

Proceedings of the 2000 General Conference of The United Methodist Church

“We Who Are Many . . . Are One Body”

Communion Meditation

by Bishop Robert C. Morgan

Mark 5:1-20

[The beginning of this address is in audio on the audio tape.]

[The demoniac is] barely a human being. He is exiled to the graveyard, to the place where only silence and the dead reside. How many people is he? How many voices come from him? He is many, so very many, that he seems a monster who can not be understood or cared for by other people. For Jesus sees this man as we do, bruised and tattered, and twisted. Jesus hears the voices of the legion, but Jesus also sees something else. For when Jesus gazes upon him, he sees what no one else can see. He sees the one loved and blessed child of God whom this poor man once had been. Jesus sees Legion, not as he is, but as he can be again, whole and restored to life. Jesus sees him as God has created him, before the demons had come. So after Jesus had instructed the demons to come out of him, he asked the man his name, gave him a chance to speak, to give the name by which he is known. But the response comes from even more demons: “We are called Legion,” they cried, “for we are many in this one man.”

Well, is it possible to see our selves in this gospel account, dear friends, as a people, as a General Conference, as a church? Here we gather at this General Conference to discuss, to debate, to share, and—yes—to struggle, of ten with each other, we who are many. Now when the world watches us—and be sure, the world watches us—do we appear as Christ sees us, whole and blessed? When the world listens to us, do our voices sound as Christ would hear us? Do our words seem faithful and committed to him, loving and supportive of one another? Are we the one, the loved body of Christ our Lord? Or do we appear as the demoniac in the graveyard, talking inces-

santly, filled with a thousand conflicting voices, filled with anger, filled with rage?

Well, there’s a hopeful promise for us in this gospel lesson. When we find ourselves trapped, as was this man, Jesus stands among the tomb stones. Where we’re hiding, bruised and shaken, he hears us as we raise our many voices to each other. He is with us in this place and will hear our every word. Let us invite him, now, to touch us so our exile among the dead can be ended. When Christ touched the man who was Legion, he was restored, and his many voices were healed and harmonized into a beautiful voice with only one word to share. The Savior tells a man, now healed, “Go back and tell your friends of what the Lord has done for you and what mercy has been shown you.” Once possessed of a thousand voices, now a single messenger remains: Tell the world what God has done for you and what mercy has been shown you.

As we gather for the General Conference, we’ll come to the Table of the Lord and we will celebrate Eucharist to remind ourselves—no, more than that—to claim our identity. The theme of our conference is “We who are many are one body” in Christ. Do we need to remind our selves that we are many? Did you see that opening procession? We come from all over the world! We speak multiple languages. We differ in theological opinions. And we represent different cultures. We who are gathered here are many, but we’re gathered here as one body. This is Christ’s vision for us. Don’t forget it. For the Christian family, unity is both a gift given and an ideal we seek. Diversity is a gift of God as well, not to be managed, manipulated, but to claim.

Early in the epistle to the Ephesians, Paul makes clear the source of our unity. He

sounds the primary evangelical protestant core doctrine of justification by grace through faith. The gentle readers, the first readers of the epistle, receive Paul’s words with great joy. The way is now open for all. Those who were far off and those who are near have been reconciled, brought into one body by the cross. All now have access by the Spirit to the Father. See, unity is a gift to those who have been reconciled to God through Christ. Dear friends, Christ is our peace. Our unity is a gift but is also a promise to be claimed.

Oh, what a challenge! What a challenge as we come together! Some believe our unity appears to be fragile, but not because his gift is not complete and to tally sufficient. We must claim it and live in it. But as Jesus looked past the demons, he saw a person, whole and healthy. And he looks at us, and we can look at each other and see each other for who we are. We can look past all divisions to see a brother’s face, a sister’s face, even the face of our beloved, the face of Jesus Christ. Oh, all of us gathered in this place are precious to him. Christ would not stifle any one’s voice, for through our voices comes the Spirit. We would hear everyone’s voice in this body who, in conviction and faith, offers an opinion or a plea before this conference.

Now am I talking about unity at any cost? Well, we know this: Christ paid our cost, and there is never a time for drawing a line in the sand. We must remember that if Jesus drew in the sand, it would not be a line, but it’d be a circle; it would be a circle. Friends, the crucified Christ paid the highest cost to draw a circle around all of us.

In June, 1998, an article about one of our Kentucky Methodist congregations appeared on the front page of the *Wall Street*

Journal. It was about a church, Bryantsville, a small rural church just south of Louisville. They had dug deep into their pockets to buy a 93-year-old farmhouse to be used as a parsonage. But buried deep into the fine print of the deed—and unknown to the church before the purchase—was a valuable commodity, a permit to grow 1,850 pounds of burley tobacco. Well, this meant a generous financial dividend for the church, and what began with excitement grew into a painful dispute over emphysema, and cancer, and the responsibilities of churchgoing Christians regarding tobacco. Well, in Bryantsville, the debate was primarily between a majority of the congregation and just one family. Both groups were devoted to their church, and both [were] profoundly opposed to the other's position.

The young student pastor, James Williams, student at Asbury, along with the vast majority of the congregation, never doubted what the church should do. They said, "We just can not be in the business of raising a crop that is harmful to people's health." Well, Grover Drew, a wonderful man in the church, a member of the church all of his life—and a tobacco farmer himself—bristled at the very idea that the church would not rent or sell their tobacco allotment, and his position was, "We will rent or sell the allotment or I'll look for me another church."

Well, for many in the church, Mr. Drew was drawing that line in the sand. An administrative board meeting was called, and they decided to pray over the issue and study the Social Principles to discern God's will, and after the study and many long discussions and prayers, the church members finally reached the conclusion that they would rather—they would not sell and they would not rent the allotment. They determined that the church would not profit from this tobacco allotment.

Well, Mr. Drew and his wife were the only ones who voted against it. The young pastor and the congregation were very anxious. They were worried whether or not Mr. Drew would return. Well, their anxieties were sort of relieved the following Sunday morning when Grover and his wife pulled up in the church yard in his pickup truck. He seemed to be in a good mood. James said that Mr. Drew never said a whole lot. He was always cheerful and smiling and supportive, and each week, the only words he ever heard him say, he would walk up to him and shake his hand and say to him something like this: "That was a mighty fine sermon, Brother Jim, and I do hope you have a good week." But someone said to him as he got out of his pickup truck in the parking lot, "We were afraid that you'd be

mad and you would not come back to the church." And Grover quickly responded, "Shucks, I'm not goin' to let a little tobacco come between me and the people I care about."

Well, when the worship service was concluded and people gathered on the church steps, Grover came up to the young preacher, smiled, and extended his hand, and said, "That sure was a mighty fine sermon, Brother Jim," and the people relaxed because they knew all was well with Grover.

At some point, we need to understand that living together in the bond of love is God's will for us. Unity's a precious thing. In fact, unity is the gift that is ours, through our salvation and Baptism. It is our unity in Christ that is the miracle that makes us strong! Without it, we will have lost each other, and we should not be willing to lose one. The question might very well be: Can we have unity without uniformity? Well, once Christ's saving hand has touched us, and once our conversations are over and the Holy Spirit has led us—once his commandment to go out into all the world has sent us from here—our mission beyond these walls is sacred. We are to spare the world our differences. Once our struggles to decide are over, once our decisions have been made, once each voice has been heard and weighed, we must allow the hand of Jesus to touch us, heal our hurts, and give us one voice with which we are then sent out to tell the world one thing—one thing, one simple, holy thing—we're to tell the world what God has done for us and what mercy has been shown us in Christ Jesus.

Oh, the blood of Jesus Christ brought us who were once far off near. Nothing else can give life to a desperate world. Nothing else can heal our world but the mercy of God. Not our doing, not our debating, not our striving. To the world that watches us, listens to us, strains to understand us, let us only speak of this one thing: speak of the mercy Christ has shown us, tell and demonstrate that we who were once aliens and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope without God in the world, now in Jesus Christ have been redeemed and made one body with one mission—to share his saving grace with all the world and make of the whole world disciples in Jesus Christ.

Hear me friends, this must be our primary focus for the General Conference, and it is this mission and the strategies for fulfilling this mission that should require the overwhelming amount of our attention during these days.

Elizabeth (*unintelligible middle name*) Pitts, a member of the Duke University faculty, has given me the permission to tell you about her older sister, Mary Blair. Beth claims that it was her sister who taught her what it meant to be loved of God. Mary Blair is mentally retarded and has lived in a special home for the mentally retarded for over 40 years. Beth tells how her brother, Carl, who had not seen Mary Blair in over 25 years, decided that he would overcome his distaste for hospitals and travel down to Gracewood near Augusta, Georgia, to visit her. Carl was about two years older than Mary Blair, and he had not seen her since she was 11 and he was 13, and now they were both in their early forties. You need to know that Mary Blair does not have language, and her mind is frozen at about 18 months. Her life consisted of enjoying music and food and sunlight on a swingset. So Carl had no idea whether Mary Blair would even recognize him when he came to see her after so many years apart. Beth said that when Carl and the parents were there in the hospital unit, they sat around and talked together while Mary Blair, as always, watched and rocked and listened from the bed. But all the time, she was staring at Carl, that forty-something-looking man with graying hair and widening midsection and a beard on his face. And she stared at him for a long time. Then she suddenly did something extraordinary. She got out of her bed and went over to him, she grabbed him by the wrist and started dragging him toward the door and down the hall. And Beth says that she can be very persuasive when she wants something. So he went with her, and the mother and the father followed as she led him into the patient lounge near the nurse's station, which was really little more than a glass booth with a television set and a long, vinyl sofa. Once in the room, Mary Blair sat on the sofa in front of the TV, and she pulled Carl down next to her so that they were sitting side by side. In that action, Mary Blair had said every thing she needed to say. She had made it abundantly clear to all of them that she had recognized Carl and she knew who he really was. He was n't just some forty-something-year-old man, some strange, gray-haired person. She had seen past the weight and the tracks of life upon his face. She saw the boy she had once sat next to on a sofa back at home. Here was a little boy with whom she had watched TV so long ago in childhood. She knew that the man who came to see her was once, and was still, the boy who was her brother.

This is how Jesus saw Legion—not as he was, but as he could be again, whole and restored to life. Jesus saw him as God created

him, before the demons had come. Jesus looked past the actions of a shattered man to see him as he once was and could be again. And that happens to us, over and over again, as we come to the Table of the Lord. Here in this place we will hear God's message of grace and mercy. Jesus will take us by the hand in this place, at this moment, and lead us to the table, and we will remember who we really are and who our sisters and brothers are. This is the table he has prepared with his own bleeding hands, and we are his guests. This is the table he has set to bring us home to one another, to make us whole and set us free. But be ware, hear me, be ware all who come here, look around at those who are with you as you come. No body deserves it, but all of us are here. Are we not all here? The one with whom you agree and the one with whom you disagree. There are those whose faces are different color, the ones who hear the gospel in different accents. We need each other to hear the fullness of the gospel.

Unity does not mean sameness. Whoever comes to the table of Christ must be reminded that we did not make up the guest list, because we're all a guest, adopted children. Every one must agree to be a sister or a brother to all others, because what we cele-

brate here is the only thing that gives us unity, and that is the shed blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and the reminder of his resurrection and living presence with us as his body, the church.

Barbara Brown Taylor has said that no matter how much we may mess things up, some things are going to keep turning out all right, because we are not in charge. Although to come to this table is to come confessing our sins and receiving Christ's forgiveness, an activity we're not in charge of. As Paul said once, we've come here—to this table, that is—once we have received his saving grace, we're all brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. Here, Legion will give way to Jesus, and we will arise and speak only of God's mercy and what great things have been done for us. Oh, if you would be healed, if you will be a source of healing for a broken world, if you will be a dynamic of healing as we move through these days of General Conference, come to the table. Here you will find bread for the wilderness and wine for the journey. Here the claim of Christ will be laid upon you again to be his body, to speak his Word, to be his presence of love and mercy in a world that never more desperately needed it.

Now hear the epistle, once more, just some brief verses. From the pen of Eugene Peterson, let me read this paraphrase.

In the light of all this—the fourth chapter of Ephesians—in the light of all this, here's what I want you to do. While I'm locked up here, a prisoner for the master, I want you to get out there and walk—better yet, run—on the road God called you to travel. I don't want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don't want anybody strolling off down some path that goes nowhere. And mark that you do this with humility and discipline; for not in fits and starts, but steadily pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert at noticing differences and quick at mending fences, you are all called to travel in the same road and in the same direction. So stay together, both outwardly and inwardly. You have one master, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all who rules over all, works through all, and is present in all. Every thing you are and think and do is permeated with one ness.

Oh, if we have heard these words so that they take root in our hearts and change the way we live our lives, then they will become for us and all who know us truly the words of the living God. Amen.

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May 2, 2000

BISHOP ROBERT C. MORGAN (Louisville): We're a little behind, but we're going to catch up if you'll take your seats. All right, if you'll come to order. It's been a wonderful, celebrative afternoon and we're now ready to do a little bit of business. Once again, the delegates would please take their places. When you are in your places, I'll call you to order and we'll begin. All right, if I might have your attention. By the grace of God, we're here and the General Conference 2000 of The United Methodist Church will come to order.

Let us pray.

(prayer)

Well, you have noticed that we are long halls. I feel that I'm sitting under a goalpost at this end and the people from the Holston conference, North Carolina conference, I know that you're back there. I know you're back there and Oklahoma, I know you're back there. And we got these wimps up here in the front row from Western Pennsylvania and Central New York, you know. If you'll start putting your tithes in like they do, back

in the back, we'll move you forward, and so on. Oh, it's a great . . . We come from all over this world to meet and what a delight it is. So we must move now to get organized. Now turn to Carolyn Marshall, the secretary of the General Conference to help us along.

CAROLYN MARSHALL: Bishop Morgan, one announcement needs to be made before we begin that part, and that is a request that all bishops and presidents of autonomous affiliated, autonomous concordat Methodist churches sitting as delegates come to the front of the stage on your left in order that you may be introduced quite soon.

BISHOP MORGAN: May I interrupt even here with that announcement to say that there was an omission in the memorial service and we failed to list Wilma Frank. There's always that, and I know you'll want to add that family to your prayers. Excuse me, Carolyn. I meant to do that first.

Roll Call Procedures

CAROLYN MARSHALL: As we begin the conference, we would like to have everyone know that the rolls will be taken

from the registrations which each of you have done; that Bishop Rader, who is Secretary of the Council of Bishops, will provide the roll call for the Council of Bishops; Sally AsKew that for the Judicial Council; Dave Lundquist, general secretary of the General Council on Ministries for general agencies; chairpersons of delegations and chairpersons of delegations of the affiliated autonomous and united churches for their delegations.

BISHOP MORGAN: All right, roll call has been cared for. Turn now to Bishop William Grove who is the ecumenical officer who represents us in the ecumenical community around the world of the Council to come and present the affiliated autonomous church representatives.

BISHOP WILLIAM B. GROVE (Retired): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We have seated in our conference and as part of our family for these two weeks, representatives, delegates from other Methodist churches throughout the world and we're happy to welcome them now. First, I would like to ask Bishop Elias Galvan and Bishop Joel Martinez to come forward, present to you