what the kingdom of God was to an earlier generation. It is our word.

We are faced with a dilemma: must we choose between integration and empowerment? One could, I think, also wonder whether empowerment is possible without integration. Certainly, it is true that segregation does not empower the segregated, especially when the segregated are in the minority.

I studied at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, for three years. It may be worthwhile to compare the recent political decisions within the Parti Quebecois and its disavowal of segregation and separatism for economic reasons, that is to say reasons of empowerment. Renee Levecque opposes separatism because he affirms empowerment. Does the EMLC promote integration?

3) Does it work? Recently, a representative of the EMLC Missional Priority staff met with ten of our preachers to discuss plans for our new Black church. At one point, the conversation turned toward this issue. Just how many churches have been formed? Roughly, how many new souls have been won? What expense have we incurred to date? Likewise during a recent address, one champion of the EMLC program argued its worth according to this logic: "White people are having fewer and fewer children." Implication, as I understood it, was that minority populations afforded a richer mission field for our church than did the White mainstream of American culture.

Has this been true in our history? Is it true in the mission endeavors of other denominations? Is this money really well spent in terms of evangelism?

4) Will it help? At the meeting of our annual conference, I wandered aimlessly out of a session looking at the blue sky and thinking about nothing in particular, until I was confronted by an old friend who took me to lunch. Over lunch we discussed EMLC. He energetically argued: "Bob, the real question is will it help people in need?" I doubt that this is *the* question. But I agree that it is *a most important* question. How does EMLC compare to other missional priorities and other church programs (e.g., the world hunger priority) with regard to this fundamental question? It would seem that EMLC may have some real miracles and successes to claim on this score. If so, why is the literature regarding EMLC so devoid of explicit numerical descriptions of helpfulness?

5) Is this the Methodist way? I hear rumblings of a move toward "open itineracy." I hear discussion of ethnic conferences. I hear calls, muted but audible, for something like a return to the Central Jurisdiction. Bishop Wilke, in a speech quoted recently in *Good News Magazine*, makes the argument that church growth requires such segregation. We are told that the image for a new day is no longer the melting pot, but now the tossed salad. Is this the mind of Christ? Perhaps, some prices are too high to pay for growth.

Our new church in Syracuse will be started. Money is in place, power is in "the right" hands, policy is set. It will be done. I am eager to see new churches built. However, I have questions about the EMLC approach to building them. I hope the discussion in the future involves some responses to these questions. I simply notice

that our schools, banks, bars, shops, and homes in this neighborhood make use of no secular equivalent of the EMLC. Is our church on the right track?

"SIGNS OF HOPE IN METHODISM"

Text: Romans 5:20

I learned from George a most important lesson in practical theology: "Watch what the Holy Spirit is doing, and then follow." George had a certain style, a posture in life that makes him altogether memorable. He groused and slouched and cursed his way through months of meetings at the World Council of Churches in the days I knew him. He drew on a rare combination of Yale Divinity and the East Harlem Protestant Parish (a remarkable venture of a bygone era). When asked once why local churches flounder he barked, "Shoe leather! Those ministers don't spend the shoe leather, out on the street, mixing it up, making calls. Shoe leather!" He hired us to work on office things ("heat, light, and running water"), but mainly, I suspect, to plant seeds of good will for the WCC in the hearts of a few young people. He chose a few traditional liberals (me), I think as evangelism for the left. It didn't work. What I saw in Geneva made me a confirmed critic of church bureaucracy, religious politics, international ecumenism, and the Presbyterian church. But George did win my heart, because he had so much heart of his own. In retrospect he was right, not only about shoe leather, but about the Spirit and the church. Spirit leads, church follows. Jurgen Moltmann spoke that summer about "giving account of the hope that is in you" (I Peter 3:15); George knew, lived, and preached the verse better. Hidden behind flat glasses, rumpled clothing, an ambitious porky belly, and a seditious goatee, George murmured piously and accurately about the Spirit: "I try to find out what the Spirit is doing, and then I join in."

In concert with George, I want to notice here seven signs of hope in the church: Spirit leads, church follows.

1. Bible

James Smart raised the question 30 years ago: Why is the Bible so silent in the church? It goes unanswered still. The Bible has been abused left and right. For the liberation theologian of whatever caste it has become a pretext for progressive politics. For the traditional churchman it remains a historical source book. For the new right, who sadly take it more seriously than the rest of us, it functions, chiefly, as a buttress for faith in an overly triumphant Jesus, an unstigmatized Lord. Granted we all have our canon within the canon. Must the Word continue to be so muffled?

Here and there one sees a contrary phenomenon. One runs into the Bible talking in the church. This happens, as William James taught that truth happens, in the experience of life, lived in a profound way. The Bible is not about Sinai, Jerusalem, and Ephesus. It is not about Jesus, Paul and John. It is not about Israel, Judah, and a first century religious movement later called Christianity. It is not about a collection of religious and philosophical concepts. It is not about various courageous men of faith from long ago. It is about you. The Bible is about your life, as your life really is. The Bible tells the inner truth of your life.

Gladys gave the scripture lesson of last Tuesday without knowing it. She spoke of her isolation, her illness, and her discouragement. It is hard to be tied to an oxygen tank when your heart is still young. She rambled on about the election: "That Bush is a snake. I'd like to take a hatchet to his face. I could put my finger right through his grin. He makes me sick." She also spoke of her days alone. "I find myself, sometimes, giggling and then laughing outright. I can't always say why." Then, after 40 minutes of monologue, she had come out down deep in the cavern of living and met up with the Bible. "I just don't care, really, whether I live or die." Genuinely now, and with real feeling: "Whether I live or die I am the Lord's." (Romans 14:8). It is the Bible that provides the code of living. We run into it down deep. It is a sign of real hope for our denomination that people, intuitively, know this.

2. Preaching

Some ministers are daring again to think of themselves as preachers of the gospel. Not hawkers of the gospel, or salesmen of the church, or administrators, pastoral counselors, youth workers, community leaders, politicians, fundraisers, or the "glue" that holds the congregation together. Some few across the land have placed their lives in the service of an active, simple, local, friendly, piercing word of truth. This is not common. Nor is it the case with many who would want to claim this of themselves. It is not true simply of those who attend liturgy study groups, or work through exegetical outlines. It is true of a few who still believe that God can speak in a human voice, the humbler the better. We should not be looking for numbers here. The best movie I attended one year (Umberto Eco's "Name of the Rose") was so poorly attended that the theater almost refused to show it that night. Truth and popularity are not in direct proportion. (This is not an excuse for ill-prepared, boring, lifeless, stupid sermons.) Truth and popularity are often in inverse proportion.

When the preacher broods about his people, studies the, exegetes their lives, and then suddenly runs up against the Bible in them, he can begin to preach. One former research scientist left his laboratory nets a few years ago to follow Jesus to seminary. He survived this experience and has gone on to preach in four alarmingly poor little churches near Canada. I read his ordination exam sermon. It was about the strong and the weak, the strong who like to drink and brag of it, the weak who can't because of conscience. He preached hard and long about love among brothers, strong and weak. He referred, at some point, to Romans 14, which reading was occurring as he spoke in the life of his church. It was a long, careful, powerful, sober sermon which clearly was the word of God. It took a lot of work. It is a sign of real hope that preaching is again important to Methodism.

3. Visiting

The art of pastoral conversation has never been an easy one to master. As my first lay leader said, "I never met a minister who really knew how to listen." I find it encouraging that many younger ministers have reclaimed an almost lost talent for pastoral conversation as they visit in homes. One such minister, with no fanfare and no applause from the cabinet, has quietly spent seven years of ministry making a minimum of 30 visits each week. His churches have grown, modestly. His parishioners have grown, gracefully. He believes that his calling includes bearing witness, in the home, to Love's hatred of sin. Wesley taught that in only two activities was the preacher not wasting his time: preaching and visiting. The rest was and is a waste of time. We have become a denomination of meetings and meeting lovers. We are dying from it. Hope lies ahead, though, in the practice of the art of pastoral conversation.

4. Money

Our nation faces financial ruin. We have sold the birthright of independence for a mess of technological pottage. A church like ours, with such a bloated, superfluous bureaucratic superstructure, enters such time at great disadvantage. Since World War II we have milked our good churches and people to pay for programs, agencies, boards, executives, and "missions" that in hindsight are highly suspect. Religious pottage. With the national debt of the 1990's will come hard times for Methodism. There is hope here. The harsh economic winds should cleave through mountains of bureaucracy that otherwise would live on until the last trumpet. Our best dollars will no longer disappear into the remarkable entrails of 475 Riverside Drive. Our brightest ministers will no longer be assigned national staff positions. Our focus as conferences and as a denomination will no longer be on religious hokum. We won't be able to afford it.

5. Liberalism

Methodism has avoided the worst excesses of leftist religion. As a denomination, in my view, we are not happy about abortion. We still trust that men and women can, in prayer, learn to live together. We realize, in hindsight, that our exit from Vietnam meant 3 million Cambodian deaths. We understand that not only whites, but blacks as well, can be infected with racism. We are not willing to excuse every breach of personal discipline on the basis of Freudian, Marxist, or Nietzschean analysis. I don't think we're huffy about it, but we do tend to care enough still to challenge aberrant behavior. Here is hope: In the future, we will be able to present liberalism with integrity, at a time when liberal will mean "caring," not "permissive."

All this comes home in ordination. Episcopalians, Unitarians, Congregationalists, and other groups on the left have hurt themselves badly in the last 10 years in ordination, by refusing to ask about effectiveness. Wesley is still enough with us to whisper, "have they fruits?" Can he preach? Can she relate to people? Is he

able to build churches? We need fewer, better ministers, and Boards of Ministry across the country are sensing this.

6. Students

There is an anger about the death of Methodist student ministry that is a harbinger of hope for rebirth of local church-related Wesley Foundations. Our lay people are leading the way.

The other day I walked across the Syracuse University Quad. A group of students had gathered at the quad's southeast corner. Pat Moody, English teacher and Methodist, was pointing toward a statue of Job. Below the statue were printed the words of Job 19:25, "I know that my redeemer lives." I overheard one blonde girl ask in a Long Island accent, "Look, can you give me a little background on this Job fellow? I don't know the story." On a sparkling autumn afternoon, at the heart of the educational enterprise, within a stone's throw of a great chapel, a benchmark of the times. I walked over, catching the teacher's eye, and examined the pupil. "Of course you don't know the story. You are young, fair, white, rich, American, happy, and bound for success. That is, you are uneducated. Job is not meant for you, but for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. You are blind and deaf. Go home." Orange, amber, gold, red, brown, yellow: an afternoon of splendor and ignorance.

One out of 300 college students in America is infected with the AIDS virus. A student is more likely to get AIDS than a prison inmate. Why do we think that the front line, in the struggle with sin and death, is in Africa?

7. Long-Suffering

Strangely enough, Jesus still commands the allegiance of some of the best people around. In Methodism, these saints are found in almost every congregation. The quiet, strong, frugal, older Methodist lady, sitting along in the back pew. An usher of uncertain vintage, always in church except during hunting season. Two Trustees, who nurse the boiler along winter by winter. These and others like them are not the Morton Downeys of life. They are not proud to be loud, and they don't particularly like people who are. They are, however, something like the salt of the earth. They have suffered for their Lord and his church, out of love.

Along with them stand aging clergymen who have given and suffered. They have, with grace, stepped aside to make way for the ambitious, the upwardly mobile, the pushy. In an age of permanent revolution, their moderation has not been highly valued, nor has it proved even to be an adequate defense against the excesses of others. They have been loyal and unaffirmed. The New Testament word for this passe fruit of the spirit is upomone, long-suffering. They are nearer the cross than many others. In their light we see light. They are a sign of real hope.

In 1988, on the surface, our church looks poor, weak, badly led, fragmented, adrift, wasteful, ineffective, off-course, over-organized, and creaking toward further decline in the next century. My friend, George, would growl, "Be sober, be watchful, the devil himself prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour." Sin abounds. But: Grace overabounds. George's idea of the Spirit gives us glimpses of hope. The Spirit visits us in the Bible, in preaching, in visiting, in money, in liberalism, in student ministry, and in long-suffering. This, it seems to me, is a ringing, divine endorsement of pastoral ministry.

Message delivered November 8, 1988, to pastors of the Onondaga District, North Central New York Conference, concerning renewal in the church.

Submitted to The Circuit Rider, December 2, 1988.

Help From UM Colleges for UM Preachers' Kids

Robert A. Hill

As a part of the continuing education program of Erwin UMC, we recently conducted a survey of United Methodist-related, four-year colleges and universities across the country. We wrote to ask what tuition benefit, if any, the schools provided to children of UM ministers. Tuition credit is a somewhat hidden but an increasingly substantial benefit provided to clergy of our denomination. However, until now no comprehensive list has been developed.

We were pleased to discover that many schools still do provide partial tuition credits for UM preachers' kids. Of schools contacted from the list provided by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 79 responded. The information provided by these schools is summarized below.

We hope to provide an annually updated version of the list as an ongoing service to families of UM pastors. If you have further information or corrections for this list, please write to: Robert A. Hill, or Nancy Gridley Miller, 920 Euclid Ave., Syracuse, NY 13210 (1-315-472-4082).

Reports From 79 of 88 UM Colleges

(For more information write the college's Office of Student Financial Services.)

Adrian College, Adrian, MI 49221. Does not offer specific benefits to children of UM clergy but will match up to \$1,000 any scholarship award by a local UM church.

Albion College, Albion, MI 49224. Does not provide tuition benefits specifically to dependents of clergy, although the college does match John Wesley Awards and makes every effort to provide advantageous aid packages.

Albright College, P.O. Box 15234, Reading, PA 195612-5234. Provides ministerial grants to children of UM clergy engaged in fulltime religious service, based on financial need.

The American University, Washington, D.C. 20016. Provides a grant to clergy children of 50% of tuition.

Baker University, Baldwin City, KS 66006. Pulliam Scholarships of \$750 to \$2,500 per year, depending on need, are awarded to dependent children of active UM clergy, diaconal ministers, and missionaries.

Baldwin-Wallace College, Berea, OH 44107. Provides a scholarship to children of UM clergy in the amount of one-half tuition for under-graduate students enrolled full time; award is renewable each year for up to four years.

Bennett College, Greensboro, NC 27401. Provides a 30% discount on tuition to clergy dependents.

Birmingham-Southern College, Arkadelphia Road, Birmingham, AL 35254. Discounts tuition 25% for children of UM clergy.

Boston University, Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215. Provides half tuition for children of UM clergy, with additional help available based on calculated need.

Centenary College, P.O. Box 41188, Shreveport, LA 71134. Provides a \$1,350 per year grant only to dependents of ministers serving the Louisiana Conference.

Central Methodist College, Fayette, MO 65248. Provides a grant of \$400 per year to dependent children of Missouri Methodist ministers, or \$100 per year to children of “licensed ministers of other denominations.”

Columbia College of South Carolina, 1301 Columbia College Dr., Columbia, SC 29203. No normal aid policy exists, but the Board of Trustees of the college awards a renewable, annual \$1,500 scholarship to any UM minister’s daughter who attends the college.

Dakota Wesleyan University, Mitchell, SD 57301. Provides benefits only to dependent children and spouses of clergy in the South Dakota and North Dakota Conferences. There is a Methodist Recognition Grant to students who have been actively involved in the church; UMYF officer is one example given.

Dickenson College, Carlisle, PA 17013. Provides student aid based on need and not specifically to clergy families.

Duke University, Durham, NC 27706. Provides student aid based on need and not specifically to clergy families.

Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322. Provides a Methodist Ministerial Scholarship to children of UM ministers or missionaries to cover 45% of tuition.

Ferrum College, Ferrum, VA 24088. Provides tuition benefits only to children of ministers serving the Virginia Conference.

Florida Southern College, 111 Lake Hollingsworth Dr., Lakeland, FL 33801-5698. Provides a Minister’s Child Grant, amount not specified.

Greensboro College, 815 West Market St., Greensboro, NC 27401-1875. Provides a \$750 per year grant toward tuition costs for dependent children of UM clergy.

Hamline University, 1536 Hewitt Ave., St. Paul, MN 55104-1284. Dependent children of active, retired, or deceased clergy are eligible for a grant of one-third tuition for each term enrolled to clergy dependents.

Hawaii Loa College, Kaneohe, HI 96744. Provides a 20% tuition discount.

Hendrix College, Conway, AR 72032. Provides clergy dependents a scholarship of one-half tuition, renewable for four years.

High Point College, High Point, NC 27261. Provides a grant of \$750 annually to children of UM pastors or missionaries (\$2,000 annually to children of those serving the Western North Carolina Conference).

Huntington College, Montgomery, AL 36106. Provides a grant of \$1,500 per year to dependents of clergy in the Alabama and West Florida conferences. There is also a church vocation scholarship of \$2,000 per year.

Illinois Wesleyan University, P.O. Box 2900, Bloomington, IL 61702-2900. Provides a grant of up to one-half of tuition to a dependent child of an active UM pastor. Applicants who receive other gift-aid must use that aid to meet a portion of their eligibility.

Iowa Wesleyan College, Mount Pleasant, IA 52641. Grants \$500 per year to spouses or dependent children of fulltime or retired ministers or missionaries.

Kentucky Wesleyan College, 3000 Frederica St., P.O. Box 1039, Owensboro, KY 42302-1039. Children of UM ministers are eligible for a scholarship grant of one-fourth of tuition.

LaGrange College, 601 Broad St., LaGrange, GA 30240. Provides \$300 scholarships for children of UM pastors.

Lambuth University, 705 Lambuth Blvd., Jackson, TN 38301. A student who has been a member of a UM church for at least one year is eligible for a Church Membership Grant of \$150 per semester. A dependent of a fulltime appointed UM minister can combine this with a Minister's Dependent Grant for up to one-half the cost of tuition.

Lebanon Valley College, Annville, PA 17003. Has an extensive grant and scholarship program for all students and tries "to assist ministers' children as much as possible."

Lindsey Wilson College, 210 Lindsey Wilson St., Columbia, KY 42728. Provides a grant of up to one-half tuition to dependent children or spouses of fulltime UM ministers.

Lycoming College, Williamsport, PA 17701-5192. Provides grants to dependent children of UM pastors: one-fourth of tuition for most, one-third for children of ministers serving the Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference.

MacMurray College, Jacksonville, IL 62650. Does not offer financial aid specifically to children of ministers but does match grants provided by any UM church.

McMurry College, Abilene, TX 79697. Provides a scholarship to dependents of ordained or diaconal ministers of \$400 per semester.

Morningside College, 1501 Morningside Ave., Sioux City, IA 51106. Grants \$1,000 per year to spouses or children of ministers. An additional \$250 per year is available to UMs.

Mount Union College, 1972 Clark Ave., Alliance, OH 44601-3998. Children of fulltime ordained ministers are awarded a grant covering half of their tuition cost.

Nebraska Wesleyan University, 5000 Saint Paul Ave., Lincoln, NE 68504-2796. Provides a ministerial discount of up to 50% of tuition to dependent children (under 25 years of age) of clergy members and employees of the Nebraska Annual Conference.

Ohio Northern University, Ada, OH 45810. Provides 50% tuition remission to children of UM ministers.

Ohio Wesleyan University, Delaware, OH 43015-2370. The Child-Spouse of Clergy Award is given to fulltime students of dependents of ordained UM clergy. The amount is equal to one-half of the tuition (for the 1991-92 academic year, tuition is \$13,610).

Oklahoma City University, 2501 N. Blackwelder, Oklahoma City, OK 73106. Two different responses seem to say conflicting things: there is one-half tuition remission for spouses and dependent children of ministers under appointment in UMC, but a clause in one letter indicates this applies only for ministers within the Oklahoma Conference.

Otterbein College, Westerville, OH 43081. Awards funds to children of active, retired, or deceased UM ministers so that total grants in a student's financial aid package will equal one-half tuition each year.

Paine College, 1235 15th Street, Augusta, GA 30910-2799. Dependents of UM ministers are eligible for a grant of \$1,000 per academic year.

Randolph-Macon College, Ashland, VA 23005. Offers tuition grants only to dependents of UM ministers serving the Virginia Conference.

Randolph-Macon Women's College, 2500 Riverton Ave., Lynchburg, VA 24503-1526. Daughters of ordained UM clergy receive a tuition deduction of \$1,000.

Rust College, 150 Rust Avenue, Holly Springs, MS 38635. Provides a 10% tuition discount to children of UM clergy in addition to any other aid the student is eligible to get.

Shenandoah University, 1460 University Dr., Winchester, VA 22601. Provides grants of up to \$500 per year to dependents of UM clergy outside the Virginia Conference.

Simpson College, 701 North C. St., Indianola, IA 50125. Provides a grant to dependent children of UM clergy, diaconal ministers, and other fulltime personnel in Christian education or church music. Value is up to one-half tuition, based on financial need.

Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX 75275-0196. Provides tuition awards of \$600 per semester for eight semesters of fulltime undergraduate study to dependent children or spouses of UM ministers and to dependent children of retired or deceased ministers.

Southwestern College, 100 College St., Winfield, KS 67156-2499. Offers a \$500 per year grant to dependent children and spouses of clergy from any denomination.

Tennessee Wesleyan College, P.O. Box 40, Athens, TN 37303. Dependent of United Methodist Ministers Grant is available to "dependents of ordained, commissioned, and licensed UM ministers." The grant of \$1,500 for fulltime students is equal to the number of hours necessary for the initial baccalaureate degree.

Union College, 310 College St., Barbourville, KY 40906. Provides a renewable \$1,000 per year grant to fulltime undergraduate students who are members of the UMC or dependents of UM ministers or who plan to enter the UM ministry.

University of Evansville, 1800 Lincoln Ave., Evansville, IN 47722. A Minister's Dependent Grant is available to dependents of ministers from any denomination, not specifically UM. Amount depends on need.

University of Indianapolis, 1400 East Hanna Ave., Indianapolis, IN 46227-3697. Offers a grant to dependents of UM clergy of up to 30% of tuition, depending on need and other financial aid for which the student is eligible.

The University of Puget Sound, 1500 North Warner, Tacoma, WA 98416-0005. The Swope Award goes to students whose parents are employed fulltime in the UM ministry or mission work or other Christian service work. Award depends on number of applicants.

Virginia Wesleyan College, Norfolk, VA 23502. Extends tuition benefits specifically to dependents of clergy in the Virginia Conference only, but stresses that it works personally with each applicant to find financing options.

Wesleyan College, 4760 Forsyth Rd., Macon, GA 31297. Provides a Ministerial Grant of 50% of tuition to daughters of UM ministers.

West Virginia Wesleyan College, Buckhannon, WV 26201-2999. Provides a grant of one-fourth tuition for children of active or retired UM ministers; the grant is one-half for those serving the West Virginia and Western Pennsylvania Conferences.

Wiley College, Marshall, TX 75670. Provides a tuition discount for clergy's children.

Wofford College, Spartanburg, SC 29303. Awards annual grants of \$1,000 to children of UM ministers.

Colleges reporting that they have no specific program for clergy dependents:
Allegheny College, Bethune-Cookman College, Drew University, Emory & Henry
College, Kansas Wesleyan University, Kendall College, McKendree College, North
Central College, Rocky Mountain College, Syracuse University, University of the
Pacific, Wesley College.

Incoming

(Information received, events observed on April 28, 1994. In the Cokesbury blackbook for this Thursday, I had only one commitment, a noon lunch meeting. A bright, cool spring day, buds bursting. The kind of spring day on which some realize, “the weather is better and I am not.”)

8:45am. The newspaper ad for the weekend edition, describing our main outreach national speaker Sunday – this Sunday – has been overlooked. The staff worker apologizes and says “it’s too late.” I suggest she plead with the paper to make an exception. She does. They do.

9:00 Yesterday, I remember, a special meeting of the conference Board of Ordained Ministry has been conducted. For the first year in nine years I am not on BOOM, gladly. I wonder about the agenda.

9:05 The state has not sent my estimated tax forms and envelopes. The volunteer treasurer is concerned.

9:15 A younger, able, committed colleague, a pastor located two hours north, is infuriated by the annual conference preliminary reports. Last year total conference apportioned receipts declined from \$3.1 million ('92) to \$2.8 million ('93). Yet this year’s budget proposal ('95) is increased by 2.5%. He wonders about the wisdom of this idea. We arrange a later telephone conference, two weeks hence, before a burial he has scheduled, delayed from a January death.

9:25 At BOOM yesterday, I learn, a colleague and friend has been “terminated.” BOOM is exiting him from the ministry for “insubordination.” He has wrongly refused three invitations to meet with the Bishop. (His reason: he wants to see the Bishop with his lawyer present. He is in conflict with the DS. His congregation is angry.) My colleague apparently is also bringing his own charges against the Bishop and cabinet. The vote was not close. He is single, conservative, pro-life, an Army reserve chaplain, a loner. A trial appears likely. Two mental lists occur to me: 1. Forgivable offenses in the UMC: adultery, divorce, sloth. 2. Unforgivable offenses: missing meetings.

9:40 One’s mother has died recently. For ten years mother and daughter spoke on the phone every day for an hour. Daughter is in the third week of grieving. Finished: calling hours, funeral, burial, letters, cleaning apartment, some paperwork. Unfinished: letting go.

9:55 BOOM, I further learn, has had to retire an alcoholic pastor, who couldn’t both stay on the wagon and stay in the ministry.

10:30 On Sunday our former Bishop will be with us. Worries: details, transport, attendance, order, purpose, details.

10:50 A man from our neighborhood who runs a collection of city social service projects from a neighborhood storefront has “snapped”, skipped town. I have known him 10 years. He has left a note, saying he can no longer handle his life. His wife of 30 years is beside herself. No threat of suicide. As far as anyone knows.

11:15 The county executive calls to ask about our AWOL neighbor. The county provides \$75,000-\$100,000 annually for the social services programs. Little to no oversight of the use of the money. I overhear the fear of egg on the face. There is never timely support in the human services subculture for good, tough administrative questions:

is there a Board? is there an audit? who is in charge? who is responsible? Try raising the questions. Scrooge.

11:40 A call from a woman I have known for some years, not a church member. She has been fired, from a church related job. I cannot believe it. She agrees to come in at 2:15 to tell me about it.

12:10 Over lunch, a pastor friend recalls this visit. For several years he has regularly taken communion to an old woman, a member of the church, who never attends worship, pledges or otherwise supports his church. She lives in public housing. As he leaves last week she says, simply, “there is an envelope for the church on the table.” In the car he opens the envelope and finds ten crisp \$100 bills. To my knowledge he is one of only a handful of pastors in our conference who still make 20 home visits or more a week.

12:50 Friend also reports on last night’s administrative council meeting. A young male car salesman spoke harshly to an older, retired female. She left the meeting in tears. Pieces to pick up.

2:15 My neighbor friend tells her story. She has been fired. I cannot fathom it. She is a top person, an excellent, strong worker. Her program in one year has skyrocketed. She is the right person, in the right place, at the right time, in the right way. She explains difference with superiors. I don’t buy it. She mentions some things undone. It makes no sense. I am angry for her sake. I press her. “Is there something you are not telling me?” Discovery: she has been fired because she confided in her clergy boss with regard to some personal issues. He decides to fire her, “for her own sake, to take off the pressure.” She has been suicidal. He reacts by firing her, for her own good. I am apoplectic. We talk about how to proceed, and make some tactical plans.

3:30 In walks a mailman, who is a member of the church. I have known him and his wife for 5 years. He is a caregiver to a physically and mentally struggling mate. We talk, and talk. About little things. About bigger things. About his life, a hard grinding life. We also talk basketball. His passion. His eyes light up. I have not seen him to talk to in a year. He is seldom in church.

4:35 The phone rings. A 90 year old gentleman, pillar of the church, is frantic. His younger wife left three hours earlier for a medical check-up, and has not returned. I tell him to hang on ten minutes and I will be there.

4:36 Another clergy colleague calls about the budget.

4:50 This great oak of a person, strong, is fearful, slightly ill, worried sick. She will be back soon, I say. Emergency rooms mean long waits. He is unconsolable. I say I will drive over to see if she is OK.

5:30 Driving down the hill I see her coming. We talk. I explain about “sundowning.”

6:00 An old girlfriend has strangely asked to come over to the house to visit with my wife and me. I arrive late. Why is she here? What is wrong? (job? marriage? kids? faith? middle-age?) This threesome is awkward in the extreme for me, though oddly enough not for them. Pizza and wine. She leaves and I still do not know why she came by.

7:45 Elementary school science fair. Distressing events for kids whose parents cannot help them build the perfect experiment. Public schools have gone to seed.

8:15 Tail end of the Nursery School Annual Dinner. “Sorry you couldn’t be here for the whole thing.”

9:00 C-Span carries the tape of the Nixon funeral from the day before. Graham, Dole, Kissinger, Clinton. Four Presidents and wives in one row, looking grim.

Erwin Church Today
Dr. Robert A. Hill
January 8, 1995

Isaiah 43:1-7

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17 and 21-22

I. Introduction: Good News

It really is good news. It *truly* is good news which we hear and speak and share with one another in this safe, happy, quiet, and lovely place. Truly, it is good news.

A long time ago, an ancient prophet stood in the assembly of believers and spoke a word which was spoken and heard as the Word of God. May it be so for you today. May it be so for us today. Thus saith the Lord, I am the Lord your God. You are precious in my sight.

I honor you.

I love you. God is loving you right now. God is loving you right now. Surely, that is good news. It is *really good news*.

God keeps God's promises. The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, known to us in Jesus Christ, born, suffered, died, and raised from the dead. God's grace is sufficient for us in this life and in the next. But for God's grace we would not be, but for God's grace we could not love, and but for God's grace we should not speak, but here we are. We live. We can love. And we should speak. It truly is very good news.

As the prophet Isaiah foretold, as the saints of Acts knew, as Luke the Gospel writer records, God keeps God's promises, and for that, we must be, we truly are deeply grateful.

II. A Decade of Growth

Today we gather for a look at the years of ministry at Erwin Church. In the last ten years there have been significant blessings bestowed upon this congregation, largely through the lay leadership of this church. Worship attendance in these years has gone from one service at an average of 75 to two services at a total average of 200. Staff has gone from three to 11, weekday use of building from 50 persons to 450 a day, annual budget from \$60,000 to \$180,000 a year, endowment from almost nothing to a total of pledged and in-hand of \$425,000. The apportionment has been paid one hundred percent each of these years. Our mission work is five dimensional at least. Children find a safe home, a loving environment, a nurturing, caring place here, and that costs you, in time, in pastoral leadership, in energy. I mean, the Erwin Nursery School and the Wesley Daycare Center, Boy Scout Troop #1, the Syracuse Contemporary Dance Company, Suzuki violin, and a whole list of others that we won't name. This place is known to and for children.

We've cared for our property these years. It's expensive to maintain two parsonages and a church, but those of us who sit in these comfortable pews today need to be thankful every Sunday we're here that we have no mortgage. How many

of us live in a house with no mortgage? But you worship in a church, bought and paid for and cared for.

There are immeasurable graces, too, things much harder to measure but much more important. It's tempting to tick off a list of those, but one will have to stand for others: there's nothing more central to the Christian life than vocation, than calling, than the way you're going to spend your work days. In this congregation, nine have been ordained to the preaching ministry, nine are currently practicing medicine, five are attorneys in this city, 27 are teachers, and the list goes on.

Yes, we have much for which to be thankful today. Erwin is if not the, at least a, leading Protestant church in Onondaga County.

I note for a moment just what it means to be a church of the Reformation today. We have a lot of camaraderie and ecumenical relation with those to the left and the right, and that's a good thing. I've often said that if I weren't worshipping at Erwin in our neighborhood, probably I would be worshipping at St. Andrew's Roman Catholic Church, a small parish to the southeast.

But as friendly and as loving as we are across the fences, there are many things with which we cannot and do not agree. We do not accept the infallibility of the bishop of Rome, we do not accept the celibacy of the priesthood, we do not accept the sacrifice of the Mass, and we certainly don't accept the subordination of women. Likewise to the right, we have much to be thankful for in our relations with the independent churches, the non-Protestant independent churches, which are growing today. They include DeWitt Community Church and Believer's Chapel and the Spiritual Journey Center and Unity Church. Many fine folks attend these churches. But these churches reject where we accept. They reject infant baptism as a saving means of grace, they reject a regular order of ministry both trained and ordained (it takes both, both a calling and a professional challenge), they reject an order of ministry that gives oversight to the church beyond the local church. It's good to have some folks out there who aren't immediately tied to the local church, who can give another eye and ear. So to the left and the right we differ. But in this tradition, we are if not the, at least a, leading congregation in this county.

Through our combined ministry and through our combined service, in pulpit and staff work and small groups and children and mission and youth and weekday ministry, this is a diverse congregation. Look around you. This is a university church, but it's an international church, but it's a suburban church, but it's an urban church, but it's a conservative church, but it's a liberal church. It's hard to define.

It has a leading position in this county. In June, the mayor and the chancellor and county leaders were here for lunch. People know about Erwin Church.

We are well represented in the university of this city, particularly in the religion department, the engineering department, the forestry school, the English Language Institute, and especially with our ministry with students. The late Chancellor Eggers said, "There are 6,000 students living to the east of Ostrom," and it's true. They're all about us; they don't happen to be here this week, but they're here usually.

We celebrate those who are giving their lives in this way. I've often said it doesn't take a rocket scientist to be the chair of a finance committee, but we have one such here at Erwin.

We are well-known at LeMoyne College. We're probably the only Protestant church so well-known at Le Moyne College, and for that we can be thankful.

The leadership of this city knows who we are. Those who are printing the newspapers know who we are.

We are well represented through our strong lay leaders on significant boards in this county, whether they be Rescue Mission or Elmcrest or on and on. Our lay people take a hand in the PTO's at H.W. Smith, Ed Smith, Levy, and Nottingham.

This congregation through its lay leadership is well-known in the business community in this county. SUNY Health Science Center is now the largest employer in Onondaga County; we are well represented there. In business arenas also we are well represented at Carrier, Bristol, NiMo, New Process Gear, Syracuse Research, and so on.

Only 400 new families move into Onondaga County every year, but through the lay leadership of this church we have an opportunity to witness and minister to those new residents each day. Through your work and at home, you are a part of God's plan for sharing the gospel. The four corners of this county are represented in this church. I think of the Disingers coming from the west, the Bertrands from the north, the Neuhausers from the east, and the Seemanns from the south. And some of those I note are here today, hallelujah!

Moreover, this is a traditional Protestant church. We are not an "alternative" church, and therefore we don't have to answer the awkward question, "Alternative to what?" we are well within the bounds of traditional Protestant Christianity and happy to be so.

This is a young congregation. The six work area chairs have an average age of 36 (footnote: there's one age I don't know, but that's the guess). The potential for regional leadership out of this church knows almost no bounds, through its church, through its Sunday School and other ministries, and through its pulpit, and especially through the faith that is born in your heart and which are living out every day.

You are the church, and people know you, and respond in kind. Your faith is deepening. And for that I give great thanks. And I'm going to ask you to open your hymnals to #84, and as a prayer of thanks to God, we're going to sing hymn #84.

("Thank You, Lord")

III. The Secular Challenge

Christopher Lasch has died. The great historian from the City of Rochester, whose voice I have appreciated for 20 years, died this last year, leaving us his last great historical book, *Progress and Its Critics*. At one point, tracing the ministry of Martin Luther King, he notes, just two years before King's death, that King came to a point when he could no longer say fully, honestly, candidly, to his constituents what he actually thought. And Lasch reports, his capacity for leadership was then exhausted. I hope I never get to that point in my ministry.

There are some things now I need to say to you from the heart. They also are good news, but they come in a different shape. There is much for which we can be thankful as we look back over the last 10 years. But Reinhold Niebuhr preached a sermon on this theme some 40 years ago, the theme of the sentence I'm about to give you, that stays with me and gnaws at me and bothers me. Said Niebuhr, "Whenever we do a little thing extremely well in order to avoid doing the big thing at all, we are engaged in religious legalism." Whenever we do little things extremely well in order to avoid doing the big things at all, we're no better than the Scribes and Pharisees of old. And while some rather littler things have been done well in this corner in these years, several major tragedies have occurred around about us, secular and religious both, and we must look at them this day. Secular and religious, we'll pick one example form each.

The first has to do with the city of Syracuse. For so many years we lauded it over the Flower City to the west, saying in Rochester they had a murder a day and in Syracuse we have only a murder a week. The statistics are still true but the situation is changing rapidly. When a member of this church is robbed at gunpoint on Westcott Street a week and a half ago, when a relative of some of the members of this church is transported through Oakwood Cemetery at gunpoint last week, we have vivid pictures of change in this city. We have a vital interest in what happens in the city of Syracuse.

In 1985 from this pulpit I preached a sermon titled "In Defense of Public Education." I read through it again this week and I still believe everything in it. It's full of long quotes from John Dewey and Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King and Robert Allan Hill. The city school system, which I so dearly love, until very recently had a modicum of safety and discipline and respect and quality to offer to all its students. I think of my graduating class from Nottingham in 1972. I think of one member, Laurel Graber, who I read every week in the *New York Times Magazine*, she's an editor down there now, I read her words. I think of Saundra Smokes writing in our own local paper. These and others grew up in a language-rich environment that set them free and set them off, male, female, black, white, into a future.

Today, the situation is different. In 1995, we are dealing with lack of safety and discipline and respect and quality. And I have to say I have failed to some degree in these years adequately to minister in this direction. Let me tell you, it matters to Erwin Church what happens in the ministry of Syracuse. We are a regional church, but we are inextricably tied to this city. I have failed in conversation with the leadership within the school system to convince that this was an issue immediate and needing direct address. I failed with my conservative friends to convince that we need to spend more money in the schools. I failed with my liberal friends to convince that there is even a problem, that this is more than perception, that this is more than classism or racism or sexism. Let me say in my view, one person's opinion, any perception you may have about the situation today is nowhere near as bad as it is. That's my view.

I have failed with my friends to convince us to stand shoulder to shoulder and to fight and to fight hard and to fight together. And I have failed with my enemies to find a common ground. Most especially, and close to home, and this is not easy over the dinner table, I have failed with teachers. Teachers, you are the key.

You are the adults in the situation. You have the union, and you have the investment, and you have the most to lose. It's not too late. And I have failed with parents, to convince parents that you need to spend an hour a week in each school in which you have a child. Lunch hour, if that's all it can be. There are solutions in the interim, too. Relocate or privatize. The best one, used by most of our 100 children and families in this church, is to supplement. It is done well through Erwin Church, and I'm proud of that.

But in 1995, I present to you this thought: we need a city-wide United Methodist council, 14 members, one from each church in this city, to work at an agenda of safety, discipline, respect, and quality; to elect two school board members; to develop a committee of 100 committed community leaders; yes, also to support an increase in local school tax; to modify tenure and to streamline exiting; and I have to say, if I feel the way I do today in the year 2000, if there's no improvement, then the Methodist and Protestant churches in this city need to form their own high school. The Jews have done it, the Fundamentalists have done it, the Roman Catholics have done it, and the secularists have done it, and they've left us holding the bag.

But none of this can be done by any one pastor, no matter how strong, nor any one congregation, no matter how talented. It takes other leadership; it takes larger leadership. Let me boil it right down so there's no mistaking it: it will do us no good to develop an ever finer Sunday School in this church if our 7- and 8-year-olds are not learning to read. I'm not exaggerating.

As goes Onondaga County, so goes it's leading Protestant church. And as go the schools in this city, so goes our Sunday School.

Wesley taught us that social holiness was the only kind of holiness there is. We are the people who remember that, and know it, and can live it. We have something to offer. But there are none so thin as those who will not eat. There's time. It's not too late. But the time is not unlimited.

IV. The Religious Challenge

Whatever secular problem there may have been, they are dwarfed in comparison to the religious problems of our time. I don't want to embarrass her unduly, but I need to say to Deborah Pritts as I did at the early service (and somebody clapped at the early service, I noted): there are 443 churches in this Conference, six superintendents, and one bishop. We have the best superintendent of the six, the most energetic, the most creative, the most engaged in her churches, and we thank her for that. The problems of our Conference are the problems of Erwin Church. Just as Erwin is inextricably tied over time to our secular environment, we're also inextricably tied over time to our religious environment. You are a creature of the Annual Conference, whether you like it or not, whether you *know* it or not.

Your building are owned by the Annual Conference, your endowment ultimately goes to the Annual Conference if not used here, your pastor is appointed annually by the bishop through the Conference, the doctrine of the church is set through the General Conference *Book of Discipline*, the apportionment (\$25,000 a year, not a small piece of change) goes to the Conference. The program of the

Conference is ours, too, and even our real property insurance is now purchased through the Conference.

We need a strong Conference. To be a strong church, Erwin needs a strong Conference, and as goes the Conference, so goes the church.

We need not only a frugal Conference but an industrious one, industry and frugality being the two values that Franklin and others built this country upon. Erwin is a leading voice in our Conference, thanks to many of you who are here today. When Connie and I delivered the final apportionment check in Cicero, we were greeted happily and warmly, and they even clapped. I don't know why; it was during coffee break, but it was fine.

Our problems in the Conference include budgetary problems, leadership problems, ethics, consensus, and gender issues, and I'm not going to elaborate there. But my understanding of the Holy Spirit is that God is a Spirit who dwells in the hearts of his people. That's what Wesley wrote. With the right leadership, we have opportunity to improve. And in any case, the future life of Erwin Church depends on what happens in the Conference.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Any institution is the lengthening shadow of one man." Today we would say one person. He was right then; it's true today.

So in 1995, I would propose that we elect a Syracuse layperson to General Conference: Vivian Benton Skeele, or Joe Moody, or Win Cotton, or all three; that we change the voting procedure so that only those paying the apportionment in full may vote to increase it; that we be very careful about budgeting beyond 10 percent of our expected income; and that we look at combining some things. I would love to look at combining, for instance, the student ministry at Hendrick Chapel with what we're doing here. Erwin Church already has a \$20,000 endowment for student ministry, and that can grow.

This cannot be done by any one pastor, no matter how strong, nor by any one congregation, no matter how talented. It takes other leadership: a bishop, superintendents, a group.

In Methodism, the office of the bishop and the person in that office has much authority. Not complete authority, but much authority. And that's good news.

I present to you these challenges. The sermon isn't concluded, but to give you a breather, I would like to ask that we pray God's blessing for our work in this area by singing one verse of hymn #468.

("Dear Jesus, in Whose Life I See")

V. A Future of Grace and Freedom

Nobody knows grace and freedom like singing Methodists. It truly is good news. As you go into this new year, I ask you to go in empowered by a sense of God's presence and love, carrying his grace and freedom to those about you. Nothing pleases a pastor more than to hear by accident the influence of laypeople upon other people. I think of leaving a sugar house up north where 15 men had gathered for an hour to boil syrup and to eat doughnuts, walking a muddy path and hearing one of the other visitors say to me about the host, a lay Methodist, "That man never says anything about his religion, but he'd give you the shirt off his back."

I think of a student returning here who had been at the University some years saying, "I don't know what you're doing in the pulpit on Sunday morning, Bob, but your best preaching occurs through the almost silent witness of one of the people on the staff at Syracuse University. Because of him I'm a Christian."

Discipleship means your preaching.

Discipleship also means your evangelism, and evangelism is hard work because it involves invitations. It takes a Trudi Moser to say to a new-found couple, neighbors, Why don't you come on to Erwin Church? I know there are some other churches around, we won't mention them. Why don't you come and be with us? And so the Cordells did, and here they are.

But the best evangelism story from this year is what Isabel Wolseley did during Vacation Bible School. You remember that August experiment, where through volunteer labor we care for a week for a hundred children in our neighborhood. Isabel said, You know, we ought to also offer the parent something this year, a chance to hear the gospel, read the scripture, pray. I'll set the room, I'll get the refreshments, I'll do the program. Monday came and nobody attended. Tuesday, no one. Wednesday, no one. Thursday, she and I sat there and were about ready to close shop. We had a prayer and were getting up. In through the door walked a young woman, smiling, and saying, Is this where the group meets? We said, It sure is. And she sat down and sat with us, and she's here today.

Evangelism is one by one, and it takes hard work, because an invitation is a risk. It can be refused. It's risky to invite, but you're willing to risk it, and I'm thankful for that.

Your stewardship is to be commended. The stewardship and giving at Erwin Church is wonderful. Many of you are tithers. I say two direct challenging words, first one to the younger adults: When more of our young families tithe, we will be able easily to fund a full-time Christian educator. I say to our older adults: Remember that eight of the top 10 pledgers at Erwin Church have joined this church since 1985. When more of our older member are tithing, we will have the funds we need in radio and television and other ministries. To be a Christian means to tithe.

I have a friend who responded to the question, are you a born-again Christian, by saying, "No, I'm a tithing Christian." And that's exactly my position.

Thank goodness for the stewardship at this church that provides the seeds for future wonder, future morality, and future generosity.

None of this grace and freedom can be available to us except through God's spirit and its power moving in our midst. I don't understand electricity, but I use it. You have to "plug in." to use a lamp, you have to plug it in. Wesley thought that, to be empowered, a Christian needs to "plug in" to the five means of grace. Have you? Are you reading Scripture? Are you receiving the Sacrament regularly? Are you praying daily? Are you disciplining the body, fasting or otherwise, regularly? Are you in Christian conversation regularly?

In 1966, the pastor of the Bellevue church wrote, in three sentences, about the power of God: "If I for one minute thought that I would have to depend upon my own abilities or my own ideas or my own skills to minister to this congregation, I would quite immediately." Al was right then, and he's right now.

VI. Conclusion: Auden

You are people of grace and freedom. Live it, love it, celebrate it, and remember the words of Auden:

He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

God bless you. Happy New Year. Let us pray.

**Sermon delivered January 8, 1995
At Erwin United Methodist Church
Charge Conference Sunday**

The Top Ten Needs of a District Superintendent

10. A DS needs a cheap, good lawyer, on retainer, who can provide letters of advice in a timely way.
9. A DS needs a good car, every information highway gadget available, a loving spouse, and a raise.
8. A DS needs sympathy from her\his colleagues: this is no picnic.
7. A DS needs to say, in the cabinet, not what is congruent with the discussion, nor what seems to fit the flow of talk, but rather what is on her\his heart. Terribly, terribly hard.
6. A DS needs to spend time, much time, on the only thing really needed now in Methodism: recruiting, refreshing, retaining excellent pastoral leadership.
5. A DS needs to be chosen, by a wise Bishop, on the basis of objective criteria: 1. a minimum of 15 years of pastoral experience in a combination of rural, suburban, and urban settings; 2. time spent on BOOM; 3. a record, unbroken, of paying the apportionment 100%, and a total pay-in of \$250,000 minimum; 4. The clear support of her\his colleagues, shown in a measurable way (elections, etc.); 5. theological moderation; 6. interest and ability in attracting strong people to the ministry; 7. demonstrated administrative skills; 8. concern for the preaching ministry of the church; 9. a reputation for loyalty.
4. A DS needs to work smarter, not harder than others.
3. A DS needs measurable goals for a 6\8 year term: 1. measured preaching improvement across the district; 2. measured statistical growth (members, money, mission, message); 3. step up to district full apportionment payment; 4. a new church started successfully on each watch.
2. A DS needs a sense of wonder, vulnerability, and self-mockery.
1. A DS needs a good Bishop.

“MINISTRY”

Paragraph 439 on the 1988 *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* describes the responsibilities and duties of a pastor. Herein one finds 85 lines and 811 words devoted to a kind of understanding of the work of the minister. One may still overhear in this paragraph a basic three-part view of ministry in relation to Word, Sacrament, and Order. The presentation, however, militates against any other simple statement. Three gerunds are employed as category headings: “ministering,” “equipping,” and “supervising.” The parallel gerund “administering” is for some reason left aside in favor of the actual noun, “administration.”

Two extensive lists of duties are also presented. Fourteen duties are listed under “ministering,” seven under “equipping,” and three under administration.” No “ordering” (to stay for a moment with the gerunds) of these is apparently indicated. That is, “to administer the Sacraments” is placed on the same shelf with “to seek out opportunities for cooperative ministries.” “To preach the Word” is on par with “to counsel concerning military service.” “To be the administrative officer” and “to participate in denominational training opportunities” are given equivalent status with the lists.

The current statement in the *Discipline* both mirrors and fosters our current malaise and confusion about ministry. Perhaps no other passage in the *Discipline* so clearly illustrates our current predicament. Our present organization and leadership have their roots in a period of Methodist history that has long since departed. The paragraph on ministry has grown like cucumbers, adding and expanding “options” for ministry, describing the points on the “ministerial arch,” stretching to include any and all points of view. Such a posture comes from our history in the 1960s, a period of numerical strength, cultural prominence, and ecumenical merger. Since 1968 Methodism has shrunk, aged, and weakened at a fierce velocity. Torn by regional, moral, and theological differences, our dwindling areas of consensus further exacerbated our physical problems. We have neither the common mind nor the money we once had. Still we are fastened to an important but nonetheless very curious commitment to “pluralism.” Pluralism holds a central place in our soteriology. Consequently, the plurality of approaches to an understanding of ministry, found in the *Discipline*, is not only consonant with our reigning ideology, but representative of a whole host of other difficulties.

The future of the church lies with a return to the basic ministry of the church. God will use our church as long as there is fruit. Otherwise not. Would we want it otherwise? The basic ministry of the church is located, as Wesley taught, where the Word of God is rightly preached, the Sacraments properly administered, and service then rendered to neighbor. For this ministry again to flourish, the locations of preaching and fellowship need rebuilding. For this rebuilding to occur, strong leadership and a clear description of the work of ministry are needed. To recruit and retain excellent leaders we will need to spend money and to focus our attention

on the primary needs of the church (preaching, sacraments, service). I believe a revision of paragraph 439 is in order. Before offering such a possible revision, I would like to recall for a few passages from the *Discipline* of 1904. I heartily recommend a full reading of paragraphs 103 to 144 of his now superannuated tract. It compares to our current *Discipline* somewhat in the way that the rhetoric of Mario Cuomo compares to that of Paul Tsongas. It is alive, and true.

Here are examples of what we once thought the ministry was about:

1. "Tell everyone under your care what you think wrong in his conduct and temper."
2. "Observe, it is not your business only to preach so many times and to take care of this or that society, but to save as many as you can; to bring as many sinners as you can to repentance; and with all your power to build them up in that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord."
3. "The duty of a Preacher is: 1) To preach. 2) To meet the Societies and Classes. 3) To visit the sick."
4. Five instituted and three prudential means of grace are listed. (How many of us can name them today?)
5. "As often as possible, rise at four."
6. "The best general method of preaching is: 1) To convince. 2) To offer Christ. 3) To invite. 4) To build up. And to do this in some measure in every sermon."
7. "Our religion is not sufficiently deep, universal, uniform; but superficial, partial, uneven. It will be so until we spend half as much time in visiting as we now do in talking uselessly. We must, yes, every Traveling Preacher must, instruct the people from house to house."
8. "We have a base, man-pleasing temper, so that we let people perish rather than lose their love; we let them go quietly to hell lest we should offend them."
9. "*We ought to throw by all the libraries in the world, rather than be guilty of the loss of one soul.*"
10. "The sum is, Go into every house in course and teach everyone therein, young and old, to be Christians inwardly and outwardly."

I was given my copy of the 1904 *Discipline* by a funeral director in this manner: One Sunday, a young woman made her first visit to our country church. After service she lingered and then came over to the parsonage for coffee. It was winter, and when she was ready to leave, her car would not start. I remember leaning over her motor as we fixed the machine. My tie picked up a little dirt, which greatly, greatly touched Laurie. Too greatly. Something was wrong. I had much schoolwork that week, along with the pastoral duties. On Friday, I drove to the nearby library in the afternoon to work on a book report on a book by Robert Grant, the church historian from Chicago. I passed by Laurie's house on the way, and for a moment thought about stopping in to visit. In the early evening, I passed again coming home, and more clearly considered going in to say hello, as I had a few days earlier. But I had other things on my mind. When I got home

the phone rang. Laurie had killed herself that afternoon. She had taken her father's hunting rifle, loaded it, put the barrel of the gun in her mouth, and pulled the trigger.

The funeral home that handled most of the Protestant burials was run by an eccentric fellow, alcoholic, who nonetheless had a deep reservoir of kindness and a love of children. He helped Laurie's family greatly as they grieved her loss. I have never seen grief so sharp and so bitter. I share this one memory, which is one I will never forget. As the family sat and prepared for the service, I waited in the office, and went over the service again. On the shelf, there stood a 1904 *Book of Discipline*. I took it down and began leafing through the pages. Just before I put the book down to pray and to lead the funeral, I was arrested by this passage: "*We ought to throw by all the libraries in the world, rather than be guilty of the loss of one soul.*"

I offer this memorial recommendation. Perhaps we could see our way clear to change the Book of Discipline at paragraph 439. I recommend we delete the paragraph, all 85 lines and 81 words, and in its place put the following 10 lines, 57 words:

The Duties of a Preacher

1. The pastor is ordained to a ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order, as generally understood in Christianity, and in the history of Methodism.
2. The pastor will preach an excellent sermon once a week.
3. The pastor will make 50 visits every week of his/her ministry, including at least two calls for every hour spent in a meeting.

“PREACHING FOR A NEW AGE”
Apocalyptic Preaching
Apocalyptic Modes and Themes in Preaching
For the 21st Century

The red sports car had been parked, with one foot over the curb, just in front of grampa's house. At 88, without legs to use and without friends left to share, the old man still resisted the demons of monotony and loneliness and pain. His daughter drove up once a month from Virginia. She of the red sports car bore the image of her mother, and at a distance looked like her mother brought back from the dead. Accustomed to cry with ease, she always brought a wet greeting to her beloved, ancient father. Who had time to park the car with perfection?

As the pastor left for another visit he walked past the red sports car. He envied its sharp look and its cleanliness. He wondered whether, after kids and after savings, he would drive sometime such a car. He noticed the tapes on the front seat and the leather seats. The preacher paused to muse about the statements made by automobiles about their owners, and vice-versa.

Rounding the back of the car he noticed the license plate, Virginia State, and the letters: L.I.N.A.D.R. A voice from the porch called out: "My motto: 'Life is not a dress rehearsal'."

The little death in each moment, with its slight momentary affliction, a foretaste of judgment, for heaven or hell, does not go unnoticed in the post-Christian world. Life itself affords and requires a capacity for discussion of the last things, of ultimate realities.

In the New Testament, these last things, the eschatological core of the gospel, are presented in apocalyptic language. Death is personified, mythically described as a being, and called the "last enemy." Judgment comes as part of the end-time events, expected soon, but in any case surely expected. Heavenly bliss and eternal punishment are presented as the consequences of one's encounter with the preaching of Jesus Christ. It is in the clothing of apocalypticism that the New Testament message presents itself.

We have yet, even in Christian theology, to emphasize sufficiently the apocalyptic nature of the Biblical texts. How much less, then, has such an understanding permeated homiletics.

Ironically, our time, our post-Christian world, is much closer to the world which the gospel writers addressed than any other since Constantine (312 A.D.). We can appreciate the cultural ghettoization of the early church, for such now is increasingly our fate. We can appreciate the difficulty with which the early teachers tried to convey the resurrection word to a natural world, for we have the same problems. We

can sympathize with the bearers of an apocalyptic word carried to a platonic world, and how hard the translation was, for again in our time the symbols of the Christian faith have "grown cold" for the culture at large.

It may be that a return to the form of ancient preaching, apocalyptic language and imagery, will aid us in preaching today in a fresh way.

The good seed of the gospel meets defeat in three ways, according to Scripture (Matthew 13:18-23). Some runs headlong into lack of understanding. A certain understanding of the gospel, preliminary not profound, is needed for the seed to take root. Without the soil of understanding, the seed withers and dies. Some other seed finds not rootage, lacks any depth dimension, any history, any family heritage, and so also fails and dies. Some developed life and character also are required for the gospel to flourish. Without depth of this personal kind, the seed has no chance. Then also, some of this seed does not grow for lack of resistance. Lack of staying power further harms the good seed. No understanding, no roots, no resistance: such are the spiritual enemies of the gospel.

Apocalyptic preaching, in Scripture and in our time, addresses these woes head-on. Meeting the need for understanding is the apocalyptic theme of revelation. Meeting the need for rootage is the apocalyptic theme of judgment. Meeting the need for resistance is the apocalyptic theme of perseverance. Spiritual revelation, personal judgment, and ethical perseverance are themes at the heart of the gospel and also, surprisingly, at the front gate of the post-Christian world in which the gospel is now preached.

A spiritual renewal of our local churches which highlights pastoral ministry, and especially preaching, proceeds best under an apocalyptic banner wherein the themes of revelation, judgment, and perseverance are trumpeted. The teaching of the Lord, the record of Scripture, the early history of the church, and also the need of our own time all encourage us to look again at the "dustbin of history," apocalypticism, and there find hidden treasure.

"THE ONE THING NEEDFUL"

Some years ago, it was in the winter, my father-in-law died of a heart attack. His funeral service was planned for a Sunday afternoon and set to be held in a United Methodist church, four hours to the south. Dear, truly loving lay leaders insisted on taking my Sunday services, and prayed us a safe drive down the icy road home. We looked down into Canada as we left, early on a crisp February Sunday. The temperature the night before had fallen to 38 degrees below zero on the Fahrenheit scale.

Beneath a fiery sun and over an icy road we drove, hurrying toward the funeral. This drive took us down through the outback of the Northeast, and thus the outback of America. We shivered and slipped from Malone to Potsdam to Gouverneur and on to the south, passing by a country that time has, for the time being, passed by.

Thoughts en route to a funeral can be heart deep and "cosmic," too. It is a time to think deep and wide thoughts.

We crossed through more than 30 towns, following old Route 11. Every one of them had a United Methodist church, coming alive for Sunday morning. Brother Bergh was sweeping snow off the front walk in Malone. Brother Parnapy, lay leader in the next town, crossed the street with his Bible in his left hand. In Potsdam I knew Russell Clark, at age 67, was preparing a fiery sermon. Our District Superintendent lived (and worked) in Canton, and we caught a glimpse of him buying the *New York Times*. Church had just ended when we hit Gouverneur, and the streets were full of Methodist, Baptist, and Catholic cars. In Philadelphia, an elderly man was already posting next week's sermon title on the sign board of the little church there. We heard a taped portion of a service from Watertown. We hurried on to our rendezvous, hoping the snow would not fall, and noticing the many Methodist churches which dotted our trail. What a joy to be free on a Sunday morning! What pride to pass by these sister churches and to overhear and oversee their gathering! What camaraderie we felt with the 30 preachers and congregations coming to hear God's word for the week and to pray with each other and to "watch over one another in love." One sermon title read, "Be Still and Know that God is God."

Methodism has been and still fundamentally is, only, a connection of preaching points. Methodism was built and continues to live as a string of moments and spots where, Sunday by Sunday, explosions of Word and Love may occur. Combustion of this sort may happen with the mixture of congregational gasoline and homiletical wind and spiritual spark. Each of the 30 old churches we passed that frosty morning held the potential for such an explosion.

My wife was that winter carrying our third child, who would be born in July. It may have been, I suppose, the overwhelming emotional winds of father's sudden death and son's imminent birth and genuine love at our backs in the church left

behind which caused the vision of that bleak Sunday (Luke 1:22). Still, I saw a vision that day.

For seven years, since entering seminary and taking my first preaching assignment, I had listened to and read from the leadership of our church, our Methodist connection. And I am a Methodist of the Methodists: born in a Methodist parsonage; circumcised by a Methodist doctor; baptized, according to the tradition of the elders, by a jovial superintendent. Taught in MYF, given summer tutelage at a camp called "Aldersgate," attending Annual Conference by the age of 15, employed by Methodist summer camping, a graduate of Ohio Wesleyan, and a sometime reader of *Together* magazine. Yes, a Methodist of the Methodists, though at Union Seminary I learned to count it all as dross for the surpassing joy of knowing Biblical Greek and Feminist Theology. I learned to pray to God with the proper reverence, "O God, our non-authoritarian parenting being."

Since my first remembered Annual Conference in 1967, our church leadership had been anxious and fretful over many things. Nettled, I suggest, by much serving. For a while, youth ministry was to be our offering to God. Then, for a season, campus ministry became the favored son. I recall somewhat later an emphasis on world hunger. Ethnic churches also received attention. A certain remarkable understanding of lay ministry then was to be our Lord and Savior. I even remember a stirring exhortation, delivered at one district conference, on the absolute priority of the cradle roll. We have made room, in our serving, for almost everything. We advocate for all: "Let us represent you, let us make you smile." Fortunately the history of these fragments of Methodist work is well written by others as it culminates in the creation of (our latest interest) the so-called diaconal ministry, a church program sure to warm the cockles of Martha's heart.

On the road to father's funeral one has both the mind of Christ and the soul of Hamlet. Revenge and resurrection cuddle together under the afghan in the back seat. I saw a vision, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, moaning on the castle parapet. I tell you I saw a vision and heard a voice. In the vision I saw a new church heaven and earth, wherein the former things had passed away.

Methodism for 30 years has been majoring in minors. Methodism for 30 years has been distracted with much serving. Methodism for 30 years has neglected the one thing needful. Methodism has exchanged its birthright for pottage. Methodism, a connection of preaching points, moments, and places where, Sunday by Sunday, explosions of Word and Love may occur, has forgotten the love it had at first, distracted by much serving.

Forty minutes before arriving at the funeral we passed yet another rural, crossroads, dying bead on the denominational string. This one we paused before, since we had been inside some years earlier. Then we had visited the old church with a builder assigned to repair it. I had despaired. An old building, bad roof, dark interior, no landscaping, small and elderly congregation. I remembered, passing by on

the road, what I had said before to my friend the builder. "How can a church this far gone be restored?" He smiled and, after a sharp remark about preachers who have little faith, did answer: "Look at the design, Bob. The design is solid, the design is good. They knew what they were doing 150 years ago. It is the design that counts. It can be fixed. I can fix it. And I will." And he did.

The design, forgotten and neglected and abused and unappreciated in our 30 years of minor-league play, is still there. Hidden under the leaky financial roof, and behind the poorly-chosen programmatic shrubs, and the darkened special-interest theological interior, and the absence of ministerial housecleaning, the grand design remains from the mind of Wesley and the hand of Coke and the Spirit of Jesus. We are the children of Asbury. We are the children of Lincoln. We are the children of God. The design is very good.

What design?

The design in Methodism is for preaching. In our bones and in our old deep structures we know that the one thing needful in our church today is preaching. Like Mary, the one who selected the good portion, we too have the opportunity, with our connection, to sit at Jesus' feet. To hear his Word, to attend to his Body, to acclaim his Presence.

Others have lately described the predicament of our denomination. I am heartily grateful for these words. Another stage in the diagnostic work needs now to be done at the Annual Conference level, and then at the local church level. However, most of these books have been long on diagnosis and very short on prognosis. What follows here is, if nothing else, a very specific suggestion about future happiness and joy in Methodism. Our future, to the extent we have a future, lies with our preaching alone. To proclaim, interpret, and apply the good news of Jesus Christ is our only vocation as a church. The rest is window dressing. I accept and affirm the other recommendations. One calls for spiritual renewal. Another champions the local church. Still another calls for refreshment of the clergy. Another suggests theological retooling. The average reader, however, of these insightful works is left largely at sea when the foundational questions (what to teach, how to teach, what to do) are posed.

Here the response may be very simple, but it is clear. We need to return by the year 2000 to the posture of Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his *logos*. Yes, let us have spiritual renewal. Let us have emphasis on the local church. Let us have better clergy and clear theology. Why not? None of these will we have until we first attend to the one thing needful, and that is the very hard work of preaching the gospel well.

If we preach well we have a reason for being and we have a future. Otherwise, we have neither (Mark 14:6). It is our only job, the basis for our design as a church, the calling to us for the 21st century.

Shocking, then, is our inattention to the Lord. We are just too busy with our own serving. Who is teaching homiletics well today? What books and articles on preaching are there? Where can one turn for help?

Further, here argued is the thesis that a very particular kind of preaching, that fit for the new millennium, is our hope. Apocalyptic preaching, lost in wonder, love and praise, is our hope.

In the ice of February, nearing the hour of death, still on the outback roads, I had a vision of a Methodism renewed, a preaching church, a people alive for a new millennium. Let us be sober and watchful. The time is short. The hour of judgment is at hand. The word of revelation beckons. Let us preserve. The renewal of all things awaits us. May we resist the forces of harm. We shall praise our Maker while we have breath. Preaching, of a decidedly apocalyptic stamp, is the one thing needful.

“BROWN SAIL, WING AND WING, NASSAU”

Text: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Mark 5:21-34

A PAINTING

Georgia O’Keefe painted a brilliant, beautiful scene set in the Bahamas. against the backdrop of Nassau beach, with wind and sand and blue of summer, she depicted a sailboat, “wing and wing”—with mainsail to the portside and jib to the starboard and both full, joyfully full, of the breath of the sea.

The boat sails, it seems, straight out of the picture. Like Mona Lisa looking at you, it is hard to tell which is more alive—the scene or the seer. A truly beautiful painting, a doorway to summer, glory, glory...

My daughter wrote a paper once on O’Keefe and the painting was featured. But recently Richard Bode wrote about the same scene, and, rightly, commented on the brown sail. Nassau sailboats sport red, blue, yellow, orange, and other bright sails—but rarely, if ever, a challenging brown one. Brown Sail, Wing and Wing, Nassau. The perfect place, the finest day, the fullest wind—heaven on earth. Like Asbury First, on a Sabbath day in June, with recent excitement—heaven on earth. Yet, the artist has painted her mainsail brown, her jib brown, and the stowed spinnaker, too, was surely brown.

Something like the color brown covers the pallet, this morning, of the Master Painter and Master Sailor and Master Lover, for whose Gospel we listen today. In the mainsail, Jesus crosses to the other side. He comes about. He tacks over against the wind. He turns. In the jib, Paul, unusual for Paul, presents a challenge to Corinth that has no directness, no flat command, but all the sideways doublespeak we associate with British humor—John Cleese in *A Fish Called Wanda*. Brown Sail, Jesus. Brown Sail, Paul.

From the rear of the slave galley, as the Roman prisoners row and row, the centurion’s voice rings out over their hard labor: “Men, I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that we will have double rations for lunch. The bad news: the captain wants to water-ski at 2 P.M.”

COMING ABOUT

As a congregation, we are poised to “come about”. It may have been that O’Keefe’s boat was given a brown sail to offer an inkling of challenge, of an unknown future, or, perhaps, of the impending need to “come about”.

What a wonderful church! What a simply beautiful congregation! What a time and place to be in ministry! What a privilege and what an opportunity! Vibrant worship, extensive education, and effective care: Asbury First United Methodist Church. All aboard! Those who have been aboard a year or two will notice something else: a faster pace, increased velocity as we have sailed across the wind.

- Average worship attendance up: 558 in 1994, 588 in 1995, 620 in 1996, 639 1997 and Summerfest still to come!
- Educational choices expanded: VBS, Good News Class, 5x5, Confirmation Mission Trip, Singles and Students, Theologians Morse and Fry, Covenant Disciple Groups, Men's Prayer, several new musical options and ensembles,
- Care Commitments advanced: Dining Center, Storehouse and others
- Stewardship improvement: from a \$63,000 hard money deficit in July of 1995 to two years completed in the black, with pledging up 5% per year.
- Endowment growth from 2.4 million in 1995 to just in under 4 Million today.

And, as Elsie Wiberg so movingly witnessed in May—"There's another thing here too: How do you measure a full heart? A full church is wonderful and easy to see. But how do you measure a full heart?"

The salt spray moistens our lips. The sun is high, the wind fills the sails, and the boat cuts even more rapidly through the pounding surf. Captains and crew rejoice, "Wing and Wing", alive and free. Note though, the Brown Sail. We are poised to come about, to turn, to enter a time of significant transformation.

In order to change direction, to "come about", a sailor, ironically, has to pick up speed, increase velocity in the old direction in order to have the speed, the momentum, to change, to tack back up the wind, to shift for another season, another century, another age.

Friends, we have been picking up speed, clipping along. Now—this year, this autumn—hold on to your lifejackets—we will need to "come about". Three brown sails we shall need to spread, in order to catch a millennial wind.

MAINSAIL

We are a friendly church. We are becoming a welcoming church. For those of us who have found our pew, our small group, our committee, our choir, our circle of friends, Asbury First exudes warmth, breathes friendliness. You can feel it this morning. People who come to worship will say, on the porch as they leave, "I've long seen this building along East Avenue. I never dreamed the congregation inside was so friendly!"

We are a friendly church. To become a welcoming church, to help others climb over the various perceived fences of architecture, tradition, history, liturgy, we shall want

to become twice as welcoming as any other church. Hospitality will then fill our welcoming mainsail. For this to happen, as a congregation sailing along, we will want to “come about”.

Our focus on Sunday morning will become our visitors. We will open wide the literal and figurative front doors: The front door of 1050, the loveliest in the city.

The front door of 1010, the second loveliest in the city. The front doors of 1040, hard to open even when unlocked.

The Internet, front door for Boomers, Busters, Xers, others East Avenue—70% of the Antique sale attendees came because of the sign! Announcement of worship hours—what time is church? Telephone kindness—our receptionists’ desk is the front door for many. Coffee Hour—the first refuge of a visitor. We need five coffee tables here: cloister, fellowship hall, narthex, library, and choir hall.

The Visitors lists are the most important lists in the church. Follow-up on visitors, quality and consistency. Ushers and greeters—to whom do you speak and how?

Staff: are you in the office or out visiting? Group leaders: are you planning more program for fewer people, more ministry for fewer Methodists, or is your volunteer time centered on unknown, absent, future friends? Welcoming is friendship in the future tense, friendship to come, hope.

There is an Asbury Attitude of welcome, hospitality, outreach that you can sense is growing, moving, coming about. But: here is a sad truth. Your pastors cannot do it for you. We can spend ten years welcoming others, but when we leave, unless your heart is welcoming, no lasting change will have occurred.

Unless the heart of the Chancel choir is open to newcomers, unless the Fellowship Class wants each Sunday to greet somebody new, unless the 5th grade Sunday school class is on tip toe at 10:00 AM awaiting a new child, unless greeters pounce to extend childcare hospitality, unless the pastoral team attends first to those absent and then to those present, unless we are as concerned for people’s souls in the sanctuary as we are for their stomachs in the dining center, unless your eyes are focused every Sunday and every week on those who need a church home in which to worship, a church ministry in which to grow, a church family to love, a church boat to sail in—UNLESS YOU ARE AN OPEN FRONT DOOR TO ASBURY FIRST EVERY WEEK—then our beloved church will shrink, age, weaken and die.

In the city of Rochester I can take you to a dozen fine church buildings which are looking for congregations.

One question: will you speak to one visitor this year? 20% and more of our congregation every Sunday is made up of non-members. Every fifth person in your

pew. Meet a visitor. Take her to coffee hour. Show her the organ. Compliment her attire. Get married. Invite her to Sunday school class, choir, a meeting, or lunch.

JIB

We are a giving church. We are becoming a generous church. I believe that over the last two years your lay leadership and clergy have developed a capacity to speak about stewardship. We have done our best to trim our sails. The summer of 1995 saw us wrestling with a \$63,000 operating deficit. Since that time we have completed two calendar years in the black, with surpluses of about \$20,000 each year. We trimmed our support staff by one position, saving about \$35,000, and cut our pastoral support by \$12,000, and also made adjustments in other areas.

Through May of 1997 our total income is running \$61,000 ahead of last year at the same time, on a \$1M financial plan. I believe over two years that we have been careful, even frugal, stewards of the church's resources.

To meet the future, though, we will need to be not only giving, but truly generous. 50% of our households pledge to support the ministry of AFUMC. That's good! 80% is what we will need to "come about". There is a team working right now to communicate with our members who are not currently pledging. It is not a matter of amount, but simply of participation. As a congregation, we need to see our brown sail, our jib, plump with the salty breeze of generosity, giving squared.

Our leadership gifts are currently in the \$10,000 per year range. That's good! \$25,000 is what we will need to "come about". Some of the top pledges in the church are clergy pledges. That's good, but clergy move, die and retire. Not necessarily in that order. To maintain our physical plant, repair our roofs, expand our welcoming and educational facilities, build our staff to keep up with our current velocity, accord the needs of our international and local neighbors the attention they deserve, we will need to "come about".

Do you pledge? Is your pledge a percentage of income gift? Are you moving toward tithing? (Tithing is to faith what faithfulness is to marriage). Have you written a will? Did you remember the church in your will? There are many worthy causes. Support them. But I believe that the Church of Jesus Christ has a prior claim for your financial loyalty. There are many good works: hospitals, schools, universities, missions, soup kitchens, scouts, United Way. Support them. But I believe that the Church of Christ has a more immediate claim on your stewardship attention. There are varieties of service, but the same Lord. Still, I believe the Church deserves special consideration. The church is the seedbed for wonder, for morality, and for further generosity. A sense of the sacred, the holiness of God provides a purpose for other giving. A developed moral sense—rightly in our culture the province of communities of faith—provides a purpose for other giving. A developed sense of generosity, an understanding of the joy of giving, provides a purpose for other

giving. I have yet to meet a leader in secular giving circles who was not formed, at some point, in a community of faith. Wonder, Morality, Generosity—seeds are planted here every week.

One question: will you move from giving to pledging, or from pledging to percentage giving, or from percentage giving to tithing this year? The Lord loves a hilarious giver.

SPINNAKER

We are a caring community. We are becoming an inviting community. The depth and variety of care, pastoral and outreach, which occur week by week through this congregation is astounding. For those who are looking for pastoral care, or, on the other hand for daycare, nursery care, mission care, dining care—this is the place to come. There is a story to tell every day about caring ministry at AFUMC!

It is one thing to deal with those who are looking for us. That is caring ministry and that is good. It is another thing to deal with those who are not looking for us, but FOR WHOM JESUS CHRIST IS LOOKING. That is inviting ministry, hard work. To do it, we will have to “come about”.

Christ seeks 28 year olds living off of Park Avenue, who might not now be looking for Him. Is our invitation to them to be made through special forms and times and places of worship?

Christ seeks 7 year olds trapped in troubled Rochester schools, who might not live with parents, or with parents who are church shoppers. Is our invitation to them to be made through release time religious education? The Dow Jones is heading toward 8000, but 15% of people in the US are living in shameful poverty.

Christ seeks shut-in, elderly folks along the East side, who may not have the wherewithal to get to church alone. Is our invitation to them to be made through Adult Day Care?

Christ seeks lonely teenagers who wander the county’s malls and railroad crossings not really sure if anybody—anybody—deeply cares for them. Is our invitation to them to be made through a new explorer post, a teen coffeehouse, and an outreach youth worker?

New Worship, New Education, New Care! We excel in care for those who come to us. What about those 300,000 in a county of 950,000 who are not looking for God’s church, but for whom Christ died, for whom Christ is looking? Those out on the highways and byways...

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.

If you do well to those who do well to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies. And do well and lend, expecting nothing in return. And your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish.

We are a caring community. We are becoming an inviting one. One question: will you once this year invite someone who has no church to worship here?

In 1933, in the depths of the depression, a young pastor and wife named Skinner took their first assignment in a little mining town just beyond Tupper Lake. The poorest spot in the state, and the coldest; probably the smallest church, farthest from any Bishop; at the toughest point in the century's financial history. The congregation had no church, but with lay and clergy leadership they worked to save all the money they needed for a new building. They rummaged and cooked chicken, welcomed and tithed, invited and welcomed, and tithed and invited. This lumber and mining town had one main street, and the rails ran in and circled back out. It was the end of the line.

Mrs. Skinner told me this story at Jan's grandmother's funeral four years ago. By 1937, the young pastor and congregation had saved enough money to build, and they prepared to leave their meeting spot in the town High School. Through all the labor together, I mean including the various disagreements, they had grown close and felt close, not to the nebulous God of Process, but to the LIVING CHRIST OF FAITH.

That spring a strange thing happened. A Methodist missionary from China itinerated through the North Country, speaking movingly of the millions of Chinese who had no sense of Christ, but who were responding to faith. The congregation was deeply touched, moved, by the forces of Love and Need. The missionary left and the church council conferred. Yes, they had slaved for three years in the mountains and in the depression to save for their church building. But here—here were human souls waiting to hear of God's love, sheep without a shepherd, China open to mission. They prayed for a week, and then voted, almost unanimously, to return to worship in the town High School, and to send their building fund to support the work in China. Mrs. Skinner said: "Now that was a congregation that lived for others."

We are a friendly church. We are becoming a welcoming one. We are a giving congregation. We are becoming a generous one. We are a caring community. We are becoming an inviting one.

Steady as you go. Watch the boom swing as we come about. Shift weight. Be careful. Give praise to God, "Even the wind and seas obey Him".

The New Creation

Galatians and Urban Methodism Thoughts for the New Millennium

Ten Spiritual Exercises

Robert A Hill

Autumn 1998

(Based on J. L. Martyn, *Galatians*, Anchor Bible, 1997)

Introduction

Every generation comes upon the strange world of the Bible for itself, afresh. Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia, from the mid-50's of the first century, may open for us some new and truly remarkable insights, especially fit for those in urban regional ministry in the Northeast USA. This fiery little letter has exploded before: at the outset of the mission to the Gentiles\the unreligious (Paul); at the creation of the New Testament (Marcion); at the dawn of the Reformation (Luther—who called the letter “my Katie von Bora”); in the Wesleyan movement (“finish then thy new creation...”); in the heart of the Civil Rights movement (M. L. King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail”).

Primary Texts

“There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is no “male and female”; for all of you are One in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28)

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me.” (Gal 2: 20)

“God forbid that I should boast in anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the cosmos has been crucified to me, and I to the cosmos. For neither is circumcision anything nor is uncircumcision anything. What is something then is the New Creation.” (Gal 6:14)

Questions

1. The basic struggle underlying the Galatian epistle, and deliberated earlier at the Jerusalem conference was ...

2. Paul was enraged with the Galatian (gentile) churches, because

3. Two questions* dominate the Apostle's re preaching of the Gospel here...

a.

b.

* These interrogatives are...

4. Can we rehearse the story of the Jerusalem Conference?

Participants:

1. Paul, Barnabas, Titus*
2. Peter, James, John, "pillars"
3. False Brethren

Data:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

The Plot:

Some Conclusions

1. Diversity “preceded” unity in the earliest church (Bauer)
 2. Only remember “the poor”
 3. On the basis of mission, the church could agree to disagree, agreeably
-
5. Are there occasions of grace in which Galatians 3:28 erupts?
 - a. E Wiesel, **Night** ...
 - b. A Ashe, **Days of Grace** ...
 - c. F McCourt **Angela’s Ashes** ...
 - d. D Bonhoeffer, **Cost of Discipleship**
 - e. And in your ministry? ...

 6. What does this mean for us today?

“Instead of being the holy community that stands apart from the beachhead God is planting in his war of liberation from all religious differentiations. The distinction between church and world is in nature apocalyptic rather than religious...’God has founded his church beyond religion’ (Bonhoeffer)
(J. L. Martyn, **Galatians\Anchor Bible**, 37)

 7. A new language for a new creation: choose one favorite from each list.

Apocalyptic Language and Imagery

Verbs: The Gospel...

Precedes
Permeates
Invades

Attacks
Creates
Transforms
Sends
Grasps
ReGrasps
Eclipses

Adjectives: The Gospel is...

Presuppositionless
Unconditioned
Preached Event
Redemptive
Apocalyptic

Nouns: The Gospel is a/an....

Incursion
Grace

Phrases: The Gospel involves...

The Eschatological Human Being
Stepping onto the Scene
Sweeping off the feet
Singling Out
The faith of Jesus Christ
Christ's own faith
Coming before God with empty hands
No prior conditions
Not freedom but freeing of the will
Not only forgiveness but deliverance
Invading the territory of tyranny
A Declaration of War
The mind set at rest
Becoming an addressable community
Not repairing but replacing

8. What does Galatians 3:28 offer us, here and now?

- a. A pre Pauline baptismal formula that he interprets
- b. In the apocalyptic now and the New Person of Christ—inreality, that is, these oppositions no longer exist—religious\unreligious, rich\poor, male\female
- c. Paul preaches not creation, but new creation....
- d. He contrasts the new with the old creation ...
- e. “The variation in the wording of the last clause suggests that the author of the formula drew on Gen 1:27, thereby saying that in baptism the structure of the original creation had been set aside” (Martyn 376)

9. What surprises, questions, or judgments do have on reading this passage:

“From reading others of Paul’s letters, we know that the apostle was aware of the fact that even in the church, the beachhead of God’s new creation, there were as yet some marks of sexual and social differentiation (e.g. 1 Cor 7; Philemon). He had later therefore to think very seriously about the tension between the affirmation of real unity in Christ and the disconcerting continuation of the distinguishing marks of the old creation. In writing to the Galatians he does not pause over that matter...

In Rom 1: 18-32, Paul uses an argument explicitly based on creation, drawing certain conclusions from the “things God has made” in “the creation of the cosmos” (Rom 1:20). In effect, Paul says in this passage that God’s identity and the true sexual identity of human beings as male and female can both be inferred from creation.

What a different argument lies before us in Gal 3:26-29, 6:14-15! Here the basis is explicitly not creation, but rather the new creation in which the building blocks of the old creation are declared to be non-existent. If one were to recall the affirmation ‘It is not good that man should be alone’ (Gen 2:18), one would also remember that the creational response to loneliness is married fidelity between man and woman (Gen 2:24, Mark 10:6-7). But in its announcement of the new creation, the apocalyptic baptismal formula declares the erasure of the distinction between male and female. Now the answer to loneliness is not only marriage, but rather the new-creational community that God is calling into being in Christ, the church marked by mutual love, as it is led by the Spirit of Christ (Gal 3:28).

The result of such a radical vision and of its radical argumentation is the new-creational view of the people of God...It is Christ and the community of those

incorporated into him who lie beyond religious distinctions...Baptism is a participation both in Christ's death and in his life; for genuine, eschatological life commences when one is taken into the community of the new creation, in which unity in God's Christ has replaced religious-ethnic differentiation. In a word, religious and ethnic differentiations and that which underlies them—the Law—are identified in effect as the "old things" that have now "passed away", giving place to the new creation (2 Cor 5:17)." (Martyn, in passim)

10. What time is it? Where are we?
 - a. It is the time after
 - b. It is the time of things....
 - c. It is the time of the presence...
 - d. It is the time of the war of...
 - e. It is the time of the dawn of...

And a grace note from W Blake...

NOTES:

"THINK TWICE"

Text: Luke 7:31-36

Lenten Series No. 2

The Theme

Both Scripture and Life teach us the saving importance of thinking twice.

Let's look at Scripture first. Why? Scripture is the truer of the two. Scripture is truer to life than life is to life. When rightly heard.

We--unless we claim to differ greatly from Jesus' contemporaries in this regard--are like children playing. Jesus sees them in the market, as he sees us day by day. Some want to play a game of "weddings": "We pipe to you but you do not dance". Some want to play "funerals": "We wail to you but you do not weep". Let's do it my way. Hey--here's another thought: Let's do it my way. Which leads, for children in the market in Nazareth in 24 ad or for adults in Rochester in 1996 ad, finally to some version of the statement: "One of us is wrong, and I think it's you!"

Think twice, Jesus says. Both are fun games. Both are valid points. Both are sincere hearts. "Come on people now, smile on your brother, everybody get together, try to love one another, right now."

The Scripture

Speaking of Jesus speaking. Recall the following statements in Scripture.

Jesus says: "He who is not for me is against me." And: "He who is not against me is for me."

Jesus says: "The Father has sent me." And: "I and the Father are one."

Jesus says: "Honor Father and Mother." And: "He who does not hate father and mother--and others--for my sake and the Gospel's, is not fit for the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus says: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you." And: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

Jesus says: "All who came before me are thieves and robbers." And: "Not a jot or a tittle will be removed from the law."

Jesus says: "Some there are who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in Power." And: "Today you will be with me in paradise".

Jesus says: "You are the salt of the earth." And: "None is good but God alone."

I grant that the sharpest edges of these contradictions may be sanded away, with contextual interpretation. Most, however, stand as they are. Two sides of one coin. Two cheeks on one face. Two eyes in one forehead. A paradox.

Scripture is at least as dense, as complex, as strange, as your life is dense, complex, paradoxical, and strange.

Look: Sensuous Love Poetry in the Song of Solomon; a meditatio mortis next door in Ecclesiastes.

Wisdom means thinking twice. Not just once. Wisdom, and your own personal salvation\well being\health, means both weddings and funerals.

Both Sides Now

Look: Life is skating, parties, ice cream, dinner out, chances to write checks for good, love, sex, friendship, bridge, preaching at Asbury First, music, solos, children, seeing your son on the pitcher's mound, watching Faulty Towers. Look: Life is an angelic friend ruined by cancer. Think twice.

You can walk and chew gum at the same time. You can rub your tummy and pat your head at the same time. You can. Perhaps middle-age provides the most Janus-like look at life, forward and backward at the same time. You can think twice, and to be safe, to mature, to work out your own salvation in fear and trembling, you must.

In Love

Just say...

You deeply, truly, passionately, madly love someone.

But you also are very, very angry with the same one.

Think twice.

Your salvation depends upon it.

Open the windows of your soul. Hold both hot feelings, like two coals, one in each hand. Wisdom is justified by all her children.

In Work

Just say...

You are heartily committed to a project, or an institution.

Yet, you know something is going wrong.

A church, a school, a nation.

Think twice.

Your salvation depends on it.

The project needs both your commitment and your criticism. Write in complex sentences and so make sure that all the truth is told.

In Church

Just say...

You are a religious person. A Jew. A Christian. Another. God, the things of God, you have known from your youth. You have faith.

But: You realize the horror that the religious spirit has visited on people in this century, especially when that religious spirit (religion always means superstition\idolatry\hypocrisy) is armed with nationalism and patriotism.

Gaza.

Sarajevo.

Dublin.

Auschwitz.

Your health--am I the only who struggles this way?--depends on your capacity to think twice. Be wise as serpents, innocent as doves, Jesus said.

Divine Duality

Hosea deeply, truly, passionately, madly loved a woman. He fell in love. There is something so elemental about the love of a man for a woman, that it colors all of life.

She was unfaithful, cuckolding him.

For years, Hosea thought twice. First, love. Second, anger. The fierce love of woman and man. The blistering anger of husband and wife. In the end, Hosea broke through to God. His own love anger, thought twice, showed him, and shows us, something of the heart of God. His struggle, his thinking twice, gave birth to the loveliest passage in the whole Bible:

When Israel was a child, I loved him
And out of Egypt I called my son
The more I called them
The more they went from me
They kept sacrificing to the Baals
and burning incense to idols
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.

I led them with cords of compassion
with the bands of love
And I became to them as one
who eases the yoke on their jaws
and I bent down to them and fed them.

They shall return to the land of Egypt
and Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.

The sword shall rage against their cities,
consume the bars of their gates,
and devour them in their fortresses.
My people are bent on turning away from me,
so they are appointed to the yoke,
and none shall remove it.

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I give you up, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah!

How can I treat you like Zeboim!

My heart recoils within me,
My compassion grows warm and tender.

I will not execute my fierce anger,
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not man,
The Holy One in your midst,
And I will not come to destroy.

Scripture and Life

Scripture and life agree. For the real things, for wisdom, for life in the spirit, one has to think twice. One has to learn to hold in hard tension, two contradictory thoughts.

Not learning to do so means death. Maltby Babcock took his own life at age 48. The wickedness of the world, his note said, was too much for his sensitive spirit. You know Maltby. You know his hymn: "This is my Father's world..." Poor, poor bloke. Some simplistic preaching---there's a lot of simplicity running around out there--yes you can go drink from those wells, but you will be poisoned--some simplistic preaching got Maltby thinking wrong. He could see: this is God's world. Yes! He could see: this is a crummy world. Yes! He needed an encouraging word from the pulpit to think both thoughts at once. It's not one or the other. We have to live with both.

A Good Objection

(Of course, much of life--mechanical life--is not so. You don't think twice about jumping away from an oncoming car. You don't think twice about protecting your family. You don't think twice about nutrition or shelter or healing or work. How many of you, when your daughter asks for bread will give her a stone? No. You would give bread and not give it a second thought.)

Life and Faith

For faith, though, second thoughts are crucial. To be alive to God's spirit, and not just our own various lusty spirits, is not to think once, but to think twice.

*Like Picasso, to paint in three dimensions.

*Like Lincoln, to write complex sentences.

*Like Luther, to cry out simul justus et peccator.

*Like Ortega, yo soy yo y mis circunstancias.

*Like Gary Wills, in Certain Trumpets, to write both about the power of leaders and the power of society. *Like Roger Angel saying, "We are all part Yankee and part Met, though there's more Met than Yankee in all of us."

*Judy Collins, who looked at life from both sides now, from up and down.

Your Salvation

I am trying to address a matter which I believe may save you. If, in the school of Christ, you learn when it comes to the real things to think twice, you will be saved.

*Saved from psychic meltdown when you cannot, by force of will, reconcile love and anger.

*Saved from cultural chaos when you (plural) cannot, by vote or legislation, eliminate either two profound truths like life, on the hand, or liberty, on the other.

*Saved from theological hate, when you discover that those whom you know were wrong actually had a point.

*Saved from seeing wife as only Madonna or Magdalene, husband as only God or goat, boss as only savior or Satan, religion as only heaven or hell. Think twice. The alternative is the hell of repression.

*Saved from a paper or plastic one dimensional hell.

Here and Now

I have to think twice in the ministry. To serve a church wherein the loveliest things are said and done. But also to serve a church wherein the cruelest and most bitter words are spoken. If I were to think once, once to often, I would have to leave. You have to think twice in church.

Think twice.

Let grace, over time, bring synthesis. Let grace, over time, harmonize. You arrive too often early. God is always on time.

Think twice.

An old friend, now in heaven, had a wonderful way of thinking and speaking. Forcefully, at table or in office or over coffee, he would expound his own view, his own opinion. Then he would pause, furrow his brow, and then carefully trace the other side of the argument. Such an habitual act of thinking twice made him, in his mid-80's, perhaps the most graceful person I have known. He had the mind of Christ.

Christ, son of Man and son of God.
Christ, very God and very Man.

Christ, of whom and in whom, the church has long thought twice. (repeat).

Christ, whose bride is the church, and who, with the church, lives out the heteronomous love of God.

Beloved, you can't hurry love. No you just have to wait. Love don't come easy. It's a game of give and take. In the spiritual life, have the courage and the patience to think twice, and then, "simply" to wait and wait and wait for Grace to reconcile and make new.

A Whole New Life

Galatians 3:23-38
Asbury First United Methodist Church
May 16, 1999
Dr. Robert A Hill

Introduction

Who are you?

There are a few moments in every season when the broad, deep expanse of life opens up to us and we wonder about the meaning, the purpose of things.

A woman stops for the red light. She has finished her day job, working 9-5. She will swing quickly now into a parking lot to gather up her two children from daycare. On the way toward home she will stop to pick up a pizza, ordered a few minutes earlier by car phone. Her husband is traveling so she will not be going this month to the evening church meeting. As she looks out at the long line of snarled traffic, she wonders: "What am I doing here? Who am I?"

Who are you?

A man leaves home in the gray early morning light. He came in at 10:00, and leaves again at 6:30. His teenage children have grown accustomed to his wandering, finding his presence odder than his absence. His job, like all, never ends. For every inch he gives, it takes a mile. He recalls the story of Hercules and the hydra. The gas gauge is on empty—he forgot yesterday to fill it. He backs out of the driveway, and then has this strange moment when he wonders: "What am I doing here? Who am I?"

Who are you?

A couple in retirement spend Wednesday morning visiting the physician and the specialist and the therapist. They stop to fill prescriptions and to go to market and to finish the banking. They have lost good friends to death this year. The radio plays a mix of new music and old news. It is snowing again. She looks at the street and he looks at her and then past her. Silently they wonder, without speaking, "What am I doing here? Who am I?"

Who are you?

Love without truth is sentimentality. Truth without love is brutality. Today we are swept up again into the great rainbow goodness of Almighty God, who calls us both to honesty and to kindness.

We find our primal identity in Jesus Christ, baptized as we are into him. In Him, we are all children of God. Our identity is not found in our religious tribe. Our identity is not found in our financial insecurity. Our identity is not found, either, in our sex. None of these distinctions, so fundamental to everyday life, gives us our identity. We are children of God, by the promise of God which overpowers every religious, economic, and gender distinction.

We are promised, in the Christ who is Lord of the New Creation, a whole new life.

Monday, a friend and I had breakfast, and talked about Reynold's Price's book, *A Whole New Life*. In it, Price traces the grace of healing which comes to him in the midst of critical illness. Price, a gifted southern author, succumbed without warning to a malady that nearly took his life. He records the terror, the pain, and the disease that nearly killed him. He remembers the kindness, the friendship, the prayer, and the skill that finally saved him.

At breakfast, Monday, we mentioned the book a couple of times, *A Whole New Life*. Our waitress overheard and, bringing the coffee said, "... that's what I want—a whole new life!"

As she returned with juice, I asked, "And what kind of life would you like?"

"Let me think about it", she replied. How would you have answered?

Carrying over grapefruit and oatmeal, she pronounced: "I've decided on my new life...I want to become a baby again...To be held, to be loved, to be rocked, to be protected, to be fed, to be cradled, to be cared for...I'd like to become a child again...and THAT WHOLE NAP THING—WAY UNDERRATED...THAT NAP THING IS TOTALLY UNDERRATED."

Neither Jew Nor Greek

The letter read this morning, Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, is one of the great high peaks of the New Testament. It is about a whole new life, a new creation. In fact, it may be the highest peak in the whole range, the Mount Marcy of the Bible. It is written to address this question: "Must a Gentile become a Jew before he can become a Christian?"(repeat). Is there a religious condition to be met, prior to the reception of God's apocalypse in Christ?

After Paul had been converted to Christ, he spent 17 years in unremarkable, quiet ministry. We know nothing of these two decades spent in Arabia. All the letters we have of Paul come from a later decade. Paul was converted to Christ, as he says earlier in this letter, "by apocalypse". Christ revealed himself to Paul. Thus, for Paul, the authority in Christ, is not finally in the Scripture, nor in traditions, nor

in reason, nor in experience. Christ captured Paul through none of these, but rather through revelation, the apocalypse of God. In short, Paul was not a Methodist.

There is a singular, awesome freedom in the way Paul understands Christ. We have yet, I believe, in the church that bears His name, to acknowledge in full that freedom.

After these 17 years, Paul went up to Jerusalem to meet with the pillars of the church. Can you picture the moment? All in one room: Paul, Peter, Andrew, James, John, Titus, Barnabus. And in that room there was argument, difference. Paul preached the cross of Christ to unreligious people, and they heard. What would the Jerusalem elders say? Jesus was a Jew, and had been circumcised. So also were all the first Christians, including Paul himself. But God had done something astounding. It was the Gentiles, not the Jews, who fervently believed the Good News. Should these unreligious children of God be brought back into the Covenant of Circumcision? No, they all agreed, no. God had done something new. So, Peter went to the circumcised, and Paul went to the uncircumcised. Peter went to the Jews, and Paul to the Gentiles. They agreed to disagree, agreeably. And the meeting ended and it was settled.

But you know how sometimes it's not the meeting but the meeting after the meeting that counts? What was settled in Jerusalem was unsettled later. Peter couldn't be counted on to hold the line, and Paul told him so, to his face. Peter was inconsistent about freedom—sometimes he ate with the unclean Gentiles—that's all of you by the way. Sometimes, when somebody was watching, he backed away. And Paul caught him at it and as he says, "opposed him to his face". I wish all opposition in church was so clean, direct, personal, and honest. "One of us is wrong and I think it you!" Paul doesn't talk about Peter, he talks to Peter. There's a life lesson.

The lines that are drawn in the name of religion are so marked, so indelible. Look at the Middle East, Ireland, Bosnia, Botswana, India, Quebec. We listened again the other night to the music of West Side Story, and heard the poignant plea in Maria's song, "There's a place for us." For some, caught between various Montagues and Capulets, there is never a place.

Paul envisions the end of religion, Christ "the end of the law". In its place he pictures the community of faith working through love. Whatever does not come from faith is sin.

You can't get to heaven in a religious car, because the darn old thing won't go that far. Your primal identity does not come from your religion. Christ brings a whole new life, the end of religion and the beginning of the church.

Neither Slave nor Free

As potent as is the power of religion to determine identity, money is stronger still. This is why in the Gospels Jesus speaks so repeatedly about money, about its dangers...where moth and rust consume. If you are used to solving your problems by writing a check, you are doubly endangered by the real problems, for which no check is large enough.

I remember an old DS 25 years ago saying to me that Jesus spoke more about money than about anything else, and I was offended. "I thought it was love", I smugly and arrogantly and full of my Union Seminary theological degree did respond.

But over time I have learned from experience, about how selfishness can hurt the spirit, and how mixed up our priorities can become. And I read the Bible weekly for 25 years, and I hear Jesus: with Zaccheus in the Sycamore, and Matthew the tax collector, and the widow giving her mite, and the prodigal son squandering, and the man fearful of the talents, and the crafty steward, and rendering to Caesar, and—you see how the list grows?

Paul sees what we still hardly ever do see. Money can't buy love. Finally, one's place on the map of economic life is not one's primal identity. It is interesting to remember at the end of his life that John Wesley worried about the growing wealth of his poor Methodists. They did what he told them. They earned all they could. They saved all they could. They gave all they could. They prospered. And in their prosperity, they were endangered. They forgot the poor, once they were not poor. Their diligence, frugality, and industry, all wondrously good things, also contained the potential to obscure their primal identity. We are not what spend, nor are we what we buy.

We are stewards, not owners. Finally we only truly own what we give away.

During for our Lenten program, we learned from an old friend of ours, who is now a City School Superintendent. I have watched him for 15 years, as he struggles to teach the poorest children in our region. I will not sentimentalize his work. The truth is that the city schools in New York are in terrible shape. The truth is that violence and disrespect are rampant there. The truth is that he and I watched our own children hurt by these schools. I remember the day one of my sons had his red hair chopped up and off by an unrestrained classmate in art class. I remember the day recently my other son reflected that until he came to Brighton he learned nothing—really I'm only in fourth grade he said. I remember the worst day of my life, when our daughter was assaulted on the way home from one of these schools. No, we need not sentimentalize.

But I also remember another day. It was a bright June day, and I had left the office for the hospital when I drove past the school which my friend lead so well. There on the side lawn, moving in a circle, were 400 students, 50 teachers and administrators, and a dozen custodians and cooks. There they were—half black, half white; half rich half poor; half male half female; most straight and a few gay;

Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Jew; some Republicans, and many others; some past puberty, and some a long way from it; some A students and some delinquents. But in that hour, they danced together, with a good leader. In that moment, they swayed back and forth to some new Polynesian beat and rhythm. I pulled to the curb to watch, and pray. It wasn't quite heaven, but you could see it from there. Neither slave nor free. No, your primal identity does not come from your wallet, either.

No 'Male and Female'

What could mark more indelibly than religion and money? What could keep our attention better than religion and money? If you had to devise a televised soap opera to mesmerize 270 million people and much cattle for a whole year, what, other than religion and money, would you use? Any thoughts?

In the resurrection, there will be no gender. At least, according to Paul in Galatians. In Christ, there is no 'male and female'. Gender is swallowed up in victory. The Oneidas and the Shakers could sense this, odd and contrasted as were their ways of living it out. In the age of all Monica, all the time, this is a hard word to speak.

We have yet, I doubt, to take seriously the Good News of liberation found in these passages. Your identity does not come from your sexuality, your gender, your orientation.

In this passage, in the Bible, Paul points to a clue, as well, to one of our great arguments today. Here, your identity is not to be inferred from creation....but from new creation! This apocalyptic baptismal formula declares the erasure—who says there is nothing radical about Christ?—of the distinction we so heighten, that between male and female.

God is calling into existence a new community of faith working through love. There is your identity. Not what is natural but what is heavenly about us forms our primary identity. That is, the Bible itself, from the vantage point of this great mountain passage, opens the way for an understanding of identity that is not just nature or creation, but new creation. This is the community of faith working through love. Here, there is a place where God may be doing something new, revealing something new. And, most strangely, it may be those who are not so easily confined by the creational categories of male and female, those who are both or neither, who are on the edge of the new creation. I know what Paul writes in Romans, but you still must ask yourself, at this point, which is Mount Marcy and which is Blue Mountain, which is the higher peak—Galatians 3 or Romans 1? I think it is Galatians 3. Through much struggle, I have come to believe that gender and orientation do not provide our primal identity. No male and female means no gay and straight, no homosexual and heterosexual. God is doing something new, which includes all in the community of faith working through love.

The trajectory of Paul's preaching in Galatians, and thus in total, makes ample space in our churches for persons of homosexual orientation. If you love Jesus, and especially if you love the Bible, then you may just find courage not only to defend a moral life in a post-moral culture, but also to preserve freedom for those who have found a whole new life, like Reynolds Price--a gay man, and so are harbingers of the new creation.

Conclusion

Who are you?

If your identity does not come from religion or money or sex, then who are you?

Are you a part of the new creation?

Are you a child, daughter or son, of the living God?

Are you, baptized into Christ, now wrapped in Him?

Are you an heir of God's promise that predates all else?

Are you identified by faith, the faith of Jesus Christ?

Are you then walking in newness of life?

Are you found in the community of faith that works in love?

Are you on the edge of heaven?

Are you one in Christ Jesus?

William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury described worship as we now may understand our real identity in faith, and our purpose on earth:

To Quicken the Conscience by the Holiness of God

To Illumine the Imagination by the Beauty of God

To Open the Heart to the Love of God

To Devote the Will to the Purposes of God

Two Beggars
John 9
Dr Robert Allan Hill
Asbury First United Methodist Church
November 14, 2004

Opening

“These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.” (Jn 20:31).

This year we will scale a great promontory, the highest peak in the Bible, which is the Gospel of John. With every cut-back trail, at every rest point, atop every lookout, with every majestic view, this spiritual gospel will address you with the choice of freedom, with the ongoing need to choose, and in choosing to find the life of belonging and meaning, personal identity and global imagination.

In John 9 we reach the summit. Here this morning is the crucial chapter within the Fourth Gospel. In it we see clearly the two level drama of faith which John acclaims. Said Luther, “preaching the Gospel is one beggar telling another where they both may find bread”.

Today we meet two beggars. One is a man lost in the mist of memory, who somehow recovered his sight at the pool of Siloam. The other is the church, John’s church, and by extension Asbury First, existentially lost, who somehow recover sight at the hand of Jesus the Christ. John has two eyes at work. One is trained on the distant memory of a powerful Jesus. The other is trained on the experience of the Risen Lord in the life of the church. Both see again, by the healing action of the divine.

This blind beggar, and his healing, and all the trouble that such a good deed occasions, is important to John because in him John sees clearly what is going on in his own church. At Siloam, there was a lonely beggar. We are beggars too. In Jerusalem, one was powerfully healed. We have been healed too. With Jesus, a man’s sight, his most prized faculty, was restored. So too our spirit. So long ago, Jesus was heard to say, “I am the light of the world”. He is the light of our world too. Did Jesus of old bring healing to the needy? By grace he does so every week in our midst still! *What the earthly Jesus did for the blind beggar, the Risen Lord does for the beloved church.*

That’s the good news.

There is other news too.

At Siloam, Jesus heals on the Sabbath. We too have learned that the Sabbath was made for man and not the other way around. In Jerusalem, there is immediate conflict over what this new Power means for old traditions. We too know the conflict between gospel and tradition. With Jesus' healing there comes a division between generations. Such contention and difference is ours too.

Our gospel shows us two beggars, one in Jerusalem a long time ago. And one which is the church itself, to whom Jesus speaks, the Risen Lord speaking in the spirit through the very human voice of John.

Of the first beggar, blind in Jerusalem, we may say: He was visited by Jesus; he was exonerated by Jesus; he was touched by Jesus; he was sent by Jesus; he was commanded by Jesus; he trusted in Jesus; he was healed by Jesus; he was questioned about Jesus; he witnessed to Jesus; he told the truth for Jesus; and for this, and for his Lord, he paid a price. He was shunned. He was thrown out of the synagogue.

Of the second beggar, the community for whom the Gospel is written, blinded by dislocation and disappointment, we may say: They were visited by Jesus; they were exonerated by Jesus; they were touched by Jesus; they were healed by Jesus; they were commanded by Jesus; they trusted in Jesus; they were healed by Jesus; they were questioned about Jesus; they witnessed to Jesus; they told the truth for Jesus; and for this, and for their Lord, they paid a price. They were shunned. They were thrown out of the synagogue.

Two blind beggars, one a man and one a church. Expulsed, thrown out, shunned, set apart.

Most especially, in this crafted memory, the blind man given sight is then thrown out of the synagogue for consorting with Jesus. And this is the central communal dislocation of John's church. The beggar was thrown out of the synagogue, and John's church too, is like a beggar, wandering outside of inherited tradition. And we are, too.

The expulsion from the religious family of origin has two dimensions, one of sight and one of sound, one sociological and one theological. First, in actual experience, the little and poor community has lost its roots and its support. It is dislocated. Second, in the nature of hope, the community has now to find new resources, new ways of thinking about hope. It is disappointed.

(Why the separation? For the Jewish community, John's high claims about Christ amounted to a breach of monotheism, a kind of ditheism, two gods. "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one...." And the charge had merit. Now we can say so many years later, why this is minimal, look, by the fourth century the church acclaimed not one, nor even two, but three persons in the Godhead!)

Here is the greatest of good news, for us, this day! The Risen Lord addresses us through His Word and places us in earshot of saving grace and lasting freedom! By grace ye are saved through faith, and not by the works of the law! For freedom Christ has set us free, stand fast therefore and do not be enslaved again!

And that is today's gospel, in brief. Now we may ask, is there any application we may make to our life today? Given that 14 minutes still remain in the sermon time allotment, we may hope so! And in fact, two applications quickly appear, one of grace in dislocation and one of freedom following disappointment, one sociological and one theological, one of faith and one of hope, one for the church and one for the world.

Dislocation

For nine years we have moved heaven and earth to reconnect our congregation to the connection of the United Methodist Church. In our life at Asbury First, at the same time, the Risen Christ is healing our blindness in stewardship and evangelism. We are learning to share our money and we are learning to share our faith, and the mud and spittle of the Savior's hand are bathing our spiritual eyes in sight. Our new sight is somehow a troubling condition to our mother religion. We have paid massive apportionments, and yet relationally we are shunned in our conference. We have instituted a connectional Sunday, sponsored a pulpit exchange, participated in youth ministries, and yet our voice is not heard for the future of the denomination. We have sent our clergy now every year to conference, and have taken our places, hours on end, in the Visioning Committee, on the Board of Ministry, on the Finance Committee, in teaching and preaching across the area, yet we are "put out of the synagogue" when the voting occurs. We have hosted the meeting of the conference, even, and yet in the gathering we are distant cousins. Why is it that this moment for us, here at Asbury First, this epoch of new sight, of beggars finding sight and bread, of health and growth, in spite of all our effort, becomes an occasion for emotional and relational contention with our beloved denomination, our community of origin?

John's gospel can really help us, here and now. We are not the first to know the endless contention and intractable difference that is a part of all institutional life. There will be grace enough and to spare in this period of turbulence. We can be kind without being dishonest. We can be honest without being unkind. And we can say to the mother religion, our inherited tradition, "Let me find a way to help you get down off my back without hurting yourself." This week we gave over to God one of our greatest saints. A woman raised in the heart of the Methodist tradition, whose loving witness epitomized the combination of deep personal faith and active social involvement which Mr. Wesley taught...A champion of women's ministry...A graduate of a Methodist school...A lover of people who also did all the good she could...A great hearted person who knew that institutional and spiritual needs, when true and real, are in full concert. Friends, as long as we have the healing presence of such insightful saints, we will be able to make our way

forward, and to deal with dislocation. Yet, to move forward with health, we will need to confer and discern together, with kindness and with honesty.

Honestly, in these years I see now, by the restoration of sight to the blind, which comes by the light of the world, that I may have acted the part of the co-dependent spouse, with regard to this connectional relationship. Our connection, our conference, is badly addicted. Its addiction to frightful outspending and overspending continues apace, oblivious to consequence, to reason, to dialogue. This is the pattern of addiction. It is a systemic, not an individual dilemma. The co-dependent protects the addict from reality, through denial, through ignorance, through avoidance. Does the addict become sick with overindulgence? The co-dependent cleans the floor before the children can see and smell. Does the addict leave aside responsibility, miss work, under-perform? The co-dependent calls in sick, leaves messages, calms the water. Does the addict empty the bank account, fill the credit card, amass debt? The co-dependent doubles the effort, works a second job, overpays and overhelps. So I may have done with our annual conference. How does the co-dependent become truly helpful? By ceasing to help, and by engaging a full, careful process of honest, kind discussion. That is we need an intervention, a special meeting, for which we can gently and carefully prepare, which is scheduled with our superintendent for April 18, 2005.

Am I preaching only to myself? Or do you recognize some signs of co-dependency in yourself? At home, at work, in family, in community, in friendship?

Our story of sight restored will have to wait for its inclusion in the future life of our denomination. We can wait, until the time for speaking comes. We can wait, wait without idols, until the end of this particular word famine. We can wait, and be ready and happy to speak and lead, down the road, when there is a teachable moment, a readiness to hear. Truth, as Kierkegaard reminded us, is not so much known, as lived. And through it all, as we have done, we can continue to love, love, love, in thought, word and deed. But not in co-dependence.

Here, just here, right here in our communal need stands the Gospel of John, a moment in the Day of God and the Gospel of Christ: you will find grace for every time of need. In the supreme dislocation, the movement from dysfunction to well-being, from addiction to sobriety, you will sense and you will know real grace.

That is one possible application of this gospel to our life, John 9 at Asbury First. Here is another.

Disappointment

On Friday I was brought to heel sitting at the red light on Goodman and East. At the corner a man was being tutored in the use of a seeing eye dog. The old black lab, harnessed and steady, was ready to guide him across the street, and his caregiver, a strong woman, held in at the shoulder from the back. Green came for him

and the dog pulled forward. But the noise was great, and the wind was blowing, and the traffic was heavy, very heavy, and drivers were zinging left and right, all in the shadow of the Lutheran Church. And this dear young man held fast in fright. He could not move. The dog pulled and the woman pushed and he froze. At last, she saw that he was not ready. And her arms went around him to a great hug from the back, and she pulled him back toward the safety of the sidewalk. I had no right to see the utter disappointment on his face and covering hers too. Yet I see there an autumnal holiness, a real freedom, a love. Her hands moving from his shoulders to his cover his chest and enfold him told me, somehow, that one day, one day, one fine day, he would muster the courage to shake free of disappointment. I cannot even begin to imagine what it must take to trust a mute animal, a dog, amid the cacophony of urban traffic. But I know he will find it. Why I bet by today he has done so. Sometimes you just have to jump. You know. When you learn to swim, and let the water hold you. When you take a leap and take a new job. When you ask someone to marry you. When you decide to leave a relationship or a friendship. When you retire. When you join or leave a church.

Looking out over sixty years of theological imagination in this country and abroad, speaking now both of, and to, the liberal Protestant communities, it will have been in retrospect rather a disappointment to see that we have not moved beyond Genesis 9, and in particular that we have not made our way out six more chapters to Genesis 15, in these sixty years. It is Noah who receives the rainbow, the covenant of color; but it is Abraham who receives the firmament, the covenant of light!

Jesus says, I am the light of the world.

I love the rainbow too. I love what Bishop Roy Nichols used to preach, that the world needs a spiritual rainbow. I love what I learned across the rainbow from K Koyama, and DJ Hall, and J Cone, and G Gutierrez, and B Harrison, and C Heyward, and C Morse, and R Ruether. Yes, all this color, celebrated in our churches and in our consciousness for sixty years, from the day my dear parents sat at the feet of Howard Thurman in Boston, it is good. We can sing a rainbow. And we have. But Jesus here does not say I am the color of the world. He says light.

And all the rainbow colors behind the pieces of the other gospels, and the documents like Q behind them, and the stretches of independent writing like Luke's midsection, and the authentic Paul, and the secondary Paul, and the little John letters, and James, and all the others, all the colors, they are good. But John reminds us of the light from which they are all refracted. And for the 21st century, we will need more light than color. W E B Dubois was right that the issue of the 20th century would be the color line. The issue of the 21st century is light. We will need the universal truth, the global gospel, the eternal dimensions of Christ, that John most celebrates, to carry us out of our very real, and very dangerous particularities. Asbury First, with its crowned, regal, welcoming Christ, has everything to offer, as part of a global village green. Jesus said, "He who is not against me is for me."

I like color. Indigo and Yellow, great colors. Orange, a personal favorite. You like blue, he likes red. Good for you. It is not easy being green, I know. Color is great, as long as color remembers the light from which it is refracted. We are all far more human and far more alike than we have recently envisioned. It is John who fills our existential disappointment with a great, universal hope! That this world can work! That in Christ there is no east or west! That God is at work in the world to make and keep human life human!

It can be dangerous to focus too much on difference. Bishop Sharon Rader told this humorous tale. On a winding mountain two-lane, two cars pass. Coming down the hill in a convertible, a young woman, hair blowing, radio blaring, waves and shouts at the car climbing toward her: “Pig! Pig!” Scowling, the other driver, an older man, mumbles that everyone still thinks he is a chauvinist. What right does she have to honk and yell. She doesn’t even know him. He is no chauvinist pig. So he thinks, as he rounds the corner doing 60 and runs right into—a pig. Friends, we are all more human and more alike than we regularly affirm, all of us on this great globe.

We all survive the birth canal, and so have a native survivors’ guilt. All six billion.

We all need daily two things, bread and a name. (One does not live by bread alone). All six billion.

We all grow to a point of separation, a leaving home, a second identity. All six billion.

We all love our families, love our children, love our homes, love our grandchildren. All six billion.

We all age, and after forty, its maintenance, maintenance, maintenance. All six billion.

We all shuffle off this mortal coil en route to that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns. All six billion.

And in the light of the light of the world, what of all our colorful difference? Perhaps we will in the 21st century come to say, of this, as did Aquinas of all his voluminous writing, in a moment of epiphany—“so much straw”.

It is the covenant of the rainbow that fascinates us still. We have not yet opened our eyes, or had our eyes opened, to the awesome bounty and beauty of the covenant of Abraham, the promise of firmament. We have been so concerned about who is in the car, and especially with where everyone is sitting, that we have paid no attention to where we are going. We have been so faithful to representation that we

have ignored reality. We have so adored colors that we have forgotten numbers. We have been so eager to provide space for voice that we have neglected the body, the incarnation. To have voice, first you need a torso, lungs, larynx, mouth—body. We have been blind, blinded. The body needs the body to be the body. I love the rainbow too. Galatians 3:28. We miss though the global, expansive, covenantal promise that our progeny will be as many as the stars in the sky, and that gospel undergirds the world! Galatians 6:14.

We need to leave the rainbow and gaze at the firmament, to leave the afternoon haze and the rainbow for the night sky and the blazing firmament. “Warmth, warmth, warmth! We are dying of cold, not of darkness. It is not the night that kills, but the frost.” (Unamuno). To leave the fretting about color coordination for the joy, the expansive great joy of welcoming the 50% of this county that has had no first helping of faith, no first exposure to the light. That is where the fun is.

Here is one great, freeing hope for the 21st century, that will move from Noah to Abraham, from rainbow to firmament, from difference to grace. Two Sundays ago our organist, somehow, caught two tunes, and made them one, an utterly Johannine thing to do. He started with “I can sing a rainbow”, and then he moved on to, “he will give me grace and glory”. May the next generation of theologians do the same: move happily from rainbow to firmament, from color to light, from varieties to common ground.

Closing

“These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.” (Jn 20:31).

Good news: in dislocation, hold onto grace, the grace to be co-dependent no more; in disappointment, hold onto freedom, the freedom to walk in the light as he is in the light.

“A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom” (Frost). So too a sermon, and a life.

One summer day in 1983, arriving late, I walked across a field in Vancouver, toward a tent at the edge of the ocean. The World Council of Churches was meeting in Assembly. Philip Potter, Robert Runcie, Desmond Tutu, Pauline Webb. I can hear the singing still, “In Christ there is no east or west...”

This week you can choose to grow in faith, and so find a fuller part of your second identity. This week you can choose to grow in love, and so open a fuller part of the world’s imagination. This week you can choose to grow in faith, and so find a fuller part of your second identity. This week you can choose to grow in love, and so open a fuller part of the world’s imagination.

Faith is personal commitment to an unverifiable truth. It involves a leap.

Faith is an objective uncertainty grasped with subjective certainty. It involves a leap.

Faith is the way to salvation, a real identity and a rich imagination. But it does involve a leap.

Now is the time to jump.
All of us are better when we are loved.

Pastoral Proverbs in Pittsburgh
Robert Allan Hill
May 7 2004

As I write, the 2004 General Conference in Pittsburgh is entering its final session. To review the two weeks experience, I ponder the following. What pastoral wisdom, what proverbs common to pastoral ministry, apply to our latest quadrennial conversation? As the days passed, several old sayings, common lore in pastoral ministry, did come to mind. *The sayings italicized below will be familiar to most pastors across the church.* Would our conferencing benefit from a rehearsal of them? More generally, would our denomination benefit from more concerted reliance on proven *pastoral* leadership?

1. *They need to know how much you care before they will care how much you know.* Ernest Freemont Tittle, the quintessential pastor of his generation, secured his prophetic preaching in the careful recollection of this wisdom saying. His opponents could say: "I may disagree with his politics, but he buried my father and I know he loves me." Liberals may want to remember this saying. Moderates in the south and in central conferences may need to see how much progressives care, *about the Body of Christ*, before they care how much progressives know. Oddly, to win hearts and minds for full openness, real signs of love and affection for the church, shown in loving hospitality and sacrificial generosity may pave the way for inclusion of gays in the next two quadrennia.

2. *You can't shoot 'em if they're in the bushes.* Rumors circulated for days that some conservative leaders were planning to propose secession from the union. Pastors deal daily with conflicts to the left and to the right. Pastoral leadership is political leadership. On Friday morning, a moment was prepared in which to make public the story of such a plan, including the introduction of one of its proponents. Once the story and its narrator were identified, the gathered community could shout its clear affirmation: united we stand! 95% so voted. Is it any accident that the fullest moment of deep unity in two weeks was felt during the hand-clasped, soberly reverent, lusty singing of an old hymn?

3. *There are no souls saved after 22 minutes.* The Spanish say this best: "that which is brief and good is twice as good". Pastors know this. This meandering General Conference, more characterized by pain than anger, by grief than hostility, struggled in its stewardship of time. Even when we tried to be frugal in our use of time, we struggled. One legislative committee spent part of a day listing shared values, common to the 90 participants. After the list was laboriously constructed, the secretary laboriously read the summary which was humorously reviewed in part like this: "Our values include....efficiency...efficiency...and the elimination of duplication"!

4. *You have to start where the people are.* A pastoral leader with no one following is just somebody taking a walk. On the last day of conference, a lone voice, much applauded, was raised from the front of the room. In a rambling set of remarks, the speaker basically said: “Look, some of us here are not on the right and not on the left. We are in the middle. Maybe we have been too silent, but we are here.” One wonders how attentive the more vocal influences in the conferences have been to the broad, but somewhat muted, middle.

5. *Preach the Gospel and love the people.* “Love one another” is the regular reminder of the pastoral ministry, the basic ministry of the church. Easily the highest or hardest moment of this conference came on Thursday morning, mid-morning, when several hundred witnesses filled the hall and with gentle decorum circled the respectful delegates. The restrained, irenic ‘protest’ and its hospitably arranged acceptance, opened the session to a full encounter with people asking to love and be loved. If the church is a community of love before it is a community of belief, a community of joy before it is a community of doctrine, then the moment identified Methodism as such. Two witnesses, Scripture and Experience, finally will carry the day on the issue of homosexuality. Within Scripture, the remarkably similar challenge which Paul and Peter faced over the inclusion of uncircumcised male gentiles, compellingly recorded in Galatians 2, is paramount. But Experience comes to call in the present stories of loving parents, families, siblings, partners, and, yes, pastors.

6. *If you always do what you’ve always done, you will always get what you’ve always gotten.* Our general boards and agencies have struggled to stay abreast of the actual condition of the churches of the church over the last four years. Responses by the General Conference to reports from GCOM, GCFA, GBCS, GBHEM, responses that gently but lovingly set aside several agency requests, are measurements of the increasing distance between the elaboration of the church and its physical body. Two exceptions, Igniting Ministry and the Emphasis on Ministry with Young Adults, were strongly affirmed.

7. *Sometimes you just have to whistle past the graveyard.* Pastors know that sometimes you just have to take a leap. Leaders have to lead, they don’t have to succeed. A young superintendent from Florida presented, with grace and aplomb, a major, new structure for organization, created out of whole cloth by committee in four days. This is the so-called “connectional table”. She concluded: “this will work.” In truth, no one has any idea whether this idea, which is a good idea, will in fact work. But Martin Luther King would not be remembered for saying, beneath the Lincoln Memorial, “Folks, I think I have a really good idea.” He had a dream! She said: “It will work”. We decided to trust her and try it.

8. *Leadership is example. Period.* Lay delegate and former White House press secretary, Mike McCurry, revealed to one gathering his five secrets for successful communication. With grace and humor he acknowledged that he had learned some of these the hard way in the Clinton White House. (He also responded to the

gracious introduction given him by saying: "I wish my parents were present to hear that. My Father would have enjoyed it and my Mother would have believed it!"). McCurry's measures of meritorious messages: 1. Credibility. 2. Candor. 3. Clarity. 4. Compassion. 5. Commitment. His honest presentation, trustworthy and clear, was delivered with heartfelt commitment. To his high goal, a pastoral leader aspires.

9. *Church renewal requires careful attention to what is said.* This is actually a proverb offered a generation ago by pastoral theologian Joseph Sittler. One speech report card for the conference reads as follows: 1. Preaching A-. 2. Floor Speeches B-. 3. Legislative Committee discourse. B 4. Bishops in the Chair B-. 5. Hallway Fellowship A. 6. Leaks to the Press C-.

10. *Proper planning prevents poor performance.* A pastor from Pittsburgh provided the leadership for hospitality at this conference. All agreed that the outcome was excellent. Some of our best leadership is still found in our strong pulpits. Logistical High points: setting, friendliness of volunteers, cookies, communication. Challenges: voting technology, sound systems, bleacher seats for alternates and guests.

11. *Leaders can get others to attack or defend the Alamo.* (This is a pastoral proverb most regularly employed in the Lone Star State.) We saw real leadership at this conference. The arrangement of the Friday morning commitment to unity in covenant came from Episcopal leadership. The remodeled connectional table came from legislative leadership. The healthy slogan, "open hearts, minds and doors", as well as Igniting Ministries, came from effective organizational leadership. The episodic excitement in worship came from homiletical leadership (thank you Dr. Forbes, Dr. Wilmoth, and Bishop Shamana).

12. *K.I.S.S.* Keep it simple silly. The best things about conference are still simple to name. A pastor has to keep things simple. We still confer well in Methodism. We know how to gather, to sing, to preach, to talk, to watch over one another in love. We still recognize, in the words of the conference secretary, that "unless what happens in General Conference matters to the local church, it does not matter". We still know that the three things a church wants from its pastor are "preaching, preaching, preaching." We still long for a new day, and sing with Wesley "finish then thy new creation". We still desperately desire to combine personal and social holiness. We still come to conference to determine "what to teach, how to teach, what to do". We still find our simplest spirituality in singing. We still stumble forward with a catholic spirit: "if thine heart be as mine, then give me thine hand". The 2004 conference in Pittsburgh will be remembered, simply, for the final day Friday morning motion, which reads: "As United Methodists we remain in covenant with one another, even in the midst of disagreement, and we reaffirm our commitment to work together for our common mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ throughout the world".

13. *It takes two wings to fly.* To anyone even slightly afflicted with what Paul called a sense of the “spiritual mind”, the dam broke on homosexuality in Pittsburgh. With almost no exception, the voices, the speeches with heart, mind, soul and strength, pointed to the future of a new creation, neither gay nor straight. At some point the current minority will be in the majority. Now is the time to consider what liberals have learned from 35 years in the wilderness of loyal opposition. Will they simply treat others as they have been treated—block voting, majority rules, devil take the hindmost? Or will they remember those faithful differing others when liberals come into their kingdom? Will they remember what the conservative, generation-long resistance—a spiritual corrective, really, in the long march to liberty—was meant to teach the church: that personal morality counts, that frugal stewardship counts, that the strange world of the Bible counts and should not be a strange silence in the church? Pastors know that you have to be able to relate both to donkeys and to elephants. The question is whether, in Niebuhr’s terms, we can in our time break the cycle of coercive violence. How does one generation not replicate, bottom rail on top, the remembered violence of another? Said Niebuhr, it takes a spiritual discipline against resentment. *A Spiritual Discipline Against Resentment.*

14. *Visit the people.* People matter most, as every good pastor knows. Not programs, people. Not music, people. Not architecture, people. Not politics, people. Not ideology, people. Not theology, people. Not bureaucracy, people. Not pronouncements, people. People matter most. Primarily Scripture, and especially the New Testament, and particularly Paul, and specifically the exactly parallel dilemma exposed in Galatians should free us over time to include gays. But right now the church, ironically and especially the orthodox church, is not fully listening to Holy Scripture as Karl Barth would have. What the church does hear is the cry of pain from real, live United Methodists: Jane’s son, Bob’s granddaughter, our organist Steve, the kids in our youth group, babies baptized twenty years ago, and so on. Our pastoral experience will bring us home, if we will let it. We are not Calvinists or Lutherans. It is not for us *sola Scriptura.*

My old teacher N. T. Wright has recently become the Bishop of Durham. It may be that our Anglican progenitors have a healthier model for leadership—Bishops placed in pulpits, baptizing babies, teaching confirmands, guiding flocks. We at least may benefit, particularly given our more missional superintending structure, from a regular reflection during our conferencing on the question raised above: what *pastoral* wisdom might be brought to bear on this moment, issue, crisis or choice?

Robert Allan Hill

Asbury First United Methodist Church, Rochester, New York

Born: Syracuse, New York, 9/26/54

Married: (7/02/77) to Janette Pennock Hill

Children: Emily (7/05/79), Benjamin (3/18/81), Christopher (7/31/84).

Member, Western New York Conference

Nominated by: North Central and Western New York Conferences

More information: asburyfirstumc.org

1. Call

1. How have you discerned your call through the Holy Spirit to the office of Bishop?

This call has come in the same manner by which the more primary calls to faith and to ministry were received: through discourse and engagement in the life of the church, reflection on that experience with the help of others, crucial moments of 'inner experience', growing breadth in practical experience, public discussion of the call since 1992, with the necessary attendant, awkward, fragile conversations, including the comments of others: "you would make a great Bishop".

2. What makes a Bishop effective in leading the church?

By the grace of God and with the willingness of the church to become an ever more addressable community, a Bishop with proven preaching and administrative experience (locution and execution) can still be effective, especially if she\he has proven ability to protect her\his own personal spiritual, relational and physical health.

Gifted preaching and gracious administration make effective Episcopal leadership.

2. Vision

1. What is your vision for the church?

Our region awaits a new Episcopal voice to herald the new future, the "new creation" (Gal. 6:15) that is opening out before us. To my ear, this new voice will be personal, pastoral and promissory. Let me state it as succinctly as I can:

Personal. *There is a deep, irreducibly personal dimension to Episcopal leadership. At some point, you may hear a voice that is unmistakably Episcopal in tone. You might not be able to define it. But like grace, you will know it when you experience it, and like beauty, you will know it when you see it, and like all leadership, only more so, you will know it when you meet it.*

Pastoral. Over the next two generations, the voice of Episcopal leadership needs to be pastoral, first and last. We need women and men whose basic identity in ministry is forged in the basic ministry of the church. Strong pastors will make strong Bishops. If we listen to the remaining health, happiness, strength, and fruitfulness of the church, and draw from it for leadership, then we will become healthy, happy, strong and fruitful. The vision needed for the NEJ to 2050 is to rebuild the church for the sake of a starving world. To rebuild the church we need Bishops who know how to rebuild the church, from the ground up, whose passion is the resurrection of the Body of Christ. Our connectional mission follows: the connection will need to develop healthy spiritual leaders, lay and especially clergy, who have a passion to rebuild a beloved church, for the sake of a beloved world. The one question I will ask of the NEJ is this: Do you want to rebuild the UMC in the northeast, beginning in our lifetime?

Promissory. God promises us a future and has already given us the leadership we need to enter it, different leadership for a different time:

First, such leadership will be energetic in **partnership** between clergy and laity. In teaching spiritual leadership, in working with conference structures, and, especially, in stewardship development, the Bishop has a unique opportunity to model partnership with the laity.

Second, such leadership will bring the gifts of the new connection which is even now emerging in the twilight of the old. This is **proven** leadership, tested by expansive organizational complexity, and it is found, right now in our connection, in the strong churches. The connection that counts into the future will be far less old style (boards, agencies, elaboration) and far more pastoral, built on the potential in the large churches which, like the seminaries, are critical seedbeds for new leadership, and on the bonds of pastoral collegiality, once our strongest suit in connection.

Third, our new leadership will have a theological, **prophetic** voice. Our enduring problems are theological in shape, and deserve theological attention, which means having Bishops who can speak eloquently to issues (war and peace, intimacy and estrangement, wealth and poverty) and themes and nose to nose with the seminaries which are forming our future leadership. Casting a theological perspective (ie “the new creation”) requires theological confidence.

Fourth, a new Episcopal voice needs especially to preach: **preaching** leadership (the communication of truth through personality) is essential, and central both to traditional and contemporary worship. Yes in the pulpit, to teach by example, but also in writing, teaching, publication, and cyber communication. How are we ever to preach a gospel of grace and freedom without preachers who exude grace and freedom?

Fifth, our Bishops need to have a sense of **promise** about the future. There is sorrow for sure in our decline across the Northeast. But there is hope as well, if we will persevere in the hard work of rebuilding. To do this requires proven administrative

excellence, in executive positions, not only managerial ones, and a buoyant daily hopefulness. A promissory voice will help us to think locally and act globally.

2. Critical Issues/Needs:

a) What are the critical issues facing the church today?

Of course there are many. Theologically, the issue is the breadth of our Christology. Ecclesiastically, the issue is the hospitality of our witness. Connectionally, the issue is the diversity within our unity. Practically, the issue is threefold: leadership, leadership, leadership.

b) What is your sense of the most critical need today in the mission and ministry of the NEJ?

The NEJ need (related tightly to the above issues) is resurrection. To receive the resurrection of the Body of Christ, from Portland to Charleston, we will need to emerge from the very understandable but tragically fatal denial of our condition, from our inability to admit what time it is.

3. How do you see the role of Bishop in the United Methodist Church?

*The term 'role', to my ear, healthily emphasizes 'work' rather than 'office'. I have written already about this in the book **Snow Day** (pps. 36-37, isbn 0-7618-2492-8). There I try to make three points, related to the disciplinary triad of teaching, supervision and appointment: The Bishop needs to emphasize 1. our promised **identity** in Christ, that of the New Creation, 2. our needed strategy of **rebuilding** the foundations of our church, and 3. our conference level **mission**, leadership development. My own background well matches this disciplinary triad of supervision, teaching and appointment.*

4. How can a Bishop authentically model inclusiveness?

The Spanish say, "dime con quien andas, y te dire quien eres" (tell me with whom you walk, and I will tell you who you are). The spiritual dimensions of inclusiveness come alive, in our church, with cabinets, boards of ministry, general church agencies and other groups that are inclusive. The Bishop has influence in all these directions, and many others. International mission work, cross-cultural ministry, encouragement of multi-ethnic congregations, pro-active connection with other Methodist denominations, and global ecumenical activity are all practical features of inclusiveness with which I have experience.

3. Education

1981-1991	MCGILL UNIVERSITY, Faculty of Religious Studies, Montreal, PQ, Canada Doctor of Philosophy in New Testament (w/Dr F Wisse)
1976-1979	UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, New York City, New York Master of Divinity (w/Dr J L Martyn)
1972-1976	OHIO WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY, Delaware, Ohio

Bachelor of Arts (w/Dr L Easton)

4. Work\ Teaching

- 1996 - Present COLGATE ROCHESTER DIVINITY SCHOOL
"The Practice of Ministry", "Church Administration", "The Elements of NT Greek",
- 1991 - Present LEMOYNE COLLEGE, Syracuse, New York
"Religious Perspectives on the Human Situation", "The Pauline Epistles", "The Johannine Literature", and "The Synoptic Gospels"
- 1990 - 1995 MCGILL UNIVERSITY: PRESBYTERIAN COLLEGE, Montreal, PQ, Canada
Preaching ("Sermon Design", "Preaching for a New Age", and "After Twenty Years: A New Look at Propositional Preaching")
- 1984 NORTH COUNTRY COMMUNITY COLLEGE, Malone, New York
"World Religions"
- 1981 - 1984 MCGILL UNIVERSITY, Faculty of Religious Studies, Montreal, PQ, Canada
Teaching Assistant in New Testament (w/Dr N.T. Wright and Dr. F Wisse)
- 1975 - 1976 OHIO WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY, Delaware, Ohio
Staff, English Language Program

5. Ministry

- 1995 - Present ASBURY FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, Rochester, New York
(Urban Regional Church - 2,300 members, 6 clergy, 33 staff, \$200,000 apportionment)
United Methodist Minister – Senior Pastor
2000 Jurisdictional Conference (New Jersey)
2004 General (Pittsburgh), Jurisdictional (Syracuse)*
- Conferences
*Endorsed for Episcopacy by WNY and NCNY conferences
*Denman Evangelism Award, WNY 2001
- 1995 (Jan-May) DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT DESIGNATE
Central Lakes District
North Central New York Conference, UMC

(Urban/Rural District, 70 churches)

- 1993 (Jan – June) ORAN COMMUNITY CHURCH, Oran, New York
Temporary Supervising Pastor (Suburban Community Church –
300 members)
- 1984 - 1995 ERWIN UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, Syracuse, New York
(Urban Church - 450 members)
United Methodist Minister
Elected as Delegate to May 1992 General Conference of the
United Methodist Church, Louisville, Kentucky, and to 1996
Jurisdictional Conference, Amherst, Massachusetts
- 1981 - 1984 BURKE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, Burke, New York
CONSTABLE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, Constable, New York
(Both Rural Churches - 200 members each)
United Methodist Minister
- 1979 - 1981 FOREST HOME CHAPEL, Ithaca, New York
(Village Church - 150 members)
United Methodist Minister
- 1978 WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, Geneva, Switzerland
Intern (Under Rev. George Todd, Office of Urban/Industrial
Mission)
(Participant in W.C.C. Assembly, Vancouver, 1983)
- 1976 SCOTT UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, Scott, New York
NEW HOPE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, New Hope, New York
(Both Rural Churches - 100 members each)
United Methodist Minister

6. Personal Development

Family: *My family is my greatest support and resource for renewal, beginning with my wife, Jan. Jan is a pianist, music teacher, church leader-- and many other wonderful things!. Chris is a college sophomore; Ben is a law student at Ohio State (doing mission work this summer in Honduras); Emily works in admissions at Ohio Wesleyan—her husband Stephen will attend Garrett-Evangelical in the fall. **Travel:** we love to travel and have done so both privately and professionally in many directions. **Language Facility:** Rough fluency in Spanish, partial in French. Reading ability in Spanish, French, Greek, Coptic, German, Latin, Hebrew(in descending order of ability). I have taught the first three. One comes to faith in the same way one learns a language One then can expand **the κοινωνια** (sharing, partnership, fellowship, friendship) Phil 1:3 of **the ευαγγελιον**.(good news). **Publications:** 4 books, 18 articles (for detail, asburyfirstumc.org) **Recent Reading:** Alistair Macleod, Island and No Great Mischief.*

7. Personal Assessment

1. What spiritual disciplines do you presently practice?

Daily: exercise\meditation, reading, sermon development. Weekly: Taize, teaching (see resume), writing, setting aside Friday night. Yearly: summer cottage, fall 'gathering', winter family trip, spring conferences. I assume the 5 Wesley means of grace are true for all of us: scripture, sacraments, prayer, fasting and 'conversation'.

2. What experiences have you had in leading a district? an annual conference and/or area? the general church?

District: more than one might think, 12/94—5/95. Cabinet intrigue and conflict, appointment process and planning, parsonage and personnel and political issues. I claim the shortest, happiest superintendency on record!

Conference: Many, but the best (I believe) is the completion of the WNY vision\mission (focus: spiritual leadership) which if I may say so over 6 years (1996—2002) was my own vision which I stand by for all conferences in the NEJ over the next two generations (and included the initiative to work with NCNY). It took forever and two days but it came out right.

General: A great deal over the last decade, especially in the areas of theological education and large church leadership (two crucial areas for the future). See the paper delivered at St Paul School of Theology (2/03), "Theological Education and the Renewal of the Church".

3. How will your leadership style be changed as a Bishop?

I am interested in the work, not the office. I hope the work would stretch me to express the poetic spirituality of Ralph Spaulding Cushman, the political courage of Francis McConnell, the pastoral love of Earl Ledden, the personal diligence of Ralph Ward, the disciplinary excellence of Joseph Yeakel, and the joyful presence of Violet Fisher.

***The Gathering
2005 Pensacola
Robert A Hill***

1. Wisdom Sayings

“We are striving to be a church *of* small groups not a church *with* small groups”

“On renewal leave I had the opportunity to listen to my body. It was tired.”

“We are a church of small groups in which people are committed to God and to one another”.

“Wealthy people are just broke more comfortably in this debt ridden culture”.

“My janitor asked why people give to the hurricane but not the budget. ‘If I flooded the church would that help?!?’”

“It is best to move slowly with staff, attending to quality, mix, and other”.

“Parents have a lot of anxiety, a lot of anxiety about children and youth.”

“Someone said that I would not be able to follow my predecessor and that ‘the bodies litter the conference floor of those who have tried.’”

“When big churches begin acting big, everyone gets threatened.”

“My Dad died ten years ago and I miss him more today than the day he died”.

“Grief is like a snickers bar. If you take one bite at a time, it is ok, otherwise it will choke you.”

“The way you leave something is about as important as anything you do.”

“The college campus is a mission field.”

“I do not want people on staff who *do* ministry. I want people who *put others* into ministry.”

“I do not know what a good sermon is anymore.”

“Is there a way to build the kingdom without building a bigger building?”

“How do I want to live out the rest of my ministry?”

“My ministry has been vastly shaped by my son’s disability, his permanent brokenness.”

“I am an extreme introvert, so ministry is exhausting. I have given up on the connection, and on trying to change the annual conference. Why does the connection expect 20% when we ask our people for 10%? My direct mentors were Jim Lawson, Maxie Dunnam, and Will Campbell.”

2. After Ten Years

It is valuable, formative to be together and to stay together, across many years and miles (Minneapolis, San Diego, Baltimore, Colorado Springs, Phoenix, Fort Worth, Indianapolis, Fort Lauderdale, Detroit, Atlanta, Pensacola).

In this decade, a generation has departed (Weeden, Trotter, Lightner, Stevens, Wilmoth, Trigg, Purcell, Amerson, Ritter, Mount, Fehlman, Butts, Neaves, Hutchinson, Crutchfield, Jones, Hill, Roberts).

Several discussion themes have held constant through these years: 1. This is still the high water mark for United Methodist preaching of a certain kind. 2. I believe this is the healthiest national fellowship circle in the denomination, the most natural, candid, intimate, enjoyable circle. 3. We are still largely a white male enclave. 4. To my knowledge, none of the Gathering churches in this decade has shrunk under the 500/1500 threshold. 5. Here and there we continue to help one another (swapping sermon illustrations, administrative advice, personal counsel, vocational discernment, pastoral care, plain friendship—many examples arise for each). 6. We talk still and creatively and necessarily about the same things: staffing, conflict, transition, finance, worship, program, the denomination, the hierarchy, the apportionment, techniques and tools, and personal struggles.

In the same decade, new currents, trends, themes have emerged: 1. competition from the megachurches, some UM, but mostly non-denominational, is now our toughest competition (as opposed to other large churches from other denominations). 2. There has been a gradual, and positive, inclusion of women and more folks from the southern jurisdictions. 3. More theological diversity is present than the earlier standard old line liberal ethos. 4. Our identity is not large church but in the main ‘traditional’ large church. A whole big other world (Ginghamsburg, etc) is out there. 5. We are ten years older. 6. The group is still cohesive, still caring, still convivial, but the tenure and commitment levels are lower. The conversations are somewhat less relational and somewhat more professional. 7. Jurisdictional differences are more striking outside the group (numbers, theology, issues, other). 8. We are swimming in a new, e-culture.

Meeting WNY Cabinet, May 23, 2005
Robert Allan Hill

For several years I have requested a brief meeting with this cabinet to address the intersection of your mission and ours, that of the WNY conference and that of Asbury First UMC. I have been puzzled, however, about just what to say.

I first thought to rehearse my too well known views about the future of Notheastern Methodism, and specifically about management of our area. But these you have in book, periodical, website, letter and email form. You know already what I think.

Then I considered a review of the decade of relationship, my attempts to connect this great church with its parent conference, the list of 17 things we have done to better the relation, and the 12 hurts we have experienced in return. But another chapter now will open. Water over the dam.

I supposed that I could tell you in detail some of the remarkable personal things that have befallen me this spring. Local pastoral, ecumenical regional, national Methodist work possibilities. Maybe another day, but off the point for today.

I wondered, too whether a full report on the growth of this church—increases of 200+ in worship, 40% in budget, 300% in endowment, 300+ in worship, tripled expansion in mission, \$.07 of every conference \$1 spent, and \$.11 of every new apportioned dollar from AFUMC—would be timely. It sounds prideful, or worse, though.

I resisted the urge to bring you brochures about our capital campaign, \$3.4M raised of \$3.7M, but still short by \$300-\$500k, and may cause apportionment shortfall in the next few years. But you already have heard this, and we have heard our Bishop's word, and yours, "tell your people they need to do what they need to do".

All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. It gets harder, as you get older, to know, really, what, if anything, would be helpful to say. So, instead, two words: a word of hope and a look to the future.

1. I find hope in the fact that we still have over 250 pulpits. Much we lack (membership, leadership, revenue, consensus, new buildings, mission, etc). But God has not turned away from us. We still have 250 occasions, every Sunday, for fire and spirit. The question is how to make 80% of those pulpits carry sermons, not pseudo-sermons, when perhaps 20% do today. That is where the future is. That is

why we have you, to highlight, champion, and protect the preaching ministry. Larry Baird's Spectrum article on his call to the ministry is just right. Thank you.

2. I suggest, simply, for the future, that this cabinet support a tithe budget, for our conference. Or, maybe a "tithe-plus" budget. If you lead in this, the conference will follow. L Schaller had our number, that every conference will accept 2% annual decline in exchange for the tacit agreement that there be no significant change. A tithe budget, half our current expenditure, would bring healthy change. Nat Hanson's January email, in conversation about this idea, is just right. Thank you.

To Reform the Church We Love

1. I first tried to influence the future with my individual voice, by writing, for example, a Circuit Rider article decrying segregated worship (“Five Questions”)
2. I second tried a caucus of fellow, younger clergy, to redirect spending to the dying churches, saying: “our front line is our front lawn”. The ‘frugal annual conference’ budget was approved in 1990 in NCNY.
3. I third tried to influence my conference, NCNY, by serving on boards and committees and in leadership. I successfully chaired the camping master planning process, served as a Trustee, briefly served as DS-designate, led the pension campaign, went to General Conference, and so on.
4. I fourth tried, now in WNY, to influence the future through two dozen initiatives, all related, finally, to strategic planning. I crafted and brought to passage the conference mission statement.
5. I fifth tried to provide influence by standing for Episcopal election. We represented rebuilding. We affirmed gays. Partnership, participation, presentations, process—good.

Bottom line?

No change.

"God at Dawn"

Text: "Acts 2:1-21"

**The Rev. Dr. Robert A. Hill
June 4, 2006
Asbury First United Methodist Church
Valedictory Series #2**

Preface

I love the prairie! So often I have seen the dawn come and the light flood over the land and everything turn radiant at once, that word 'good' so profoundly affirmed in my soul that I am amazed I should be allowed to witness such a thing. There may have been a more wonderful first moment 'when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy', but for all I know to the contrary, they still do sing and shout, and they certainly might well. Here on the prairie there is nothing to distract attention from the evening and the morning, nothing on the horizon to abbreviate or to delay. Mountains would seem an impertinence from that point of view.

So Marilyn Robinson finishes *Gilead*. At dawn, with an aching heart, a full chest weight of the sense of ...the unnameable. Radiant. Good. Wonderful. Song. Joy.

Have you forgotten the love you had at first? When did breathing become such an ordinary thing to your mind? And prayer? Have you begun with the spirit to end with the flesh? Has the vocation, the sense of self and soul that is the real marrow of Pentecost given way to drift, ennui, languid doldrums?

Wake up! It is morning! Dawn is breaking! Come Pentecost...

In our Scripture lesson today, Luke is surely reminding his church, and reminding us, of the love we had at first. Every single one has a tongue of fire given, that makes effective connection with others. Every one is called, has a vocation, a measure of spirit.

Jacob finally won his name at dawn: Israel, he who wrestles with God.

David wrote of dawn as the feeling of a groom after the wedding night.

The disciples enter the tomb at dawn.

John ends with breakfast at dawn, and a catch of 153 numbered fish.

For some, this call has been a call to the ministry.

The sermon today is an unapologetic, unabashed, direct appeal to you to consider whether, come Pentecost, you are meant to preach. Has a flame got your tongue? Were you meant to be in ministry?

Two dozen women and men have been called and sent into the ministry through you in the last 10 years.

They heard the wind of Pentecost, and the call at dawn. Early some morning, and no they were not drunk, at least not most of them, they heard something, and heeded.

Would that all God's people were prophets

Prepare for a profession that does not yet fully exist...

Where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need...

Where your deep sadness meets the world's deep greed...

How shall they hear without a preacher?...

Let your life shine...

Be ashamed to die before you have won some victory for the human race...

Who told you who you was?

If you see a turtle on top of a fence post, you know he didn't get there by himself...

Prepare to depart this life 'in the friendship of Christ'...

Some read RM Miller on E Tittle, some R Lischer on small church ministry, some Bernanos and the life of a country priest, some Hempton on Methodism, some BB Taylor on the preaching life, some R Hill on ministry in the Northeast, some P Palmer on calling....

Pentecost is God at dawn. This morning is the morning of tongues of fire, of firey tongues, of speech that burns, heals, warms, enflames, inspires.

How shall we rightly admire the prairie dawn? How shall we sense whether, and how, we are called? How do you know what you are called to be and do?

Things that really matter are ultimately relational, whether that relationship is with others, with self, or with God. Our friends give us ourselves. Our instincts give us ourselves. Our sense of presence gives us ourselves.

1. Close Relationships

Here is one account, one testimony, no worse nor better than any other.

We learned to love Jesus in the simple rhythms of the ordinary. We learned to love Jesus in the pause before meals, with grace in his name. We learned to love Jesus singing hymns to Him, in church, at camp, in the car. We learned to love Jesus as we read about his life in the Bible. We learned to love Jesus by celebrating his birth in snowy December, and his destiny in snow melting April. We learned to love Jesus by seeing older people love him, really love him, with their hands, and their money and their time and most especially with their choices, and within that, with their choices about things not to say, not to be, not to do. We learned to love Jesus like we learned to speak English, one lisp at a time, one dangling preposition at a time, one new word at a time. The music of Jesus played the accompaniment to all of the growth and decay of life around us. There was no wall of separation, neither artificial, nor sacramental, nor communal, between our life and his. His was our life, and our life was his.

This sounds romantic, but it is not meant to be. Conflict, envy, hurt, gossip, anger, misjudgment, unfairness, tragedy, hatred, fear, abuse, neglect, betrayal, addiction, and loneliness sat around the table too—around the kitchen table, around the picnic table, around the coffee table, around the communion table.

Still there was a closeness in the Christ who raised us—a pine needle Adirondack Christ, with the dawn scent of the forest primeval, a sunlit Finger Lake Christ, a blue collar Erie Canal Christ, a blizzard Christ, an autumn peak Christ, a high summer Christ, a Christ with mud on Easter shoes. You could say that we were more Gospel people than Letter people, more Peter than Paul, more good Samaritan than justification by faith, more Methodist than Presbyterian. There was no forced or feigned distance between Jesus and us, between his life and our own.

He was with us in school. Our teachers attended church, and when they scolded us for talking or not wearing our eyeglasses, Jesus walked past us and smiled.

He was with us at home. Our parents entertained college students, all then of just one gender, with sandwiches and pickles. The men stood when their hostess entered the room. They wore ties. Jesus sampled the pickles, with us.

He was with us in the summer. He felt the glow of a warm campfire on a cool mountain night. When the ministers worried whether there was too much kissing, too much holding hands, Jesus worried too, and then you could see him, almost, holding a young couple as they held each other.

He was with us when we grew up and became teenagers ourselves.

He was with us when all hell broke loose. When older boys, or younger men, went off in pressed uniforms to someplace on a map we had seen in school. When some came home, and when some partly came home, and when some did not come home, He wept.

He was with us in college, at marriage, in studies, at work.

You go with your friends. So if your friends go off to college, you may too. If they enlist, you may too. If they take a job in the south, you may too. It is a natural thing.

If people you know and love go into the ministry, you may too. If you respect somebody who is in the ministry, you may be inclined to preach. If your parents, with pride, have the pastor to Sunday dinner, you might think about taking that seat, and holding that fork, and intoning that prayer. If you grow up with Rev. Jones, and sense he is a real human being, you might try to become one such yourself. If the kind of people who are your kind of people enter Christian service, you might, too. And if your mother, father, grandparents, spiritual aunts and uncles, and a boyfriend or two study for the ministry, you may too.

Trust your experience. Honor your instincts. Listen to your heart.

Your relationships are crucial, crucial in the dawning of a sense of vocation.

In eighth grade the choir director, Ruth Tubbs, commented on the resonance in my speaking voice, following the usual desultory youth service. In college, the chaplain, Jim Leslie, took seriously my interest and gave advice. At church camp, Lou Broadbent and Jim Legro showed me you could be a minister and still be a real young man with heart and life. At home both parents somehow said just enough without saying too much. After college, Bob Homer gave me two churches, and checked in on me and checked up on me. It takes a long time to grow a preacher. Relationships hold the key.

Hold that thought. You might want to continue to dance with the one who brung you. For as crucial as our relations and relationships are at vocational dawn, they are more significant, even as the sun begins to rise.

2. Work Relationships

So now you are beginning to work, to hold a job. What counts in your work relationships? Can you honestly list what is meaningful and what is not about what you do? There are clues here, terribly important ones. Do not, do not enslave yourself to something that diseases your soul.

It is Richard Florida in *The Rise of the Creative Class* that gives me hope about the future of the culture, the church, and the ministry. He surveyed people about what they want in work—a kind of white collar Studs Turkel. Regarding work, he found, the question

‘what?’ is often secondary to the question, ‘with whom?’ People prefer the hair salon to the machine shop, for relational reasons. Hear his report on surveys of what people most want in work:

I. Responsibility: Being able to contribute and have impact. . .Knowing that ones work makes a difference. . .Being seriously challenged.

II. Flexibility: A flexible schedule and a flexible work environment. . .The ability to shape one’s own work to some degree.

III. Stability: A stable work environment and a relatively secure job. . .Not lifetime security with mind-numbing sameness, but not a daily diet of chaos and uncertainty either.

IV. Compensation: Especially base pay and core benefits. . .Money you can count on.

V. Growth: Personal and professional development. . .The chance to learn and grow. . .To expand one’s horizons.

...cut new ground...feel at home...be creative...design your own work space...define your own role...have peer recognition...enjoy a work\life balance...

Now hear the good news! The ministry gets A+ in four of these five. There is no greater challenge or responsibility than shepherding souls. No one has more daily flexibility in determining one’s use of time. As an itinerant preacher you are guaranteed a pulpit—somewhere. Reading a book a day, or the equivalent, is a guarantee of personal growth. Responsibility! Flexibility! Stability! Growth!

The culture around us is starting itself to move away from the rank materialism of an earlier time. The deep sorrow we have at the suicide of the church meets the deep falsehood of our culture, here. It is false that an ever bigger mortgage will make you happier. It is false that several credit cards to the maximum will bring joy. It is false that accumulation of things will bring peace. It is false that \$100,000 of college debt is a doorway to nirvana.

So, we get a D in compensation. This is a real issue, particularly for those acculturated to see the bottom line as the measure of worth. It is no accident that the church struggles to attract young, heterosexual, middle class, white males. We must do what other generations have done, and make this an opportunity for heroic living. You learn the value of a dollar. You learn to make every opportunity count. You learn the danger of debt. You learn the power of giving. You learn the shrewdness of frugality. You learn to hike, hard with a heavy backpack. See it as a physical challenge, like a 7 mile run in the winter, at 10 degrees. Add a little snow. And some wind. Yes...

Growing segments of the population work for challenge, enjoyment, to do good, to make a contribution, and to learn. Such motivations will eventually eclipse compensation as the

most important motives for work ... People on their death beds never wish they had spent more time in the office. (Robert Fogel)

3. A Relationship with God

A longing deeper than the relationships of belonging in family, and the relationships of meaning, in work, exploded from human hearts on Pentecost. This dawn day of spirit! This dawn day of fire! This dawn day of translation, interpretation, preaching, ecumenism! This dawn day of world Christianity! This dawn day of the church! This early morning dawn day! A deeper longing burst forth on Pentecost. Theirs, and ours, is a deeper longing, a longing for a relationship with God.

St. Augustine of Hippo at long last found himself, his soul, and his true vocation, by finding a personal relationship to God. Yes, Augustine entered the ministry. He became priest and bishop in North Africa about 400ad. He wrote 500 letters, 200 sermons, 2 great books. In an age, like yours, of intercultural conflict, Augustine made sense of faith's highest vision...the city of God. In a culture, like yours, that wore the nametag of Christianity without fully understanding its meaning, Augustine celebrated...the grace of God. In a political climate, like ours, that honored highly individualized freedom and the power to choose, Augustine praised God's freedom to choose, and acclaimed...the freedom of God. In a highly sexualized age, like ours, Augustine colorfully confessed his own wandering, his own mistakes, which, he attested, did test but did not exhaust the ...patience of God. In a religious climate, like ours, which buffeted a truly biblical belief, Augustine praised his maker, and so reminded the church of the proper...praise of God. His Confessions—perhaps part of your summer reading—his great autobiography, is a prayer—for the city of God, by the grace of God, in the freedom of God, to the patience of God, as the praise of God. Augustine found a relationship with God and was ordained. And vice versa.

It may be that the only way God has to relate to some of us, to get our attention, to mute our pride, to kindle our affection, is to get us into the ministry. Baptism and confirmation suffice for most. But for the real hard cases—the guy who wrote the book on pride, the gal whose picture is alongside the dictionary definition of sloth, the one who embodies real falsehood—like us, like Augustine....like you?...God keeps ordination in reserve.

Long ye for God? Preach. Preach until you believe it, then preach because you believe it. Long ye for God? Preach.

At dawn, God called. Some answered...

et tui?

Thirty years ago today I preached my first sermon, in New Hope, New York. It does not take long to go from being a young turk to becoming an old turkey. Who will come along to take our places?

Think about it...

"God at Dawn"
Sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Robert A. Hill
June 4, 2006

Acts 2:1-21

¹When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. ⁵Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? ⁸Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹(both Jews and converts to Judaism Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" ¹²Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine." ¹⁴Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷" 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. ¹⁹I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. ²⁰The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. ²¹And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

ASBURY FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Our Search for a Pastor in Charge

With the support of our Bishop, the Staff Parish Relations Committee of Asbury First UMC is conducting a nationwide search for an outstanding leader, teacher, and preacher, who will develop a deep personal, pastoral relationship with this congregation, inspiring and empowering us to fulfill our mission. This prospectus provides nominators and potential candidates with a profile of Asbury First and the person we seek. The position of Pastor in Charge of this “Flagship Church” in the WNY Conference demands the investment of energy and commitment over an extended time. Asbury First is accustomed to pastorates of more than ten years. The successful candidate will be appointed Pastor in Charge on July 1, 2007, and by mutual agreement, serve for many years.

Our Congregation and Our Parish

Asbury First UMC is a large, metropolitan church with many members from the suburbs: a family of God, a big church with a small town feel, known for excellence in preaching, music, and outreach in the Rochester community. The United Methodist Church’s slogan, “Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.” describes Asbury First. We are warm and welcoming, caring and compassionate, regardless of racial/cultural or economic backgrounds. Asbury First continues to increase in attendance and membership.

Asbury First’s mission statement is “Through Worship, Education and Care, we develop committed disciples who live and proclaim the Gospel and thereby work to transform our culture”. While we are a large congregation, there is nurturing and support for members through participation in a wide variety of small groups such as Sunday School classes, choirs, Bible study groups, covenant, and prayer groups. Our pastors provide intentional care from cradle to grave, assisted by trained Stephen Ministers and an active Intercessory Prayer Group. People who move away constantly tell us they cannot find another church like Asbury First.

Asbury First enjoys a high standard of intellectually and spiritually enriching preaching. We are called the “flagship church” for our conference, and certainly one of the important pulpits in the Northeast Jurisdiction. We enjoy and continue to

seek excellence in staffing (pastors and lay), and they are well supported by talented and dedicated lay leaders and members.

Asbury First affirms an open, magnanimous, spiritual liberality in the proclamation of the Gospel and the interpretation of scripture. We accept many points of view and make room for many kinds of people. We love the sacred Biblical narratives. We honor our inherited Christian symbols by interpreting their meaning for the present age.

Asbury First is accustomed to and enjoys traditional liturgical expression in worship. We offer weekly informal Communion, Taize, and occasionally casual/contemporary services. Our 11:00 a.m. Sunday worship is broadcast live on radio WYSL (AM 1040) or through our website: www.asburyfirstumc.org

We have a beautiful campus, historically significant architecture and great facilities, which are well-used and maintained. Economically, we are a middle-class church where members give generously of their time, talents and treasure to further our mission.

Programs and Outreach: Asbury First programmatic activities are rich and offer a wide variety of opportunities for member participation. We have extensive outreach programs, both local and beyond.

Music at Asbury First is strong and active. Multiple choirs, for all ages, are the backbone of this program, but musical theater performances by youth, children and occasionally adults are also an attractive feature.

We have a strong Christian Education program for children, youth and families, supported by a Youth Minister and a Director of Children's and Family Ministry. Our summer Vacation Bible School and the bi-annual, off campus, church family retreat are widely enjoyed and spiritually enriching.

Numerous small groups and classes for spiritual development and outreach offer growth, fellowship and service opportunities. Historically, our eleven adult Sunday School classes have been unusually strong, although actually they represent a small percentage of the membership. We are initiating new classes for young adults and offering alternative ways to nurture and assist them in their spiritual growth. Disciple Bible Study, Covenant Disciple Groups, Christian Believer, Companions in Christ, and Bible Study represent some of the current small group opportunities.

In the past twenty five years, the congregation has been especially steeped in local community outreach and service ministries. Our on-campus outreach programs (Dining/Caring Center, Storehouse, Day Care, Nursery School) are widely known and respected in the Rochester community. Asbury First is one of 13 host churches in RAIHN (Rochester Area Interfaith Hospitality Network). Many of our members are significantly involved in these ministries, along with some volunteers attracted

from the wider community. Many members are also active in service outside of church-sponsored programs - from local jail ministry to medical mission opportunities in other countries.

Our outreach is international in scope through our denomination and also direct involvement with Miracle Garden Tsunami Children's Home in India and a covenant relationship with a church in Honduras, Amor Fe Y Vida.

Asbury First is a teaching church. Our pastors teach in local divinity schools, and also mentor interns in field work. Students from Eastman School of Music are engaged in our music programs.

See our website www.asburyfirstumc.org for more detail on programs and outreach.

A brief history: As its name indicates, Asbury First United Methodist Church is a product of unions: First and Asbury Methodist Churches and the Methodist and United Brethren denominations. First Church was founded in 1820 and over the next 113 years had a proud history in Rochester. It was active in the founding of other churches, the most important for our story being Asbury.

Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church was founded by a group from First in 1836.

It had various names: East, Second Methodist, St. John's, and Asbury, "Societies" or "Churches." In the period 1836-1934, it, too, had an active and proud ministry.

The two congregations were united in 1934 following the loss of First Church's building by fire. The united congregation seemed to be a successful merger, and has been a healthy congregation thereafter. Our present church building was completed in 1955. The union of Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren denominations occurred in 1968, and thus our name: Asbury First United Methodist Church.

Our campus and resources: The Asbury First United Methodist Church campus is a gathering and worship center for the congregation of 2300 members. Average Sunday morning attendance is approximately 750. The campus of 7.3 acres consists of a Gothic-style sanctuary, with education wing, built in 1955. On either side of the church are two historic homes which are used for office and meeting space in addition to housing three of our major outreach ministries.

The approved annual operating plan for 2006 is \$1.26 million. Through the generosity of previous generations and the current membership, Asbury First has an endowment of over \$6 million. Our current expansion program, A Time to Build, is scheduled for completion in 2006 and will provide additional gathering/ welcoming space, a large youth room, and improved handicapped accessibility. The Time to Build Program is estimated to cost \$4.74 million. To date, four million dollars have been committed to the capital campaign. A plan to raise the balance has been developed so that we can remain debt free.

Our community: Rochester is located on the southwestern shore of Lake Ontario and just north of the Finger Lakes in upstate New York. We enjoy four seasons, rolling hills and lots of natural beauty (waterways, waterfalls, parks, farmlands), and historic places in and surrounding Greater Rochester (pop. approx. 1 million). Our institutions of higher learning, suburban schools, medical facilities, music and the arts, and recreation facilities are of the highest standard. We have all the big city advantages, but with the feel of a small town. Housing costs are among the most reasonable in the USA. Rochester ranks high as a friendly city and as a desirable place to raise a family. See this web site for more details: www.roch.com/sites

Our Vision

Asbury First UMC is a spiritual “village green” in which people with many points of view and a wide spectrum of beliefs come together with a common purpose – to become committed disciples of Jesus Christ and to proclaim and live the gospel.

In our future we see:

- A growing, varied, vital and involved faith community.
- A full sanctuary and fulfilling worship services.
- Many children and adults actively hearing about Jesus and the love of God.
- A welcoming, committed congregation reaching out to the community and each other.
- An accessible, well-maintained and well-used church campus with a central gathering space that is alive and at the center of the village green.
- A place where all people receive spiritual nourishment for personal growth in their faith journeys.

Our overarching themes will be:

- Better reaching the unchurched and disenfranchised - becoming the church of choice for, and drawing into membership, those who are searching for a faith community that meets them where they are in their faith journey.
- Calling members into closer discipleship to Christ - calling new and current members to deepen and live out their faith through worship, fellowship and service. This is sharing your time and talents in church family as well as sharing financial resources. This is AFUMC becoming a more integral part of a member’s identity.

Our vision will become reality as we:

- Proclaim and demonstrate the love of God.
- Assist people to identify and evaluate ethical issues and choices.
- Are guided by our Christian heritage and trust in God.
- Exemplify Christian principles through commitment, witness and action to make Christ's vision a reality.
- Inspire faithful and fulfilling living through Christian teachings.
- Facilitate personal faith journeys by offering a wide variety of opportunities to learn about and experience the transforming power of Christ.
- Reach out to welcome, uplift and empower others, with mutual support and respect for diversity of beliefs and condition.
- Affirm the goodness, sacredness and interdependency of life while being open to the challenge and risk of the Spirit-led future.

Our Staffing Strategy

Consistent with our Church Direction and Mission, our staff placement covers six areas under

the direction of a Pastor in Charge :

1. Worship/Music (Pastoral Team)
2. Education for Discipleship (includes Mission and Outreach)
3. Care Ministry
4. Stewardship Development (includes Financial Administration)
5. Office Management
6. Building Maintenance

As recently as the first half of 2005, we had three additional full-time Elders (two experienced and one newly ordained) providing pastoral direction and support for Education, Member Care, and Stewardship. We emphasize that the final responsibility for all areas of ministry rests with the Pastor in Charge; however, he or she will need the support of other experienced pastors and leadership staff, who are able to lead in their assigned areas of responsibility with minimum direction.

We presently have two experienced, appointed Elders. To preserve flexibility during this transition, we have increased our hiring of pastors outside the appointment process. Specifically, we have increased the hours of an experienced part-time Elder, who in her expanded role will serve as Youth Minister, and we have contracted with a retired Elder to work part-time sharing pastoral duties and providing oversight for Adult Education and Discipleship Training. We also have broadened the responsibilities of leadership staff. We have expanded the responsibilities of our Director of Children's Ministry to include Family Ministry and encouraged our Financial Administrator to provide leadership in stewardship development.

When Rev. Dr. Robert Hill leaves at the end of June 2006 to become Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, Bishop Fisher will appoint Rev. Susan Shafer, Pastor in Charge, through June 2007. During this time, we will continue our search for a new Pastor in Charge to be appointed July 1, 2007. The Rev. Susan Shafer, with more than 20 years of experience at Asbury First, brings the right mix of wisdom, love, pastoral skills, relationships, and strength to lead us through what will be a creative as well as challenging period.

Bishop Fisher will also make an Intentional Interim appointment of an experienced Elder on July 1, 2006 to assume a major role under Rev. Susan Shafer's oversight. The SPRC will work with Rev. Shafer, the "Interim" appointed Elder, our part-time Elders, and leadership staff to best deploy the gifts of our pastors, and balance the workload. There will be new initiatives as well as continued support for all areas of ministry and programs during this transition year.

Our goal is to identify our next Pastor in Charge with sufficient lead time so that we may work with this person on any changes in pastoral and leadership staff placements beginning July of 2007.

Qualifications for Pastor in Charge

A Ph.D. is desired, but not required. A comprehensive Position(Job) Description and Position Profile are enclosed. What follows are extracts from these documents, not particularly in order of priority. Recognizing that no one individual will embody all these characteristics in full measure, we present them to convey a holistic impression of qualities and qualifications found in the ideal candidate.

We are looking for:

- A person of unquestionable personal and professional integrity who is centered in Christ.
- An experienced and visionary leader, teacher, preacher, and pastor.
- A person who has the administrative knowledge and experience to manage a large church.
- One who enjoys being a pastor and wants to get to know the congregation.
- An inspiring preacher who recognizes the need to keep the connection between preacher's voice and pastor's heart.
- One who can deal effectively with diverse theological perspectives, and make Bible teachings relevant for today.
- A person who is authentic, warm and caring, and relates well to all age levels.
- One who respects the United Methodist Discipline and tradition.
- One who is sensitive to Asbury First tradition, but not bound by it.

- A team builder who seeks consensus, manages disagreement, nurtures and encourages.
- One who can delegate responsibility and authority and inspires excellence in performance of staff and lay leadership.
- A person who can inspire our congregation to greater participation and stewardship.
- One who is willing to have a high profile in the community and the denomination.

Rewards and Opportunities

We might claim there is no better opportunity for ministry in the Northeast. Some candidates might consider this a capstone for their ministry. Previous Pastors in Charge have subsequently been elected bishop or appointed to a leadership position at a theological school.

We have a competitive compensation package for this region, with four weeks vacation after the first year of service; and full time pastors may apply for an extended leave after five years of service. Our pastors have responded to opportunities to teach at local seminaries and to publish; we are supportive where this is seen as mutually beneficial.

Important attractions:

- A pulpit of distinction, and support of the preaching ministry.
- The caliber and scope of worship, music, pastoral care, education, and outreach programs.
- A generous, loving and responsive congregation.
- Excellent support staff - pastors, leadership staff, and lay leadership.
- An inspiring physical and spiritual workplace.
- An opportunity to set down roots, buy a home, and stay awhile in a great community.
- Visibility in the community and in the extended United Methodist Church.
- Satisfaction from leading Asbury First to achieve its mission and vision.

The Process of Nomination and Application

Nominations, expressions of interest, and applications should be sent to :

Rev. Ruthellen Hoyle
 District Superintendent
 Genesee Valley District
 United Methodist Church
 1100 South Goodman St

Rochester, NY 14620
Phone and Voice Mail (585)-340-9525
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Applications are requested by April 15, 2006. The Search Committee will interview selected candidates beginning in May 2006 and continue with interviews until Bishop Fisher makes the appointment.

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2/16/2006

The Partnership of the Gospel
Luke 13: 31-35
Service of Installation: Marsh Chapel
March 4, 2007
Dr. Robert Allan Hill, Dean

Welcome

We have been gathered here, from Texas and Chicago, from Rochester and Providence, from Bay State Road and Brookline, gathered by grace. From a University President to a babe in the womb, from the least to the greatest, we are, for a moment, gathered. As Thornton Wilder wrote, 'just for a minute we are all together: let's *look* at each other'. Let us meet the moment, not miss it. As Abraham Heschel said, 'let us learn to meet the moment'. Like a mother hen gathers her brood, the Spirit of Christ has gathered us, and welcomed us again into real life, which *is the partnership of the Gospel*. Welcome, and please know how meaningful your own presence truly is for this gathering.

A sermon like this one, a salutation, ought to begin with some recognition of the difficulty involved in interpretation, and perhaps with a bit of humor. To those twin ends, we recall the account of the man who was stopped for driving 90 miles an hour on the turnpike. He explained his velocity to the officer by saying he had seen a sign that said '90' so he drove '90'. Then the officer noticed three petrified and terrified backseat riders, and asked if they were frightened by their turnpike ride. One said, "Oh no, route 90 was fine, we just hope and pray he is not going back onto route 220—that was really scary!" Interpretation is a delicate art. A gospel text needs and deserves some exegetical examination and some theological explanation and some practical application.

A. Exegetical Examination

In fact, our lesson today, Luke 13:31ff., exudes as poignant, as heartfelt, as realistic, and as personal an outlook as one can find anywhere in the Gospels, in its soprano voice of the lingering teaching of Jesus, or in its alto voice of the earliest church's memory, or in its tenor voice of the gospel author, or in its baritone rendering in tradition.

The highest note is Jesus' own. The first line, the melody, is a kind of dominical soprano voice, laden with maternal imagery today. 'Like a hen gathers, would I have gathered you.' All these lines (31-33) are found only in Luke, and clearly go back to Jesus himself. The nature imagery, the kindness of the Pharisees, the use of the term 'fox' (from a country preacher's lexicon), the gritty undercurrent of fear, the poetry of three days: mirabile dictum!, we hear today what Jesus said. His voice, vss. 31-33, carries across two millennia. *Go tell that fox...As a hen gathers*

her chicks...today, tomorrow, the third day... Here is Jesus of Nazareth, in 33ad, facing the tragic sense of life.

(There also is his frightened, hopeful church, in 70 ad, facing the tragic sense of life. There is Luke, in 90ad, facing the tragic sense of life. And here we are, gathered as partners in the Gospel. Thoreau wrote: “If it is not a tragical life we live, then I know not what to call it. Such a story as that of Jesus Christ--the history of Jerusalem, say, being a part of the Universal History. The naked, the embalmed, unburied death of Jerusalem amid its desolate hills—think of it...”)

Listen particularly, just for moment, to the voice of the writer, Luke, the third or tenor line, if you will, in this harmonic composition. Luke makes two novel moves, which differ from the interpretation offered by Matthew, with whom Luke shares a use of a portion of this text. Both moves impress us today.

First, Luke uses two powerful, forceful verbs to show the sweep of Jesus’ divine embrace, the gathering motion of the mother hen, the announcement of partnership, divine and human (thelo and sunago). *I would have done...I would have done...I longed, desired, deeply wished...to gather, to embrace, to join together, to partner...* There is a deeply moving aspect to this emphasis, as Luke has Jesus open the next several chapters of the Gospel of Luke, which include all the favorite and solely Lukan materials. We have the Good Samaritan, thanks to Luke. And the lost sheep and coin, thanks to him. We have the prodigal son, that most Gnostic of parables, thanks to Luke. And the dishonest steward, thanks to him. *Luke is probing the partnership of the Gospel*, and he begins his own emphasis right here. *What we think about God determines how we live. Luke illumines that partnership.*

Second, Luke stands Matthew’s interpretation of expectation on its head. For Matthew, the prediction of the coming of the Son of Man was an end of the world prediction. Not for Luke. Matthew looks up, Luke looks out. Luke sees the world a little more as we do, with miles to go before we sleep, with generations to go before we sleep. We have work to do. Here. Now. In partnership. Together. In real unity, not just in passing togetherness. Where Matthew heralds parousia, Luke heralds incarnation, and the coming entry, triumphal entry, into Jerusalem. Here Luke foreshadows what is to come. For him, as George Buttrick wrote, “Jesus was killed by the insurrectionists in the mob and by the reactionaries in the temple” (a good warning about the far left as well as the right). We can learn in our time from this text, and offer a form for its theological explanation.

B. Theological Explanation

Gathered here are we, in Boston the cradle of liberty, and at Boston University, the cradle of Methodist ministry. It is hard to walk much farther east, without some swimming trunks. It is hard to walk much farther back, without some memories. John Adams and John Dempster would like a word or two with us. The church whose educational project Dempster, a Mohawk valley native, began, here,

and the country whose cultural project Adams, a Braintree native, began, here, both depend on human freedom, human grace.

I longed...to gather... God in Christ invites a partnership of the Gospel, as Paul names it in Philippians 1: a partnership, a *koinonia*, a partnership. (Tragically, the NRSV has rendered the word, there, a sharing. How pale, how 'us' today.) Sursum corda: Jesus gathers us, to live out a muscular partnership of the Gospel: to learn not only to chew, but also to choose.

Our lesson shows Jesus, fully human as well as a body of divinity, 'the transcript in time of who God is in eternity'.

T. Here Jesus loves his own people like a momma, like a mother hen. These people, and we too, we could discern then, must not have been totally deprived.

U. Here Jesus recognizes the choices that inevitably make us who we are. Choice is relational and conditional, and makes us inspect what condition our condition is in. These people, and we too, must have not been unconditionally elected.

L. Here Jesus gathers everybody, all, all, like a hen with a brood. These people, and we too, we could discern then, must not have been limited to the very narrow, tiny minority of the pre-destined elect.

I. Here Jesus faces, heartsick, the brutal truth, that these people, and we ourselves, can and do resist the invitations of love, even the momma like, mother love of a hen gathering chicks. They must not have been powerless. Jesus' grace was resisted, steadily and effectively, to the path of the cross.

P. Here Jesus himself does not persevere, not at least in Jerusalem, or in the spiritual culture of our time, nor does his cause, at least not in this passage. Persecution not perseverance awaits this holy one.

Jesus, here, means freedom. The one requirement of your picture of God is that God must be 'worshippable', worthy of worship (neither cruel, nor evil, nor blind, nor capricious, nor us on our worst day). Today Jesus sets us on a path of freedom—a good Boston theme. Human freedom that is *temporal, universal, loving, imaginative, and powerful*. We will think of it in a moment as another kind of TULIP formula. We hunger for the partnership of the Gospel, the partnership of grace, divine and human, and the partnership of freedom divine and human.

A sermon like this one, a salutation, ought to continue with some analysis and examination, careful examination, and perhaps a touch of humor. To those twin ends, Mark Trotter reminded me once of the physician who provided a thorough medical exam to one patient, declaring him as 'healthy as a horse'. As the

man took up his coat to go, he fell down dead as a doornail. The secretary overheard the thud, entered, and asked, 'what are we to do?' To which the doctor, in view of misdiagnosis, said, 'Well, I don't know. But at least could we turn him around so that it looks like his coming in, not going out?' Be wary of overly optimistic charts, graphs, reports, diagnoses. Keep the verses of Yeats at hand, "the center does not hold..."

For all our warlike failings, there is still a grandeur to the human being, a grandeur personally known in love, and that love modeled after its partner in the divine love, love divine, all loves excelling! (But not erasing!)

The personalist liberals of Boston knew about partnership-- Brightman and his dark God-given, Ferre and his hymn to love, and our own colleagues on imagination and creation. Yet they underestimated the power of human freedom, for evil. Their editors and mid course correctors of the neo-orthodox school knew about partnership. Yet they underestimated the power of human freedom, for good. Their successors, the liberationists, knew about human freedom. Yet they underestimated the power of human freedom, to reach across inherited boundaries.

Many decades ahead of his time, one voice stood out, and from this very pulpit. Howard Thurman explicitly championed the partnership of the Gospel. Oh, he celebrated personality with his teachers, but knew the darker dimensions of experience for both Jesus and the disinherited. Oh, he too acclaimed faith, but knew the dangers of Christo-monism, and the neglect of a common ground. Oh, he too faced the terrors of power without truth, but knew the dangers of any ghetto, and could preach a scandalous universality, and acclaim a spiritual presence. Brightman and Niehbuhr and Gutierrez all offer something, but not enough, not alone. Not enough for a world hungry for the partnership of the Gospel. Thurman would have gathered them together, like a mother hen gathering her chicks.

How shall we appropriate such an explanation? As my grandmother would admonish, 'give us something practical to take home'.

C. Practical Application

Jan and I have come to Boston to spend the fourth part of our ministry in gathering chicks, in a generative mode, *and in a spirit of partnership*—to build a congregation, and recruit preachers, and exemplify spiritual hospitality, in a way that engages the next generation in the partnership of the Gospel. A national voice, a Methodist ethos, an excellent hospitality—these are our signposts. Marsh Chapel can become *a heart for the heart of the city and a worship service for the service of the city*. We will rightly be measured by the kind of people we produce, and the kind of pastors we produce. Humanly speaking, the death or life of the church depends upon the leadership of the church, and its voice. The voice of responsible Christian liberalism may be dormant but is not dead, not yet. You are here today because you

are the natural partners in this expression of the Gospel. Our voice is a responsible Christian liberal voice, one that sails between the Scilla of reaction and the Caribdis of rejection. The voice of Marsh Chapel is a responsibly Christian liberalism.

A real partnership of the Gospel will depend upon a common hope. It is not enough for us to recall the common faith of John Dewey. It is not enough for us to recall the common ground of Howard Thurman. On a reliable, common hope hang our future. What are the features of the common hope, this partnership, this partnership of the Gospel? We have preached some of them this year. T. Something temporal. A heart for the heart of the city—a longing to heal the spiritual culture of the land. U. Something universal. An interreligious setting. L. Something of love. A developed expression of contrition. I. Something imaginative. A keen sense of imagination. P. Some real power. An openness to power and presence. Today, Come Installation Sunday, a capacity for partnership, heart to heart, that rests on a faith in the partnership of God in the Gospel.

The human being for all his and her faults, has a capacity for wonder, for love, for courage, for the mutuality of work in partnership, on which this fragile globe depends. The best speech I have heard was by Mario Cuomo, who at the close said he would like to be remembered by one word, 'participant'. As Charles Darwin's exhibit reminds us, for all the changes that reason and experience have brought us, which we need not fear: "there is a grandeur about this view of life..." Nearby we have leading thinkers who write about imagination with creativity and about creation with imagination.

Is partnership to have a voice? Or will the Gospel be only 'the throwing of a stone'? Will the heteronomous freedom of partnership in the Gospel—temporal, universal, loving, imaginative, and powerful--find a hearing? Or shall the determinists (both Biblicist and materialist) win? Will your grandchildren sing the songs of freedom and grace? Or will a lockstep legalism of a purpose driven life prevail? Hear the gospel: *as a hen gathers her chicks...*

No, it is not too late for partnership. Abraham had a whole lot of nothing. And faith. And that gave him a future. Who knows what may come? Fifty two years ago, I doubt that Marcia and Irving Hill thought that once they named their misbehaving first baby Allan after Allan Knight Chalmers, that he would be one day the Dean of Marsh Chapel. But here he is. It is not too late. The best time to plant an oak tree is one hundred years ago. The second best time is today

We need one another. We need healthy partnerships: of learning and piety, of church and school, of school and university, of pulpit and lectern, of words and music, of lay and clergy, of women and men. To the partnership of the Gospel we turn, for labor, in love, in the next decade. Will you respond? You are gathered here today for a reason, the partnership of the Gospel. Will you act? Forgive me if I become quite specific, for a moment.

Voice, ethos, and hospitality cost.

Sermon by sermon this year, we have tried to announce a call to the ministry: our future voice. Sermon by sermon this year, we have tried to remember a charmed chapel story: our historical ethos. Sermon by sermon this year, we have taught disciplined generosity: our chance at real hospitality.

We hope to complete the endowment of the Marsh Chapel deanship. Is there one person who would feel called to such a gift, in the partnership of the Gospel?

We hope to renovate this building. Are there 100 people who would feel called to share the burden of such giving, in the partnership of the Gospel?

We hope to establish a Dempster House, an interreligious living unit for students (Hindu, Moslem, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, all) committed to a common hope. Are there 1000 people who could share the burden of such a project, in the partnership of the Gospel?

Closing

We have provided personal counsel, and some solace, in this past week. One couple, reflecting on a grim tragedy, a loss of life and of friendship, sought counsel under the shadow of a familiar portrait. As we completed a prayer, the young man asked, 'Who was Howard Thurman?' Before I could put into gear my own lengthy response, which, like the peace of God would have passed all understanding and endured forever, his friend spoke. She answered, 'Oh, I know his story: Dean of Marsh Chapel, religious teacher, guide to Martin Luther King, advocate for a common ground...' In eight sentences, she had it. I still do not know which was more thrilling, his question or her answer! Thurman wrote:

For this is why we were born: People, all people, belong to each other, and he who shuts himself away diminishes himself, and he who shuts another away from him destroys himself.

Will you embrace the partnership of the Gospel?

Remembering Chalmers
Matthew 22: 34-36
October 26, 2008
Marsh Chapel
Robert Allan Hill

Preface: Chalmers

I am holding a worn black and white Kodak photograph, 1954, in which a black suited man with a great shock of white hair is holding a baby boy. The white hair is that of Allan Knight Chalmers.

You may wonder where sermons come from. Surely they arise out of careful interpretation of the Scripture. Certainly they are born in the struggle and uncertainty of prayerful life, especially in a time like ours. Necessarily they emerge from the manifold dialogues and discussions which are the marrow of community life. Occasionally they burst forth from the abject need of a person or a public situation. Sometimes, all of these are catalyzed, together by a single remark. Today's sermon was lit by the match of a friend's single sentence.

Where do illumination, imagination, inspiration come from? Why did I use the adjective 'erstwhile' in conversation last week? How did he find a way to solve a scientific problem by turning it upside down? Where did her inclination, accurate inclination, to doubt what she was hearing dwell before it came to live in her mind?

My friend stopped to talk. We talked. As in all real conversation, there was a mixture of memory and imagination. She said: 'it is so sad when people lack access to their own best past'. It is. It is so sad when someone lacks access to his or he own best past. It is tragically sad when a country, or a people, or a denomination lacks access to its own best past. Her sentence arranged, as a host arranges a dinner table, today's sermon. Her comment placed the Scripture in the right light, caught the temper of prayerful struggle today, dipped into the theme of this weekend's remembrance, burst out of her own pathos, and, thereby, caught fire. Here is one definition of hell: losing access to your own best past. Here is one description of heaven: finding access to your own best past.

Over thirty years of pastoral ministry, we have seen women, men and groups lose their way, lacking access to their own best past. They can be cut-off from such blessing through accident, change, job-loss, migration, divorce, or other endings in relationships. Over thirty years of pastoral ministry, we have seen women, men and groups find their way home, gaining access to their own best past in memory, dream, reconnection, reading, prayer. This is what Sunday morning is all about!

Isn't this what happened to Martin Luther, blocked from his best past in the dark loneliness of his monk's cell, blocked by fear and anguish and dread? He found the Psalms, and understood them. He found the letters of Paul, and interpreted

them. He found Augustine, and learned from him. He burst out—sola fide!, sola gratia!, sola Scriptura. (I might have left off the sola!) He found freedom and grace by gaining access to his own best past.

I want to offer you the gift of memory as a help for imagination. I want today to offer access to your own best past, in the specific memory of a forgotten person, whose legacy is our best past and our desired future. Allan Knight Chalmers expressed and embodied preaching, change, and wholeness—kerygma, metanoia, oikoumene.

Here is a sketch of Chalmers' life from the King Center:

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1897, Chalmers received his B.A. (1917) from Johns Hopkins University and his B.D. (1922) from Yale University. He joined the faculty at Boston University in 1948 after serving as minister of New York's Broadway Tabernacle Congregational Church for eighteen years. During his career, he was chair of the Scottsboro Defense Committee during the 1930s, president of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, treasurer of the NAACP, and active in the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), the American Civil Liberties Union, and the Religion and Labor Foundation. Chalmers retired from Boston University's faculty in 1962.

Chalmers was a personal and professional supporter of King and the movement. In early 1956, as treasurer of the NAACP, he wrote to King promising to support the Montgomery bus boycott: "We will back you at the national level without any question" (Papers 3:173). In December 1960 he organized a meeting of leaders from various civil rights organizations, such as FOR, the American Friends Service Committee, the National Council of Churches, CORE, and SNCC, to discuss how they could cooperate to move desegregation forward in the South. Chalmers remained active in the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and in other peace, religious, and political groups until his death.

1. Kerygma: Chalmers' Preaching Voice

We remember Chalmers on a good day to do so. Our lessons today, particularly the reading from St. Matthew, connect closely to the project of his life. We shall lift out simply one sense in which this is so. Today's reading offers a wonderfully broad gospel, for those with eyes to see it and ears to hear it. One of the dangers of interpretation, compounded by years of study, can be the inability to see forest for trees. The reading today, seen whole, is universal, broad, magnanimous, liberal, inclusive, free, gracious, embracing, and itself whole, and so, holy. How shall we summarize religious teaching? Love God, love your neighbor. Granted the long histories of rabbinic debate about the law and its summary, granted the further Messianic dispute underneath the argument about David, granted the particular changes Matthew makes of his inheritance from Mark here, granted the various other fine points that we would lift out on another day and in other sermon, still, the main point holds. In Christ there is no east or west, in Him no south or north, but

one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth. The river of love will ever surmount the banks of law. The river of love will ever surmount the banks of religion. The river of love will ever surmount, and ever overtake the endless banks of boundaries we seek to set. I suggest we think about that a bit, in late October of 2008. Such breadth is at the heart of Allan Knight Chalmers.

Here is a taste of his pulpit voice. Chalmers preached:

You will in many cases fail to understand with absolute correctness the meaning of words, since words are symbols of thought and are not accurate; but you will come closer to the truth if you give the benefit of a deep desire to reveal a truth and not to hurt, to any set of words you hear or see. (A Candle in the Wind, 29)

They are lost who lack access to their own best past. One is lost who lacks access to his own best past. You are lost who lack access to your own best past.

Chalmers told his students that a B was required to pass the preaching class. A lower grade meant taking the class again. Chalmers encouraged his students to 'read a book a day'. He meant the habit to continue through a lifetime. Chalmers believed in preaching without notes. Still, if the student wanted to become a manuscript preacher Chalmers would aim to make him a strong manuscript preacher.

His classes met three times a week, an hour at a time. He required weekly 'interstitials', which were two or three paragraph reflections on a moment, experience, event, theme, or idea. Mrs. Chalmers attended the Edith Buell Club (for seminary wives).

My Dad remembers hearing Chalmers in the spring of 1950. Pacing the platform of the Oneida Methodist Church (where in 1968, at age 13, I was confirmed), Chalmers held a packed sanctuary enthralled in the retelling of the Scottsboro Boys story. Chalmers lead that early civil rights crusade to free 9 unjustly convicted black teenagers, a successful crusade that over a decade freed them all. He whispered. He shouted. He stepped off the exact measurement of the prison cells in which the lads had been held. He kicked the pulpit (I have no idea what that gesture aided). He placed before that gathering of 500 young adults the cause of justice in their time. My parents heard, and chose Boston over Drew (always a wise choice).

2. Metanoia: Chalmers Social Gospel

The other day I feasted in the stacks of the Gottlieb Archives. Ryan brought me pencils, paper, white gloves and three long folders of original Chalmers writings. One contained letters from and to Martin Luther King. Another contained writings related to the NAACP and the civil rights movement, and correspondence with Thurgood Marshall (there is a photo of Chalmers, Fosdick and Marshall). A third contained two reflective essays, Chalmers remembering, not Chalmers remembered. The first of these was written at the behest of Harrison Salisbury and the New York Times. One handwritten short letter is from a ten year old boy, offering the NAACP a gift of 22 dollars (*my mother is writing you this check in her name because I don't have a checking account—I'm only ten years old*).

Writing to King, his student, colleague and friend, Chalmers strongly propounded time to think: *A man gets thin if he does not read, becomes inaccurate if he does not write, but most of all loses profoundness if he does not think; or if he is deep he may only be in a rut because he has not had time to think anew as time and circumstances have gone on. (AKC-MLK, 3/6/60).*

Writing to donors, raising money for Freedom Riders' legal defense, Chalmers urges action: *Each of them faces four months imprisonment, \$200 fine, and a permanent record of criminal conviction that can mar his future. Their only offense was: they had faith in the rule of law in our country (AKC, 11/20/61, NAACPLDEF REPORT).*

Writing to the Times editor, now in the 1970's and commenting on that troubled time, Chalmers offers an exemplary rendering of responsible Christian liberalism: *the silent generation slogged; the violent generation slugs. Too many did not think back historically or ahead creatively...Separate is not equal...(This generation) has not yet produced leaders, both intelligent and selfless...We are in a phase where the icons and the iconoclasts are in control. Where are the bulldozers who know that what they do is part of a building plan? Time will have to tell.*

Chalmers had a supporter in Paul Tillich.

"Social institutions as well as personal habits have an almost irresistible tendency to perpetuate themselves in disregard of the demands of creative justice in a new situation or under unique conditions both in the communal and in the individual life." (Tillich, 56)

"What kind of knowledge can create moral action? It cannot be the detached knowledge of pre-scientific or scientific inquiry, nor can it be the knowledge of the day to day handling of things and people, even if such knowledge is elevated to the level of technical expertise or psychological skill, for any of this can be used for the most anti-moral actions. (Our most flagrant example of this is the Nazi system)." (ibid)

Chalmers had a kindred spirit in the poet Hayden Carruth, who died in Munnsville, New York a few weeks ago.

Hayden Carruth: “Regret, acknowledged or not, is the inevitable and in some sense necessary context—the bedrock—of all human thought and activity. Intellectually speaking, it is the ground we stand on”.

Chalmers would admonish us to remember, as Colin Powell did last week: 30% of all American teenagers do not graduate from high school. For African Americans, the number is 50%.

One of my favorite quotes of Daniel L. Marsh is cited in his book, *The Charm of the Chapel*, where he states: “We hope that the procession of immortal youth passing through the halls of Boston University for the next thousand years will be vouchsafed a vision of greatness, and that that vision of greatness will become habitual, and result in moral progress.”

3. Oikoumene: Remembering Chalmers Today

I looked this week at Chalmers’ books: *Candles in the Wind*, *As He Passed By*, *A Constant Fire*, and others. The rhetoric is dated but the passion is timeless. Chalmers believed that this world could change for the better. People, individuals and groups, could turn around, think again, change their mind, think twice. Change happens. Real change is real hard, but this world can become a better place. After many years of division and discord, I hear a remembrance of Chalmers and others like him. This summer and this fall, across multiple perspectives, there has been a lifted a set of voices like his.

This country is beginning to remember Chalmers. We remember Chalmers best by remembering today’s Gospel best. We are beginning to remember...

To remember that our differences are not our definition. To remember that real leaders are plow horses not show horses. To remember that, in the balance of liberty and justice, those who have much should not have too much and those who have little should not have too little. To remember that warfare that is preemptive, unilateral, imperial, unforeseeable, reckless, and immoral stands outside of Judeo-Christian just war theory, let alone outside of Chalmers’ pacifism. To remember that a passion for justice comes in more than one shade, more than hue, more than one color. To remember that no one person and no one tribe have a corner on the market of the true, the good, and the beautiful. To remember that people, all people, belong to one another. To remember that God loved the world, the cosmos, the oikoumene. To remember that you only have what you give away. To remember that you are your brother’s keeper. To remember that love of God and love of neighbor are love together. To remember that Scripture is errant, tradition affirms equality, reason accepts evolution, and experience counts. (You folks, if you give me enough time, I will make you Methodists yet!) To remember that the measure of

success is found the treatment of the least, last and lost, those at the dawn, twilight and shadows of life. To remember that real liberation means the possibility of salvation for all, not some. To remember that you whose commonwealth is heaven are citizens of the globe, the oikoumene.

Coda: Crawford

After about twenty years of preaching, and with much reluctance, I finally enrolled in a continuing education program. I had come to the edge of these waters other times, sometimes even showing up for opening events, only to turn around and head home, disappointed at what I could see coming. In the winter of 1999, somehow, I went down to Princeton for a preaching week. One evening, a man whose name I vaguely knew stood in that chaste chapel to preach. An African American, the venerable dean of a venerable university chapel, the man's stealth and subtlety drew me. He preached on the Psalms, and as he preached, the other failed educational moments of other years and of the days preceding began to fall away. He turned his slight frame, twisting in an elliptical pose. He darted and wove and scampered and paused. Then, unexpectedly, he stopped and said, a propos of what I know not: 'No one here will remember Allan Knight Chalmers. But let me tell you who he was.' On that cold Princeton night in 1999 Edgar Evans Crawford told the story of my name, and of my life. It was a strange, wonderful, true moment—kerygma, metanoia, oikomene—as strange a moment as I can recall. When you gain access to your own best past, then you are set free. When you gain access to your own best past, then you are given grace.

I am holding a worn black and white Kodak photograph, 1954, in which a black suited man with a great shock of white hair is holding a baby boy. The white hair is that of Allan Knight Chalmers...for whom I was named, by whom I am held. Still.

Preaching, change, common hope. Kerygma, metanoia, oikoumene.

You see, as all sermons, this one is very personal. I was named, Robert ALLAN Hill, named for Chalmers. I am holding a worn black and white Kodak photograph, 1954, in which a black suited man with a great shock of white hair is holding a baby boy. The white hair is that of Allan Knight Chalmers, for whom I was named, by whom I am held.

He holds me still.

*Merrywood
Mark 10: 17-31
Marsh Chapel
October 11, 2009
Robert Allan Hill*

In the early part of August, 2009, the newspaper, our national ‘paper of record’ carried a front page article about a tragic accident in Upstate New York. Many months earlier, near Auburn, NY, a bright young college freshman, a creative, itinerant musician, by accident ran his motorcycle headlong into a car which was waiting for oncoming traffic to turn. For six months he was, as the article reported, ‘a vegetable’ at 20 years of age.

Not far from the location of this tragic accident in Upstate New York, more than thirty years ago, I had made my first official pastoral visit. The hospital was located near Auburn. The young man, age twenty, had been in a motorcycle accident, too. He too survived but with his life forever altered. His one hope had been to become a NYS trooper, and his chances had been good prior to his own accident. Now, with his injuries, he would not qualify. Devastated would be an understated description of his condition. I see that young man by the mind’s eye almost every time I make a hospital call or another visit, an average of 25 calls per week in these thirtytwo years (an instructional aside for seminarians). Also, fifteen years ago, I briefly became the District Superintendent designate (a church administrative role) in the area of the tragic accident. I accepted because of the people I had known in the office, who were honorable and bright, who had helped me, who were genuine preachers and pastors.

Returning to the present. Our young motorcyclist whose story was told last summer suffered massive brain injury. For six months he lay in a vegetative state. Over the next six months only minimal improvement occurred. His family waited on him hand and foot and diaper. His younger brother spent large swaths of every day with him. But he could not recognize his own mother. ‘Who are you?’ Think about that for a moment. His brother would get so exasperated that he would lift the young man and drop him to floor, shouting to be recognized, shouting to make himself heard. Shouting at the top of his lungs to wake his beloved sibling from mortal sleep.

Since 1986 I have been shouting myself, but about another tragic. In prayer, in sermons, in books, in lectures, in speeches, in articles, in conversation, in debate, on the blog. Shouting. Wake up! Wake up! Thou Rip Van Winkle in the land of Rip Van Winkle! Wake up!

After about a year comatose, the young man began to revive. He still has no memory and no forecasting perspective. He spends his days in a group home, taking walks, visiting the zoo and the county fair, walking past the green lawns of the college in which he was once enrolled. Think about it for a moment. A tragic accident strips you of

health, of mind, of memory, of identity, and nearly kills you. In fact, to some degree, or by some measure, you may be dead (see Luke 15).

The newspaper of record reported on the upstate accident, in part because healing came to our young cyclist.

His healing came not by means of surgery or medication or other attention to the massive damage his frontal lobe, his main brain, sustained. The article meanders endlessly regarding how many and what types of attempts were so made. To no avail. His only partial, and very gradual renewal came--by another way. When the main roads of the brain have been washed out, or bombed out, or obliterated otherwise, the brain turns to the back roads. Healing comes indirectly. Healing comes from the little capillaries. Healing comes from the country paths, the little lanes, the overgrown and unmapped and even unplowed blue highways of the brain. The superhighways are left behind, to atrophy, age, weaken, and collapse. The blood flows backward, not exactly uphill, but outback. The blood finds other little routes by which to nourish the barren brain. And some grudging, slow, partial, painstaking healing arrives.

My church, the UMC of the NEJ, was riding high on a motorcycle some forty years ago when there was a tragic accident. Half the membership disappeared. The remaining half became twice as old. The buildings aged double time, with little maintenance, as some sanctuary roofs collapsed. Administratively inexperienced leadership was empowered. Simple truths about inclusiveness, choice, peace, reason, truth were forgotten. Support and salaries withered. Uneducated preachers occupied half the pulpits. Buildings were sold, campgrounds closed, missions aborted, youth groups eclipsed. The one great feature of our branch of Protestantism, choral singing in four part harmony, was displaced by happy clappy, Jesus is my girlfriend, follow the bouncing ball, one line blast music. Energetic, intelligent, aggressive, ambitious young people found other vocations than preaching. My church hit a car and catapulted downhill to brain damage, lost memory, forgotten identity and near death, or a kind of death. The membership of the New England conference, on the day of that metaphorical collision was 210,000: today it is 80,000. New Jersey: 200,000 to 85,000. NCNY: 155,000 to 60,000. Troy and Wyoming: 120,000 to 45,000. Church meetings, in the few cases that they involved conference, that is, a chance to confer in honest and kind conversation, pitted those committed to rebuilding the church against those committed to opening up the church. Build or open up? (Repeat). Those were the options, with little but a glimmer of memory that one requires the other.

The foremost current historian of Methodism asked me in 2004 if I thought the UMC had any future. I gave my reply and returned the favor. "No", he said.

Like a brother I have shouted. Like a brother I have lifted and dropped. Like a brother I have cared and loved. But the cerebral cortex changeth not. Some of you have, too.

The week after the article appeared about the tragic accident and the unexpected healing in Upstate New York, my granddaughter and grandson and I, along with their parents, strolled in the village of my upbringing. A bucolic setting for a lifetime of sermonic bildungsroman material surrounded me there, as it does on every visit to the farmers' Saturday market.

Jan later said, piercingly, how much growing up in the little college town of Hamilton, NY had forged my self. A love of free space, and freedom to move around save and unhindered. A familiarity and confidence in academia. An assumption about the certain goodness of the church as one part, only one part, of God's good community. A regard, early and late, for the quality of speech, the significance of language, the joyful love of the mother tongue. A joy in fishing, hiking, swimming, skiing, skating, cycling, golfing, all at the drop of a hat, all within a ten minute ride or twenty minute walk. No oversight, and the recognition of the freedom in such freedom. Time and space for friendship, without the intrusions on friendship that come with wealth. A long twilight childhood, for which twilight did not fall, and the streetlights did not come on until age 13 and the mudslide of Woodstock and the mudslide of American culture.

That day I took my son in law to see the Methodist Church. With his children we walked around to the back of the church. Once there had been a simple lawn there, like the many and simple lawns that lushly and lavishly adorn so many of the Upstate cities and towns. I remembered the side street as a dirt road, but early or late it was now paved. Behind the church there is a playground. I want to describe it for you. Here is the reason I want to describe it for you: it is a capillary, a little vessel carrying a little blood, a tiny moment of real healing coming out of the back roads by the rivers of memory, every smiling, ever gentle on the mind.

The playground is named 'MerryWood'. It is an example of spirit, speech, and space making way for a common grace. Merrywood: "a toddler park, in the spirit of community", says the sign. Welcome. The donors are listed. Some are Methodists from the church whose lawn holds Merrywood. Some are neighbors, who have lived in that location for sixty years. One is in memory of such a neighbor, who died as the park was built. The Rotary Club joined the partnership. And there is the church, presumably absorbing exposure, responsibility, liability and insurance.

As one who was a child on that backstreet, that back lane, I found the sign on the fence breathtaking. Listen to its simple sentences:

Welcome to Merrywood

There is a child in all of us, but this playground is for children.

On Sunday mornings we prefer praying to playing. During services you are welcome to join us inside.

Our neighbors love children, but they also enjoy quiet mornings and quiet evenings.

Narrow little John Street is perfect for walking but not for parking.

Toddlers please make sure your adult friend stays and plays with you at all times. Don't let them sneak away. (☺)

Not: ADOLESCENTS STAY OUT. CLOSED ON SUNDAY MORNING. STAY OUT BEFORE 9 OR AFTER 8. NO PARKING. CHILDREN MUST BE SUPERVISED AT ALL TIMES.

Rather: graceful, playful admonition and reminder, a gentleness in discourse and so in community.

There will be no large, lasting, quick recovery for the UMC of the NEJ. The time to have attempted that was before the boat had started fully to capsize, before our cycle crash. Our last real chance came about 20 years ago (humanly speaking of course). The massive damage to the main brain, the catastrophic near lobotomy of the cerebral cortex will not directly be healed. But there are the back roads, the capillaries, the little vessels, the Merrywoods.

Merrywood models spirit. Those who built the playground in 2003 (one assumes with the pastoral imagination of the minister leading the way) had about them a certain spirit. A humble spirit. A human spirit, or a humanizing one. A readiness to admit that there are many ways to keep faith. An openness to others, especially to unknown, different, future, foreign others. A care for children, the least of these. A modest mode of partnership, Methodist and Baptist, town and gown, Rotary and church, neighbor and visitor, one generation to another. Our future will also bear the mark, the imprint of this spirit (see Gal. 5:22). There is here a memory that ministry is service. There is here a memory that ministry includes children. There is here a memory that Jesus was the person for others, and that the church is the community of faith working through love. There is a memory that it is God who heals, and we are his, the sheep of his pasture. "Love is God". You might say that there is a Christological memory at work, battling the Christological amnesia of the last forty years. (The Gospel of Mark has something to say about Christological amnesia, including our reading today.) And, to be clear, to say it so that there is no mistaking it, there is a memory here of grace. Merrywood is a reflection of a common grace, the partnership of the gospel (see Phil. 1:3). But that memory starts with grace prevenient, prevenient grace. Before we hear of it, God is at work, loving children, speaking kindly, opening space for common grace. Those who built Merrywood, perhaps mutely but truly nonetheless, affirmed faith in prevenient grace. Our healing comes across such back roads. Unexpected, common grace!

Merrywood models speech. How something is said is just as important as what is said. There are flat, fundamental, and finally false ways of saying things that are the equivalent of shouting at a hearing impaired person. With every occasion for communication, including the very simplest, as evidenced in the Merrywood sign, there is an opportunity for grace. We have very little left to go on. We in the Protestant church in the Northeast.

A few thousand sixty year old members, a few hundred 150 year old churches, a few scraps of memory. But people instinctively hear good news. They know when the gospel has been preached. They hear it. They feel it. They know it in their bones. People who read the Merrywood sign know they are being addressed, if they allow themselves to be at all addressable, from another realm, a dominion of grace, a just, justified, justifying, rightwising, loving, freeing realm of grace. I repeat the gracious admonitions. Listen to the way they are put:

Welcome to Merrywood

There is a child in all of us, but this playground is for children.

On Sunday mornings we prefer praying to playing. During services you are welcome to join us inside.

Our neighbors love children, but they also enjoy quiet mornings and quiet evenings.

Narrow little John Street is perfect for walking but not for parking.

Toddlers please make sure your adult friend stays and plays with you at all times. Don't let them sneak away. (☺)

This is not nostalgia, not flummery, not rhetorical trimming, not cute speech. It is a moment of justifying grace. The speaker is not worried, is not anxious, and does not have a furrowed brow. The writer/speaker is not a salesman, but a witness. The writer does not need a certain response. Another world, a new creation, is peeking in upon the dementia of a dying church within the loneliness of a frightened world. Here we are, she says! Come in! Play! Enjoy! Oh, and if you are so moved, come and enjoy come Sunday what means most to us. It is that indirection, telling the truth but telling it slant (as the poet said), that confident aplomb, that air of happy courage that is everything, justifying grace, gospel. If we are to speak the gospel we shall need Merrywood speech, just grace, a willingness to lay down our sword and shield, to put on a long white robe, to study verbal war no more. If, that is, we want to be heard by a world that increasingly experiences language as aerial bombardment and hit and run driving and other forms of e-damage. Those who planned Merrywood, perhaps indirectly but nonetheless truly, affirmed their sturdy faith in grace that justifies, on its own terms. Healing comes across such forgotten, overgrown, unplowed back roads.

Merrywood models space. Those who imagined and created this remarkable play space did so with a certain eye upon space. Read sometime Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*. Children who grow up in high broad space have a high broad perspective. Setting the spatial setting is 90% of education. Now we want to become very practical for a moment. Across the UMC of the NEJ we lack many things. You make your list. Here is mine. We lack: leadership, money, trust, skill, memory, courage, numbers, heart. But there is one thing of which we have almost endless supply. Space. Unused, empty, vacated churches, lawns, buildings, lots, land, space. Space, we got. So, why not use it

FOR THE COMMON GRACE? Why not take empty church and make Merrywood? Have we forgotten the love we had at first? There is hardly a setting in our conferences that with a little pastoral imagination could not become a Merrywood, small or large. All eight churches we have served, over time and distinctly and in some way, have done so. Life is not about what you do not have (see Exodus 20). It is about what you do have. Enjoy what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are. Well, we do have space. One church could use its empty sanctuary to provide sanctuary for Iraqi refugees. Another could use its forlorn basement for lbgtq ministry. One church could use its lawn for skating rinks and hockey. Another church could use its garret to house unemployed members. And so on. Those who built Merrywood, however mutely or unconsciously, exhibited a confidence, a faith in sanctifying grace, in the possibility, by back roads, of betterment. You can if you think you can. That is not a word about spirit. That is not a word about speech. That is word about space.

Later last summer, I heard our daughter and son in law singing to both children as they were bathed. This little light of mine...This is the day...I love the mountains, I love the rolling hills...Every round goes higher higher...

When these children sing the songs of faith, like 'this is the day', I feel happy, and more, I feel some hope. Their parents, clergy they, are not going to give over the church, the broad magnanimous open liberal large loving free caring Christian church, to the fears of religionists. They know the difference and they live it.

Healing is coming. Slowly. Partially. Painfully. Indirectly. Along the back roads. In spirit. In speech. In space. Grace prevenient, spirit. Grace justifying, speech. Grace sanctifying, space.

Welcome to Merrywood...

Marsh Chapel
Robert Allan Hill
The Demise of Methodism in the Northeast
Pentecost 2010

Pentecost is the birthday of the church. The church will exist until the end of time. Some parts of the church may not.

The decline of Methodism in the Northeast (a harbinger of similar decline coming soon to other regions) is not the consequence of the will of God (the theological defense). Nor is this decline the result of inevitable demographic trends (the sociological defense). Neither is the decline due to insuperable national and regional trends in lifestyle or commitment levels (the cultural defense). This spectacular decline is also not assignable to educational fashions (the pedagogical defense). Our decline toward death in the Northeast has been a matter of consistent, deliberate, and conscious choice, on the part of church leadership. It need not have happened. It did. We did it. To ourselves. Neither a vengeful God, nor a drop in population, nor culture wars, nor seminary curricula are to blame. We simply chose death over life.

We had several excellent reasons.

In the meantime, though, the body of the church lost significantly more than half its size, and aged well out into retirement years. In the span of little more than a generation. Our demise makes the leadership and management of General Motors (of recent bankruptcy court fame) a model of stewardship by comparison. We simply decided not to preach well, not to tithe at any level of church life, and not to replenish our spirits in the vital liturgical traditions of the church.

In my adult lifetime, since 1972, my beloved church, the United Methodist Church of the Northeast, has displaced, off loaded, dismembered half of her people. 2% a year for 30 years. The farther north, and the farther east, the worse the numbers. But the arithmetic alone does not bear witness. The devil is in the details. So I begin a journal, a history and a diary and a memoir. In much harsher circumstance, V Klemperer can bear witness, then so can I. To do so, I must take you for a few moments, back home.

This summer we drove past a parsonage, a small relatively new ranch house, situated next to a white, clapboard New England style United Methodist Church. A new sign read 'for sale'. The Nelson NY UM parsonage is not exactly Graceland or Neverland or Buckingham Palace or Gracie Mansion, but it did once constitute 1/3 of the once solid pastoral support of a now clearly dying suburban parish.

In June I preached in Baltimore, in the fine facility of the Baltimore Marriott Waterfront Hotel. A thousand well quaffed, fashion edged, nicely attired Christians, in black and white, United Methodists, filled the lush ballroom. The next morning we drove north to Scranton PA, to the last full session of the so-called Wyoming Conference. 300 overweight, poorly dressed, all white, largely retirees, met in the unkempt gymnasium of the University of Scranton. Like Solomon's baby, the conference is to be cut in two pieces this year. From southern waterfront to northern wasteland we drove in one morning. In religion, the south has surely risen again. In Scranton, most the delegates were too old and too heavy to walk from the gym to the cafeteria, less than 300 yards. Golf carts carried the disciples. The ice is melting. Fast.

I attended my home conference, my spiritual home. As an itinerant preacher, a traveling elder, my church is the gathering of similarly cast about travelers, my conference. My brothers in ministry, my sisters in itinerancy. Hymns to sing. My life goes on in endless song...I drove to Clarence Center, near Buffalo, thinking about the plane crash last winter which put the little town on the map. My dark reverie was shaken as I passed a church sign which read: 'True peace is found only through Jesus Christ'. I do not believe that. Neither do you. Re-read Romans 8 again about the whole creation groaning if you must. Read Acts 10 about all in their own way being saved if you must. Re-read Galatians 3:26 about the end of religious distinctions if you must. Channel John Wesley—if thine heart be as mine then give me thine hand—if you must. Re-read any of Huston Smiths books if you must. Remember Abraham Heschel. Remember Anwar Sadat. Remember Abraham Lincoln. Remember Mahatma Ghandi. Recall the Dalai Lama, if you must. BUT MUST YOU? We are not Christofascists, are we? We know in our bones that there are many ways of keeping faith. We know in our guts that in the Father's house there are many rooms. We know in our hearts that the true light that enlightens EVERY ONE has come into the world. Don't we?

I drove on, glad to be arriving at a MAGNANIMOUS METHODIST conference wherein there is no east or west, wherein no south or north, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth, wherein there is broad peace, peace perfect peace, wherein Wesley is remembered, and remembered to have said, 'if thine heart be as mine, give me thine hand'. NO. Not for you, not for us the holier than thou neo-gnostic Unitarianism of the second person of the Trinity, patronizingly triumphalistic, christofascist, exclusivist hatred of such a saying: 'True peace is found only in Jesus Christ'. No.

But. As you probably already surmise, in the rear view mirror, and beneath the aforequoted warped proverb, I cringed and wept to read the church's name, Harris Hill United Methodist Church. And. As you may now guess, at the conference itself the opening sermon, an atrocity, gave more than ample cover to such christomonist religious one-up-man ship.

In August we went by the past and the future on the high Allegheny Plateau of Route 20, Pompey NY, where Winston Churchill's mother was raised. Twenty years ago I lead an effort to plant a church on that majestic promontory, with a forty mile view of the Mohawk Valley, John Dempster's home, spread out below. We moved, itinerants we. The mission died. Today, not a quarter mile from the space of my dream church, a finished fundamentalist church, with big glass and great parking and atrocious architecture and one line music and Biblicist gay bashing occuppies, and I mean occuppies, the hillside. From near and far children will come to hear about Jesus the gay hater, Jesus the abortion opponent, Jesus the warrior, Jesus the kick boxer, Jesus the bibliolatryst, Jesus the American, Jesus the purpose driver, Jesus the religious, Jesus the blood stained lamb. What happens to a dream deferred...?

Days later and a few miles farther east, I brought the car to a screeching stop in Fabius NY. The Fabius UMC is a solid, clapboard, clean and simple, center village church on route 80. It is at the very center of the 1790 village. Its windows are Keck stained glass, its pews and altar of beautiful cherry, its hall and rooms used for multiple community groups—scouts, daycare, seniors, all. On front sign, where once you read the sermon title, you now read: 'For Sale. Call 3154273515.' I did. Call. I may yet buy it. Ten years ago that church thrived. All of our churches are one pastor away from death of this sort.

Riverside Church is in flames. The itinerancy is broken. 55% of our pulpits are occupied, and I mean occupied, by uneducated clergy. Dewitt Community Church has had 2 interim preachers and 2 pastors in five years. Our pastors and bishops are rewarded and elected on the basis of their capacity to accept L Schaller's tragic prophecy: 'the denominations will gladly accept 2% annual decline in exchange for the tacit agreement that there be no significant change'. We don't seem to mind dying, as long as we can do it at home, in our jammies, watching TV, eating ice-cream, with pleasant pastoral (read hospice) care.

For to live, to choose to live, would mean tithing. To live, to choose to live, would mean inviting, welcoming, embracing others. To live, to choose to live, would mean to tell the truth and shame the devil, as we heard Emily Webb say last week. Truth hurts. To live would mean different leadership, or, put another way, leadership. Not for us, not now. We have grown accustomed to our comfortable demise. We have grown comfortable, comfortable with incompetent leaders, mediocre preaching, grudging pastoral care, lame itinerancy, leaky roofs, dead flies in the hymnal pages, and 2% decline a year. To live would mean to change.

Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right spirit within me!

The happy news is that a return to excellence in preaching, consistency in tithing, and immersion in tradition will bring us back to life. If we choose life.

First. The mark of disciplined living in our time most needed by our churches is robust tithing. In a materialistic age, nothing testifies better to the invisible than generosity with abandon. People notice. Likewise, when the church appears to act irresponsibly with money, people also notice. The Riverside Church conflagration over Rev. Braxton's salary is a current example. In an age of entitlement, nothing witnesses better to graceful love than intentional self-abandon in regular (not occasional) giving. Steady investment in fellowship is a great joy to the giver. In an age of greed, nothing bears stronger witness to another way, than another way of relating to wealth. Sadly, we have not remembered well our inherited practice of tithing. Our current average lay giving hovers between 1 and 2% of income. Our current average clergy giving is lower still. More sadly still, we have overburdened our basic ministries in the local churches by requiring not a tithe, but often over 25% of income to be sent on into the elaborated ministries of the denomination. The power to apportion is the power to destroy. This heavy handed ladling of required donations has most hampered growing and larger churches, who would have benefited from the reinvestment of extra-tithe resource in developing ministries of worship, education and service. To equip our church for the struggle ahead, we will need to teach tithing by precept and example, in season and out.

Second. In Methodism we need to recover our confidence about the importance of education. No denomination anywhere, ever did more to support educational development than did the Methodist church in America during its first two centuries of life. 128 US schools and colleges continue to this day to honor such investment. More statues to John Wesley are found on campuses than in churches today. John Dempster exemplified the recognition of an earlier era to the need for education in the preparation of clergy, and education in the development of laity. Our current willingness to let semi-prepared people occupy our pulpits in large numbers is a direct contradiction of our own best past. When I entered the ministry in 1979, about 5% of the pulpits in our conference were held by non-elders. Today it is 55%. You cannot run a college on adjuncts. It is far better to have one good sermon preached four times than to have four bad sermons preached one by one. Our confidence in our inherited use of circuits has disappeared. We have made a virtue of uneducated piety. But there is no such thing as piety without learning. The two go together. Better a good sermon preached four times on a circuit than four bad ones comfortably heard and given, without any driving.

Third. We shall need to recover a love for worship that is traditional without the scourge of traditionalism, that is enchantment not entertainment, that is God centered not conversation centered, and that is excellent, entrepreneurial and enjoyable. We shall need to continue to forestall decline, demise, and death. In words, in the thickets of detailed mini-histories, in congregations, in communities, in conferences, voices of health and renewal need raising and heeding.

We need not ride the sled any farther down the hill. We need to stop, get off, stand up, brush off the snow, grab the rope, push off those unwilling to get off

themselves, and pull the sled back up the hill. We shall not prefer play to work, nor meetings to ministry, nor representation to redemption. With every budget, choice, selection, apportionment, election we shall need to reject the easier, cozier, happier downhill ride.

In other institutions, when the angel of death approaches, the top leadership is held accountable. Those at the helm at death are held responsible. Brownie during Katrina. Keating during the S&L bailout. GM's leadership in the recession. Belichick after the last game. Rumsfeld in Iraq. Leadership matters.

Except in Methodism in the Northeast since 1972. Has any active or retired Bishop in our jurisdiction in the last generation, ever, once, personally expressed contrition, accepted accountability, taken responsibility, uttered a word of regret, compunction or lament? Losing half of the church's membership in a generation, note on Bishop has had the integrity to take on the responsibility of honest leadership. Not one. Not once. U Sinclair: 'It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it'.

They blamed others. One example will have to suffice, to stand for one hundred. In 1996, Bishop Skeete retired and in his valedictory, with real hatred and honest racism, dismissed the New England churches he had been assigned to lead and shepherd as 'eurocentric havens of mediocrity'. Nice phrase. Memorable, 15 years later. It's always somebody else's fault. Stay seated. Cover up. Keep warm. Let the sled roll on down the hill.

We need to do otherwise. To get off, stop the ride, dust off our trousers, pull the rope, climb.

Servants of the Word
Matthew 25: 14-30
Romans 10: 14-17
November 13, 2011
Marsh Chapel
The Rev. Dr. Robert Allan Hill, Dean
Dedicated to the Memory of the Rev. Margie Mayson (d. 11/8/11)

I lift my voice in celebration of Jesus' parable of the talents. (I heard WS Coffin in his first sermon at Riverside Church, autumn 1977, preach on it, and conclude by singing 'This little light of mine'.) Life is a gift which inspires continuous giving, says the Lord. Talents are meant to be shared, says the Lord. What we have and who we are we are meant to invest in the future, says the Lord. This means risk. There is risk, always there is risk, in investment. The risk is real, and should be reasonable, and can be managed. But it is risk still. All walks of life, including yours and mine, involve real, reasonable, manageable risk. Let us apply the lesson, you and I, to our own lives and work. As OW Holmes said of a sermon: 'I applied it to myself'. This morning, in particular, let us think about the servants of the word, ministers of the gospel, in the Methodist tradition of Marsh Chapel, and of those in that calling to whom the Lord may say: "Well done thou good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. We will set you over much. Enter into the joy of the master".

I lift my voice in honor, defense, and happy admiration of a 32 year old Tennessee Methodist preacher, who questioned from his pulpit the invasion of Iraq in 2003. (With a congregation of conservatives, deep in a red blooded red state, he preached the gospel of truth about an action that was preemptive, unilateral, imperial, reckless, unforeseeable, immoral, post-Judeo Christian, and wrong.) "This mistaken action will haunt and shadow our beloved land for a biblical three to four generations", he wrote in the sermon. With a wife and two pre-schoolers, and a massive seminary debt, he knew his sermon was more than generically risky: at worst, his collection plates might empty along with his pews. The DS might get some nasty email. He might be asked to move. Late one night, after putting the kids to bed, his wife gently asked him whether he really needed to speak up. He thought for a while and said: 'Well, at least if the worst comes, I can count on another appointment, come June. That's the way the Methodist church protects the freedom of the pulpit. I may not make much, but I have a kind of tenure. We will be able to feed our kids.' A servant of the word.

I lift my voice in admiration for an ordained woman elder in Ohio, who had a couple coming for marriage ask if there were any man available, instead of her. The bride said, 'We put down our deposit a year ago. We don't want a woman to officiate. You owe us.' When the minister explained to the administrative board that she would be going to small claims court over this, pointing to the stipulation in the wedding rules that the pastor in charge will officiate, there was a ruckus. 'Why didn't you just get our former pastor to

tie the knot? He lives right here in town. He is retired and would be glad to do it.' So, the red faced board chair demanded. At home that night, she promised her teenage daughter: 'We may have to move next spring, which will be hard for both of us, but at least I will have an appointment, come June. We will not starve, you and I. We are Methodists. That's the way the Methodist church protects the freedom of the pulpit. I may not make much money, but I will have a job somewhere. We are Methodists. We believe in the connectional, itinerant system, to protect the freedom of the pulpit.' A servant of the word.

I lift my voice in honor of a New York district superintendent who questioned his bishop. I mean he QUESTIONED his bishop. Later he told his son how he dreaded sitting down across the table from his fellow elder, the resident bishop, and saying what he had to say: 'Bishop, I know you are having an extra-marital affair. And while it is true that several of your colleagues have done the same, over the years, in this jurisdiction, and not looked back or been defrocked, I am not going to be still about it. You need to resign. Today.'

The son asked, 'What will happen to us?' His dad said, 'I don't know but I do know I will at least have a job in June. You can still count on going to Ohio Wesleyan next year.

I may not make as much money as I could have in another denomination (like the Presbyterian or Episcopal Church), probably only a third as much, but I am proud to be a Methodist, where we protect our preachers from predatory and mendacious bishops.

Methodists protect the freedom of the pulpit with the guaranteed appointment. Ernest Fremont Tittle's great Evanston congregation, in their landmark statement on such freedom, and their defense of him, gave us a shining example.' A servant of the word.

I lift my voice in deep love and regard for an older Florida preacher, shepherded to his last assignment at age 64. The Staff Parish committee chair asked, 'Don't you have somebody younger, someone with kids in school, with a Dodge caravan, and a dog and an eagerness to please and a dislike of conflict?'. A year later, at age 65, the minister had to get up in the pulpit and point out that the congregation's laziness, stinginess, shallowness, narrowness, meanness and arrogance were not working excessively well in evangelistic terms. (He dreaded doing it, for many reasons, one being that because he had started late in ministry, and needed as many pension years as he could muster.) He loved the younger people in the town, along the lake nearby, and the handful of good, loving, retired school teachers whose tithes kept the church open. But in his heart he knew he had no choice. And the DS had said, when he was sent there, 'Speak lovingly, but truthfully. They have been coddled, dodged and lied to for years. I want them to hear about salvation. But I want them to hear about sin too. And if things get bloody, I'll have a church for you in June. After all, we are Methodists. We stand for the freedom of the pulpit. We watch over one another in love, in connection and in itinerancy. We would not expect you to go anywhere you are sent without guaranteeing you a job somewhere. That would be cruel. That would be cruel to require you to move annually at the direction of a bishop, on a very modest salary, and not to commit to providing you some job, however humble.' A servant of the word.

I lift my voice in concern for a 29 year old, newly minted United Methodist elder, who gave a strong sermon in West Virginia, in support of the full humanity of gay people. He

did not sleep a wink the night before. He could feel the deep disappointment and anger in the eyes of the women and men—few enough already in number—with whom he would worship and for whom he would preach in the morning. He mused: ‘For all the visitation and counseling, all the weddings and funerals, all the long days and late nights, all the genuine friendship and pastoral care, they still will not forgive this. It means they have to re think their dysfunctional relationships to family and to the Bible. But silence, avoidance, and dishonesty are not helping them, as far as I can see. Ours is a gospel of truth. For it to be gospel it has to be true. Gay people are people. Gay people are people, not fractions of people. I know my voice may be muted, but it will not be silenced. I will be gentle, brief, humble and kind. I will visit later to listen in love. But I will preach. I am a traveling elder, an itinerant minister, a Methodist preacher. My college teacher (Howard Zinn) had tenure and could teach the truth as he saw it. I have an annual appointment to preach as fully and faithfully as I can. And I will. I can, I will, I promise, So help me God. I agree to go and work where I am sent, and the church promises a pulpit, however modest, and a salary, however meager. I can provide for my family. I am proud of our connection, our history, our birthright, our defense of freedom.’ A servant of the word.

I lift my voice in praise for a quiet, gentle, middle aged northern preacher, who disagreed in love with her resident bishop. ‘What he was quoted as saying in our city paper, after conference this summer, is just not right, just not true. I have to say so. I read a sermon once, ‘The Truth of Our Lives’ (M Mayson, AFUMC Rochester, 3/05) that gave me courage. I will do so personally, with respect, with grace, with humility, and in genuine love. But I have a pastoral responsibility too. In one paragraph quotation he did a decade’s worth of damage to our evangelism here in our struggling conference, by what he said. People will not darken the doors of churches whose leaders say such things. Bishops in our church are general superintendents, servants of the servants of God, servants of the servants of the word. They are consecrated not ordained. They are elders like the rest of us. Some of them hear so often what great people they are that they start to believe it. I know a few who can strut sitting down. He may not like my voice, or my view, but he will have to appoint me, even if it is to a tiny church in the north country. I will still be able buy rice crispies and cat food come June. I love my church and am proud to be a Methodist preacher. Only one thing would eject me from my cradle denomination: the trashing and elimination of the security of appointment.’ A servant of the word.

In the last sermon that I heard my father give, in Sherrill NY in 2008, he quoted the following passage from Timothy Tyson’s memoir, BLOOD DONE SIGN MY NAME. If you ever have any doubt as to the birthright, precious worth of the freedom of the pulpit, protected in our denomination by the security of appointment (now under attack by, of all people, the Bishops whose job it is to serve these very servants of the word), buy and read this book. Tyson, an historian, remembers growing up under the leaky roofs of many North Carolina Methodist parsonages, in the 1950’s and 1960’s. His father, an itinerant minister, a traveling elder, a servant of the word, was very effective and beloved from church to church, until he began, once trust was established, to preach about race and race relations—the full humanity of black people. To his white congregations this white

man said something like 'people all people belong to one another' (H Thurman). Every three years or so, the DS called, and Bishop reappointed the family. On the road again. Once because he invited Dr Samuel Proctor, a fine African American Preacher, and then President of North Carolina A and T into his pulpit. Once because he organized an interracial memorial service following the death of ML King. Once because he preached a particular sermon on racial equality. Once because with his brother, the author's uncle, he went to court and sat on the 'wrong side' of the courtroom. He said to the judge: "If you can tell me where to sit, you can tell me what to think, and what to say, and...I don't believe you have that authority.' His parishioners told him he was no longer welcome in any of the six pulpits on his circuit. He reminded them that 'he' didn't stand in those pulpits at their invitation...but by the calling of the Lord and the appointment of the bishop.' His wife was eight months pregnant. People crossed the street to avoid him. Threatening phone calls came, after which he sent his wife and kids to live with his mother. Then this, the passage my dad cited: "Lying in bed alone at the parsonage a few nights later, he heard a knock at his back door. He thought it might be the Klan coming to make good on their threats, but saw what appeared to be a white woman standing near the back porch. It was too dark to tell who it was, and the figure had moved back away from the house after knocking. He opened the door and reached for the light switch. 'Please don't turn on the light' a female voice stammered. 'I just wanted you to know how proud I am that you are my preacher. I just wanted you to know that.' And then she hurried away into the darkness. (Tyson, Blood Done Sign My Name, 194) A servant of the word.

I lift my voice this morning to echo the ancient wisdom of the Apostle Paul, in whose words we again receive the call to preach (are you so called?), the risk of ministry (is this adventure yours?), the gospel investment in history and mystery (is this your path?): 'How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him...Faith come from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.'

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***New Year's Theological Resolutions
January 1, 2012
Lectionary Texts
Marsh Chapel
Robert Allan Hill***

Preface

Your love of Christ shapes your love of Scripture and tradition and reason and experience. You are lovers and knowers too. We are ever in peril of loving what we should use and using what we should love, to paraphrase Augustine. In particular we sometimes come perilously close to the kind of idolatry that uses what we love. We are tempted, for our love Christ, to force a kind of certainty upon what we love, to use what is meant to give confidence as a force and form of certainty. It is tempting to substitute the freedom and grace of confidence for the security and protection of certainty. But faith is about confidence not certainty. If we had certainty we would not need faith.

1. Errancy

Your love for Christ shapes your love of Scripture. You love the Bible. You love its psalmic depths. #130 comes to mind. You love its stories and their strange names. Obededom comes to mind. You love proverbial wisdom. One sharpens another comes to mind. You love its freedom, its account of the career of freedom. The exodus comes to mind. You love its memory of Jesus. His holding children comes to mind. You love its honesty about religious life. Galatians comes to mind. You love its strangeness. John comes to mind. You love the Bible like Rudolph Bultmann loved it, enough to know it through and through.

You rely on the Holy Scripture to learn to speak of faith, and as a medium of truth for the practice of faith. Around our common table today in worship, we share this reliance and this love. The fascinating multiplicity of hearings, here, and the interplay of congregations present, absent, near, far, known, unknown, religious and unreligious, have a common ground in regard for the Scripture. A preacher descending into her automobile in Boston, after an earlier service, listens to this service to hear the interpretation of the gospel. A homebound woman in Newton listens for the musical offerings and for the reading of scripture. On the other side of the globe, way down in Sydney, Australia, a student listens in, come Sunday, out of a love of Christ that embraces a love of Scripture. Here in the Chapel nave, on the Lord's Day, scholars and teachers and students have in common, by their love for Christ, a love for the Scripture, too. In this way, we may all affirm Mr. Wesley's motto: *homo unius libri*, to be a person of one book.

But the Bible is errant. It is theologically tempting for us to go on preaching as if the last 250 years of study just did not happen. They did. That does not mean that we should deconstruct the Bible to avoid allowing the Bible to deconstruct us, or that we should study the Bible in order to avoid allowing the Bible to study us. In fact, after demythologizing the Bible we may need to remythologize the Bible too. It is the confidence born of obedience, not some certainty born of fear that will open the Bible to us. We need not fear truth, however it may be known. So Luke may not have had all his geographical details straight. John includes the woman caught in adultery, but not in its earliest manuscripts. Actually she, poor woman, is found at the end of Luke in some texts. Paul did not write the document from the earlier third century, 3 Corinthians. The references to slavery in the New Testament are as errant and time bound as are the references to women not speaking in church. The references to women not speaking in church are as errant and time bound as are the references to homosexuality. The references to homosexuality are as errant and time bound as are the multiple lists of the twelve disciples. The various twelve listings are as errant and time bound as the variations between John and the other Gospels.

The Marsh pulpit, and others like it, are not within traditions which affirm the Scripture as the sole source of religious authority. We do not live within a Sola Scriptura tradition. The Bible is primary, foundational, fundamental, basic, prototypical—but not exclusively authoritative. Do you hear that? It begs to be heard. Today's passage from Matthew 4 is an idealized memory of something that may or may not have happened in the way accounted, somewhere along the Tiberian shore. It looks back sixty years. What do you remember from January of 1948? Nor was it written for that kind of certainty. It is formed in the faith of the church to form the faith of the church.

If I were teaching a Sunday School class in Nebraska this winter I would buy the class copies of Throckmorton's Gospel parallels and read it with them.

We grasp for certainty, but confidence grasps us.

2. Equality

You love the tradition of the church as well. Though with a scornful wonder we see her sore oppressed...John Wesley loved the church's tradition too, enough to study it and to know it, and to seek its truth. The central ecclesiastical tradition of his time, the tradition of apostolic succession, he termed a 'fable'. It would be like political debaters today using charged language like 'fairy tale'. Likewise, we lovers of the church tradition will not be able to grasp for certainty in it, if that grasping dehumanizes others. The Sabbath was made for the human being, not the other way around, in our tradition.

Baptism is as traditional and central a variously understood practice as Christianity possesses. It is in some ways the very doorway to our traditions. Yet listen to Paul today. In his context, he rejects baptism. For him gospel trumps tradition.

Our linkage of the gifts of heterosexuality and ministry, however traditional, fall before grace and freedom. Further, on a purely practical level, another generation will not be impressed by church growth strategies rooted in the exclusion of 10% of the population. There is a serious upside limit to the use of gay bashing to grow churches. My three children in their twenties are not going to stay around for it.

It is theologically tempting to shore up by keeping out. But it has no future. Equality will triumph over exclusion. It is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave...

If I were convening a Lenten study in suburban Washington DC I would have the group read G. Wills' *Head and Heart: American Christianities*, for some perspective on the way traditions change.

3. Evolution

You love the mind, the reason. You love the prospect of learning. You love the life of the mind. You love the Lord with heart and soul and mind. A mind is a terrible thing to waste. You love the reason in the same that Charles Darwin, a good Anglican, loved the reason. You love its capacity to see things differently.

Of course reason unfettered can produce hatred and holocaust. Learning for its own sake needs virtue and piety. More than anything else, learning to last must finally be rooted in loving. Did you hear the one thing requested in our vibrant Psalm? To inquire in the temple. Inquiry!

The universe is 14 billion years old. The earth is 4.5 billion years old. 500 million years ago multi-celled organisms appeared in the Cambrian explosion. 400 million years ago plants sprouted. 370 million years ago land animals emerged. 230 million years ago dinosaurs appeared (and disappeared 65 million years ago). 200,000 years ago hominids arose. Every human being carries 60 new mutations out of 6 billion cells. Yes, evolution through natural selection by random mutation is a reasonable hypothesis, says F Collins, father of the human genome project, and, strikingly, a person of faith.

If I were the chaplain of a small private school in New England I might have my fellowship group read this winter F Collins, *the Language of God*. He can teach us to reason together.

It is tempting to disjoin learning and vital piety, but it is not loving to disjoin learning and vital piety. They go together. The God of Creation is the very God of Redemption. Their disjunction may help us cling for a while to a kind of faux certainty. But their conjunction is the confidence born of obedience. Falsehood has no defense and truth needs none.

4. Existence

You love experience. The gift of experience in faith is the heart of your love of Christ. You love Christ. Like Howard Thurman loved the mystical ranges of experience, you do too. Isaiah, in looking forward, can sing of the joy of harvest. We know joy. Joy seizes us. Joy grasps us when we are busy grasping at other things. You love what we are given morning and evening.

You love experience more than enough to examine your experience, to think about and think through what you have seen and done.

But beloved, a simple or general appeal to the love of experience, in our time, in 2008, is not appealing or loving. It is not experience, but our very existence which lies under the shadow of global violence. To have any future worthy of the name we shall need to foreswear preemptive violence. How the stealthy entry of such a manner of behavior could enter our civil discourse without voluminous debate and vehement challenge is a measure of our longing for false certainties. Our existence itself is on the line in discussions or lack of discussions about violent action that is preemptive, unilateral, imperial, and reckless. One thinks of Lincoln saying of slavery, 'those who support it might want to try it for themselves'. Not one of us wants to be the victim of preemptive violence. We may argue about the need for response, and even for the need of some kinds of anticipatory defense. But preemption? It will occlude existence itself.

If I were gathering a book club in downtown Boston to read this winter I would select the articles and books of Andrew Bacevich. Our future lies on the narrower path of responsive, communal, sacrificial, prudent behavior and requires of us, in Bacevich's hero Neibuhr's phrase, 'a spiritual discipline against resentment'.

There are indeed theological temptations in the unbalanced love of Scripture, tradition, reason or experience. As we come soon to Lent let us face them down. Let us face them down together. Let us do so by lifting our voices to admit errancy, affirm equality, explore evolution, and admire existence. The measure of preaching today in the tradition of a responsible Christian liberalism is found in our willingness to address errancy, equality, evolution and existence.

Coda

- 1. God is love.*
- 2. Love is both mercy and justice, both compassion and holiness.*

3. *Compassion is more important than holiness.*
4. *God loves the world (not just the church).*
5. *The church lives in the culture. The church lives **in** the culture to transform it. (Not above it to disdain it, not below it to obey it, not behind it to mimic it, not before it hector it).*
6. *The church is the Body of Christ.*
7. *Christ is alive. Wherever there is way, truth, life...*
8. *Life is sacred.*
9. *Life is a sacred journey to freedom.*
10. *The Bible is freedom's book.*
11. *The Bible is **a** source, not **the** source, of truth*
12. *The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*
13. *War is hell.*
14. *Peace is heaven. Jesus is the prince of Peace.*
15. *Gay people are people.*
16. *Women's bodies are **women's** bodies.*
17. *Women and men need each other.*
18. *There is a self correcting spirit of truth loose in the universe.*
19. *The founder of Methodism is John Wesley (not John Calvin).*
20. *The ministers of the conference are the conference. Period.*
21. *Ministry is preaching.*
22. *The fun of faith is in tithing and inviting. 'Remember the poor.'*
23. *Tithing is required. It is core, not elective.*
24. *Death is the last enemy. As Forest Gump said, atop his beloved's grave, 'My momma told me that 'death is a part of life'. But I wish it weren't'.*
25. *God's love outlasts death.*

After Twenty Years

Galatians 5:1, May 1, 2030
Robert A Hill

Looking back over the last twenty years of ministry, it is heartwarming to feel the new freedom that is pulsing through the body of Northeastern United Methodism. By God's grace, our churches and leaders have recovered our joy in faith and our confidence in Christ.

Since the turn of the millenium, we have walked together toward our own "North Star", Jesus Christ, who sets us free. Like Harriet Tubman and others who hiked the underground railroad, walking north, at night, toward freedom ("following the drinking gourd"), we too have kept our eyes lifted due north, walking toward Christ. We remember that "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom". It has been quite a journey, this night march, for twenty years, due north toward freedom. But look at the ground we have covered! Jesus is our saving, freeing "North Star".

As the century ended, women were finding full voice and place in our pulpits and pews, on the way "north". Remember Cleveland in '00? We found the freedom, there, to agree to disagree (agreeably!) about homosexuality, on the way north. Then over a decade we loosened the shackles of excessive, outdated apportioned overhead, and so freed our churches to run again, and move again, and grow again, headed due north. That combined growth in body and frugality of budget opened up the space we needed, in the conferences, to do the one thing needful—to develop leadership. We invested in preventive and physical health care for our leaders. Why, I was trying to explain to a new young DS last week that there was a time when we didn't even have dental care for clergy—hard to believe isn't it! We focused on continuous education, for lay leadership. We improved our remuneration and housing for clergy. A sense of self-respect returned, and helped us restore our noble preaching tradition, so hobbled for so long. Today in our pulpits, there is weekly fire and consistent excellence, and dependable depth, as our preachers point to the "North Star" of freedom. Through the long night trek since 2000, we learned again that the Bible is, first, a book about freedom, that is to be read and interpreted, first, with "the glorious liberty of the children of God". The Bible is freedom's book, the pulpit is freedom's voice, the connection is freedom's defense. We remembered that, as we walked north.

Yes, I know, we suffered, too. At least in the short run. It cost us to speak of a straight moral life, in a crooked world, especially when we emphasized

tithing and hospitality. It cost us to champion children—expensive, expensive. It cost us to make space for gays. I particularly recall the courage of those moderate and conservative men who found a way, back then, in conscience to accept what in conscience they could not easily recommend. It cost us to temper our freedom to abort with a responsible regard for potential life at 23 weeks. I particularly recall the courage of those moderate and liberal women, back then, who helped us learn from our experience. Yes, it hurt us to continue to fund clergy health care and to hold onto a guaranteed appointment, through all those rebuilding years. And it hurt us to keep churches open, to stay present, with the poor—in the mountains and downtown. It hurt to walk into the open space, the northern exposure, of freedom. It hurt us to agree to disagree, when some wanted a killing frost to fall on difference. But “suffering produces endurance and endurance character.” We got by, and came through, and walked due north. Thank God for Jesus Christ, our North Star!

Last night, in a clear spring sky, after reading again from Kasemann’s old book, **Jesus Means Freedom**, I gazed at Polaris. I thought about those heroes of liberty who had endured their own northern exposure. Jesus in Galilee. Paul in Galatia. Augustine in Hippo. John of the Cross in Segovia. Luther in Wittenberg. Wesley in Bristol. Frederick Douglass in Rochester. John Brown in North Elba. Handsome Lake in Geneva. Susan B Anthony in Seneca Falls. John Humphrey Noyes in Oneida. Mother Ann Lee in New Lebanon. And then faces of colleagues in the ministry came to mind. Next month I retire, and with the doctor’s last not so cheery diagnosis, this will probably be both my last active and last earthly annual conference at which to preside. I leave happy. I give thanks that in the new millenium, over twenty years, we have walked due north. We have followed the North Star, Jesus Christ, and we have joy and confidence in ministry, hearts again strangely warmed beneath the night sky: “Warmth! Warmth! Warmth! We are dying of cold, not of darkness. It is not the night that kills, but the frost.” (Unamuno).