

Sermon by Bishop George W. Bashore,

Resident Bishop, Pittsburgh Area

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God is good—

All the time.

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That's why the psalmist who wrote the fifty-first psalm could pour out his soul, and that is precisely why we can approach God at any time.

I come at this particular time in the history of The United Methodist Church in confession with a heavy heart for our disunity and pain. And yet there is hope, for in confession there is, first, the mercy of God. At the beginning of that psalm the psalmist cries out, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy." The reality of God's steadfast love is more fundamental than the reality of human sinfulness.

First, we acknowledge the source of our salvation, the center of our life. The cry for mercy and for forgiveness comes only because of standing in the presence of this God of steadfast love and abundant mercy. An affirmation of God's presence and the divine nature of in-viting and welcoming love is the first step into grace.

Recently, I was given a plaque that is inscribed "Bidden or not bidden, God is present." I placed this in my study along with a branch of thorns from the Holy Land, reminding me that in the anguished cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", even in the midst of what ever throws me into an abyss of loneliness, God is present, caring, and calling.

Clinton McCann, who writes in the *The New Interpreter's Bible*, comments, "While sin is inevitable and pervasive in the human situation, it is not ultimately the determining reality." And what hope that brings to us while we grope our way toward faithfulness and toward unity! The cross is the determining reality. It is because of the cross that we know God as a pardoning God. How often have we sung as we have gathered at the Eucharist: "O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy on us, have mercy on us"? And in awe and in mystery, as we gather around the table, we celebrate God's presence and God's pardon. "The body of Christ, given for you. The blood of Christ, given for you." You know, it seems to me that the most joyful part and the central part of our liturgy is the assurance of pardon: "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven." Why is it that we don't shout then glory to God, "Hallelujah"? We can confess because we come before a pardoning God. And so, O merciful God, have mercy on us in The United Methodist Church.

There is such brokenness in the world and in the body of Christ. I can hardly believe at times when I look inside myself that I find that I am more concerned about differences in the church than I

am about the fractured world in which we live. Where are my energies spent, where Jesus spent his time—healing, blessing, pointing the way to God's powerful love and transforming love? Hardly. O God, I'm guilty of an insidious difference to God's many, God's many in the world who are hurting and many who don't look like me or who place demands on me which I wish would go away. I have this comfort with the many, and I waiver so often between responses of cowardly silence and arrogant rhetoric. When difference overwhelms me, I find myself at times not talking. I listen to my thoughts, my rationale. And then, there are other times when I talking having not listened. I don't listen because I don't want to hear. I pre-judge and I act as if I have nothing to learn from my brother or sister. I have to confess that at times I've become more enamored by my enlightenment training, which created a critical spirit, making me more analytical and skeptical than welcoming and adventuresome, expecting some new beautiful serendipity in your world, O God, that will bring a wonderful addition to my life.

So create in me, O God, a clean heart, washed and ready for your salvation. Renew a right mind in me so that I can welcome you in others. Let me behold the sacramental moment of your presence in the other. And let me hear the hymn of gladness, yea, even the birth pang song of something new being born in my heart and my being because you are there.

Help me to participate in the twenty-first-century drama of the body being broken and the blood being shed in the cries of the silent, gasping for breath and life. O God, you are in all of the yearning cries and even in the angry shouts calling for deliverance from addiction and from oppression. You, whose nature is to create and recreate and restore and rehabilitate, restore unto us, O God, the joy of your salvation.

For too long, in many conversations, it seems to me, in The United Methodist Church we have been hanging our harps on the willows and acting as if we can not sing the songs of Zion. Eugene Peterson, in his moving rendition of the fifty-first psalm, writes, "Tune me into foot-tapping songs. Set these once broken bones to dancing. God, make a fresh start in me and shape a Genesis weep from the chaos in my life." Let us pray together that God will shape a Genesis weep during this time in Cleveland for The United Methodist Church.

In the message in that vision of the risen Christ to the church at Ephesus, there appears there to be a dynamic kind of dialectic between exclusive commitment to God's values and inclusive love. That's our dilemma in the church today. How do we discover the right balance? On the one hand, the church at Ephesus is affirmed for the strength of conviction. "I know that you can not tolerate evil doers." On the other hand, the church is admonished, "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love that you had at first;" that is, the love of Christ and the love for God's children in

the world. On the one hand, there is judgment and a call to repentance. “Remember then from what you have fallen and repent.” On the other hand, keep your faithful commitment. “I know that you have not grown weary.” Is it possible for us to move toward a Hegelian dialectic in which the thesis and the antithesis come to some resolution in a synthesis? Do both parts of that dialectic contain truths? And what are the truths that are contained therein? Or is there a more transcendent truth which can bring about the unity of the body of Christ? We need to be open to this quest to rediscover the first love that can pull us together. The rallying cry of hope for the German Confessing Christians in 1934 is in the First Article of the Barman Declaration. “Jesus Christ is the one word we have to hear and obey both in life and in death.” One of the growing barriers to this central truth, and also, I believe, to the foundation for evangelism in today’s society, is the elevation of tolerance, especially in the American society, to the peak of important values. Can we now speak about the uniqueness and the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ? For some reason, our culture has tried to take away the real importance of tolerance by giving it a definition which implies that there is no room for beliefs and convictions and understanding of truth. But tolerance is the acknowledgment of other viewpoints and the right of persons to hold alternative values. However, tolerance does not mean the acceptance of those views. And in deed, tolerance is important, but it never means that we give up on our own convictions. *Agape*, loving concern for God’s children in the world, transcends and also deepens the meaning of tolerance. To be sure, we dare not denigrate the value of another person. We are always called to lift up those around us. And yet, our deepest understanding of God’s grace is in Jesus Christ. And our experience of abundant life now and of eternal life—that lies in the reality of Jesus Christ. And what about, then, the abundant life and the eternal destiny of our neighbors in the world? John Wesley has reminded us, “You have nothing to do but save souls. Therefore, spend and be spent in this task. Bring sinners to repentance. Do all in your power to build them up in holiness.” Again and again, the circuit riders recorded in their journals, “One more soul saved.” We dare not allow any limiting definitions of tolerance to sandpaper the cutting edge of evangelism.

We want each person in this world in which we live to know the joy of salvation. One of the premier artists in Pittsburgh is Linda Barnicott. She happens to be the wife of one of our very young, talented pastors. In our living room is an original painting by Linda. It’s entitled, “Let the Children Come to Me.” It’s a Nativity scene. Mary and Joseph are standing along side and watching, and there is a young girl in a Native-American costume who is sitting there cradling and holding the baby Jesus. Waiting in turn, there is another child in African garb and another one with an Indian sari, and all of the races and the nations of the world are waiting in turn. They are coming in order to hold and to be held and to embrace the joy of salvation. There’s a long line of persons from all races and nations, the children coming. For they have heard the angel voice, “For unto you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” They look adoringly and lovingly at this child, the child for all of God’s children. And just as the shepherds did, can you not see them and picture these children running back and excitedly proclaiming and praising God that they have seen the joy of salvation? So we, too, I believe, if we are going to move toward any sense of unity, we need

to share our stories of our experience of the joy of God’s salvation with one another.

I’m amazed constantly--aren’t you?--that in the midst of trial and oppression and deprivation, that United Methodists on the African continent and in other places in the world and in the midst of some of our cities, that they are still gathering to sing and to dance the songs of Zion. For way down in their hearts there is that which can not be taken away. For it’s God who has placed the joy of salvation there. How terrible it must be if you can’t sing the songs of joy. And our responsibility is not only to open our selves to receive the joy of salvation, but it is to share so that others can join in the song. We give a prayer for those who don’t have one. We love those whom no body loves. We sing for those who can’t sing. Again, Eugene Peterson, Matthew 5:13: “Jesus said, ‘Let me tell you why you’re here. You are here to be salt seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. And if you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness?’” All persons are within God’s invitation to new life and eternal life. Children in Africa dying from AIDS and violence and starvation. Children in the Orient plucked away from their families and homes and given to prostitution and pornographers and pedophiles, so that people can gain in the Western nations. Persons of all ages in Cleveland and Berlin and Manila and cities and rural valleys throughout the world victimized by drugs. These are the many; the many dying, the many crying, yearning for the day of salvation. These are those without hope because their beliefs are empty. And then there are the spiritually empty who have their barns and their treasuries full. In the United States our streets are filled with violence, and the many, the children of God, are being scared and scarred and killed, while we bow down before the demonic forces of the National Rifle Association.

Lift up the cup of salvation with governmental decision-makers around the world until the peaceable and oppressionless reign of God is fulfilled, until we all can sit at the banquet table with all races, and churches are free of racism, and weapons of destruction are eliminated, and we all wash each others’ feet.

It will only happen when we remember our first love. “At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light, and the burden of my heart rolled away. It was there, by faith, I received my sight...” and now I know something about the joy of salvation. So we need to share the story. In our quest for unity, we must remember that every one has a name, and each name has a face and a heart. Any time that we move from personal names to abstract labels, we are diminished in our capacity to deal with what is best and at the center of life. Every time we go along with this movement from the personal to the impersonal, from the immediate to the remote, from the concrete to the abstract, we are diminished, and we are less. I have a name, George, and I have a heart. Several years ago, a reporter from the *Boston Globe* literally ran after me during a break of a very controversial annual conference session. He said, “I have followed you. I followed your positions for several years, and I do not understand you. You have taken rather liberal positions regarding economic justice and welfare and health care and gun control, but you take conservative stands on the issues of human sexuality. You have championed liberal causes of affirmative action and racial justice and ecological concerns, but you seem to be conservative in theo-

logical matters and talk about the particularity of Jesus Christ and the need for evangelism in the world. Who are you?"

Now I was impressed with those perceptions, but I was distressed that he wished to make me a plaster of Paris mold. Know my heart, and in our quest for unity, we need to know each other's hearts. We need to discern the movement of God's Spirit through Scripture and through tradition and through experience and through reason together, but we're talking from heart to heart. I'm thankful that the good shepherd calls each of us by name. And when there are differences, we need to learn each other's faith journey with Christ and share it in the Council of Bishops. We are not all cut out of the same mold. Yet I want to tell you that even in the midst of differences, I have listened tently to my sisters and my brothers share their wonderful insights into biblical revelation. And I have been moved deeply by their stories of their faith journeys and their love for the first love—their journeys in Christ. And I know that somehow, when heart meets heart in Christ, there will be given to be an opening to the way and the truth and the life. And whether I change or you change or we both change or neither one changes, we need to know each other's hearts, and not make assumptions or allegations. Jesus knows our hearts and keeps on saying, again and again, "Here I am for you!" Can we not do the same? "Here I am with you, and for you." How else will the world be given to know the joy of salvation unless they see it in the church? Finally, pastors, do you know the names of those in your congregation? Do you know their hearts? Do you pray for their hearts with them? A wonderful laity address when we talk about partnering. And I want to say to lay people and the clergy, one of the great dilemmas is that within our own congregations we don't hold one another and embrace one another in God's love, knowing our hurts and our aspirations and our testimonies and our mission. Together, do we sing and speak about the joy of God's

salvation with one another? Do we talk with love: How is it with your soul's journey with Christ? Do we act out "here I am for you, here I am with you"? In our difference, can we be given to call each other by name and know each other's hearts? In the move to our first love, we always must take along some body with us on that journey. Some have said the time for dialogue is past. Not so! It is never past, when the finite mind is wrestling to discern the infinite and until every thing is brought into a unity in Jesus Christ.

So in addition, then, I want to suggest, in addition to sharing verbally, we need to be together in mission in the world, side by side. Remember that song? "We will work with each other, we will work side by side, and together we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride, and then they'll know we are Christians by our love." As we face common evils together, side by side, even willing to put aside our differences so that we might fight against those that we know in common are evil and contrary to God's values. What face do we show to the world? Our name is Christian: Christ ones.

So friends, let us keep on singing the joy of salvation. Let us keep on praying, "Have mercy, O merciful God, upon us and upon your world." Let us keep on serving side by side, and let us keep on talking heart with heart, and then, perhaps, we'll get some of the spirit of our choir. Do you remember old Avery and Marsh, long time ago, some of you? I want to join the great parade. I want to join the happy caravan of God's people, God's own people marching round the world. There are people of all times and places, there are people of all nations and races—a singing, swinging procession. And here am I. Here am I. O God, restore unto us the joy of your salvation.