

DO THE RIGHT THING!
Micah 6:6-8; Luke 10:25-28

I. GREETINGS

- A. Bishop Mary Ann and Jeff (my long-time colleagues and friends over the years), colleague Bishops, honored guests, lay and clergy members, visitors, guests and friends of the Cal-Pac Annual Conference, sisters and brothers, greetings in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ. Bishop Mary Ann, thank you for extending to Marilyn and me the wonderful privilege to be with you and Jeff as you preside over your final annual conference session prior to your retirement. This being my home conference, it's been such a joy and privilege to renew friendships and relationships from many years ago.
- B. Reminiscing a bit, it all started for me in 1961. Having been ordained Deacon one year earlier in the Louisiana Annual Conference of the Central Jurisdiction (where I met my bride-to-be, Ethelou, who sang *How Beautiful are the Feet* for my service of ordination), immediately following the conference, she moved to Los Angeles, was employed with the Boy Scouts of America, and joined Calvary Methodist Church of Los Angeles, where Cornish Rogers was pastor. Elsie Rogers, the spouse of Cornish, and Ethelou knew each other in New Orleans.
- C. To make a long story short, Ethelou and I remained in contact. That December, she invited me to fly from seminary in Atlanta, GA to Los Angeles to escort her to a Christmas Party. My seminarians gave me a hard time, suggesting how foolish it was to do such a thing. Well, I flew to Los Angeles, took Ethelou to the Christmas Party, and before flying back to Atlanta, we were engaged. We were married June 3, 1961, at Books Memorial Methodist Church, New Orleans (the site of the Louisiana Conference where we met in 1960). Following a short honeymoon, we returned to Los Angeles where she was employed.
- D. With just one semester before completing seminary, I found a summer job, which I hated. On the day I decided to quit the job, I called Ethelou to tell her what I had done. She said, "that's alright, you can get another job. By the way, I received a call from Cornish Rogers indicating some district superintendents wanted to talk to me about an appointment." My response was, "I'm not related to this conference. I don't know why they want to talk to me." We came to Redlands; I met with Doug Walters, the father of George Walters, and Russell Clay. After a brief conversation, they asked, "where is my wife." I told them she was waiting for me in the car. "Then, bring her so we can meet her." After seeing her, they said, "you should have brought her with you, and our decision would have been much easier." Immediately, I was asked to serve as Interim at St. John's Methodist Church, Los Angeles (Watts) for two months. In December

1961, I was offered the position of Associate at Wesley Methodist Church, Los Angeles, and the rest is history. Bishop Kennedy transferred me to the conference at the June 1962 session. I was ordained Elder in June 1963.

- E. I shall always be indebted to this conference. You accepted me fresh out of seminary; offered me various opportunities and challenges (associate pastor, Wesley; pastor, Hamilton; conference staff; superintendent for the Long Beach District) which molded and shaped me for future ministry in the larger church. Thank you for welcoming me, believing in me, and preparing me for making a difference in this church and in the larger ecumenical and interfaith religious community around the world.
- F. Gazing upon this 2012 class of ordinands, I'm reminded that it was 49 years ago that my class of 21 elders sat where you sit. We anxiously awaited our turns to march across this stage, to kneel at this chancel rail, and to have hands placed on our heads. The time and the place were different. We were all male, with four persons of color. This bishop and the district superintendents were Caucasian. The Bishop was Gerald Hamilton Kennedy, and my DS was The Rev. Richard (Dick) Wilson Cain. But, just as you will do tonight, we took our vows to God and to this Church and went forth in faith from this place to do ministry in this church and in society in varied and sundry ways. Several members from my class have gone home to glory. Others are retired and living in various locations, some within the bounds of this conference.
- G. Reflecting on that experience, we didn't know what awaited us in the years ahead. Yet, we went forth in faith and made our witness. And for most of us, we were enabled and empowered by God and the Church to do far more than we could have imagined. And by God's grace, we impacted the lives of many people around the world. Thus, I'm honored to be granted the privilege to represent my class and to preach the ordination/commissioning sermon for you 49 years later.

LET US PRAY: Loving, Creating, and Sustaining God, pour out your Spirit and blessing on all gathered here this night, especially upon these who are responding to your Call upon their lives. Allow me to be the vessel through which your message of grace, hope, love and challenge is proclaimed for this occasion. Dear God, we acknowledge that all we do here this night is not about us, but about you. Thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, who took the form of human flesh, and lived among us full of grace and truth. Thank you for his life, death, and resurrection, which opened up to us the marvelous privilege of living in relationship with you and with each other, on this earth and into eternity. Inspire us to renew our commitment to you and this church for continuing ministry

and witness in the days ahead. This we pray in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, our Risen Savior and Redeemer. Amen!

- H. Using the passages of Scriptures read from Micah 6:6-8 and Luke 10:25-28, I invite you to reflect with me on the theme: DO THE RIGHT THING!

II. A LOOK AT SCRIPTURES

- A. According to Marvin Chaney of San Francisco Theological Seminary, Micah 6:6-8 is the most familiar passage from the Book of Micah. It is thought to be a brief summary of the theological under-pinning for specific prophetic issues. He acknowledges that God is not the problem. "Rather, God seeks from human beings only what is 'good' for all concerned (6:8) – to effect justice, to love covenant loyalty, and a making humble to walk with your God."
- B. I like Chaney's translation of the NRSV of Micah 6:8 – "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Listen again to Chaney's rendition: "to effect justice, to love covenant loyalty, and a making humble to walk with your God."
- C. My sisters and brothers, you will want to let this passage of Scripture become a living expression of your total being as you live with and engage the people you are being called and sent to serve, whether in a congregation, in a specific community, or in the larger society.
- D. Luke 10:25-28 is another familiar passage of Scripture. Listen, again, to these words: "Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this and you will live.'"
- E. I've chosen to use this passage from Luke because of its historic significance in the development of our United Methodist way of doing theology. In addition to being central of our Christian faith, John Wesley took this passage and made it the focal point of his Doctrine of Christian Perfection. Throughout his ministry, Wesley preached this doctrine continuously. For me, I understand Wesley to be suggesting that we may not achieve Christian Perfection in this life. Yet, our goal in life should be to become perfect in becoming perfect.

- F. But Wesley went a step further. He sought to make his call to faithfulness simple and practical. He reduced his faithful witness to three simple rules – “do no harm; do good; stay in love with God.” Bishop Reuben Job has written a small book entitled *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*. If you don’t have a copy, it’s a must-buy for your library. Three simple rules – “do no harm; do good; stay in love with God.” These words are easy to remember, but ever so challenging to do.

III. THE OCCASION

- A. We gather here tonight to affirm and celebrate the fact that you have accepted the Call of God upon your lives. In this act of worship, we confirm that you have, indeed, been called by God, and are deemed worthy to be set apart for the ministry of oversight to congregations and other specialized ministries, within this annual conference or beyond, on behalf of The United Methodist Church around the world.
- B. This is, indeed, a sacred trust and responsibility. To the extent to which you are loyal and faithful to this sacred trust and responsibility, our church and the church universal will flourish. But, unfortunately, too many of our clergy are not living up to the expectations of what it means to be effective spiritual leaders in these times. Too many churches are declining, not for a lack of people in the community. Rather, congregations are declining because too many clergy lack the leadership skills to engage laity in the ministry of revitalizing congregations. As my spouse often says, “it is sheep who beget sheet, and not the shepherd.” By no means am I minimizing the importance and significance of effective clergy leadership. You can’t have inspired and enthusiastic members without effective clergy leadership. However, it is enthusiastic and inspired members who tell others about the joy they experience in the life of their churches. It is inspired and enthusiastic laity, who invite others from their walks of life to become members of their faith communities.
- C. On an occasion like this, you may not wish to hear such harsh reality. But, if I don’t share this candid assessment of current reality, I would fail you by not making clear what is expected of you. To be honest, too many clergy have developed bad habits. They have lost that sense of excitement and enthusiasm about ministry. So, they are unwilling to work, and to spend the necessary time and energy engaging laity in grasping a vision for ministry. And, they don’t spend adequate time honing their spiritual disciplines and preparing sermons and other acts of worship and programs that are relevant to the people they serve.

- D. My sisters and brothers, within our church, there are no bad congregations or ministries. Whether they are large, small, urban, rural, multicultural, multiracial, aged, young, or mixed, they are God's people in need of pastoral leadership. Now, it's possible for the bishop and the cabinet to make a bad appointment to a given ministry. But, wherever God's people reside, that's a good opportunity for ministry. God is already there in God's people waiting for clergy to join them in making a faithful witness to the gospel in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ.
- E. Years ago, when I served as an active bishop, one of my younger clergy came to see me. He wanted to know what he needed to do to become a bishop. I paused, and gave what I hope was good and wise counsel. I simply said, "I advise you to forget about trying to become a bishop. Rather, I advise you to focus your time and energy on being the best spiritual leader you can be where you are, and in future appointments. For you see, by the grace of God, it's the people you serve and work with who will let you know if you should consider being a bishop."
- F. I share this story to simply remind you, that your success or failure in ministry will be determined largely by how well you use your God-given talents and skills in the places you are appointed. Do you remember Jesus' parable of the talents? Check out Matthew 25:14-30. Do you remember the story of Nehemiah? He was successful in rebuilding the walls and the city of Jerusalem because he did four things: 1.) He prayed to God for a vision to guide his passion for his people; 2.) He selected from among his people a team of people to work with him in grasping the vision and accomplishing the mission; 3.) He was mindful of distractions, within and without, and strategized to neutralize their impact on the mission; and 4.) He and the people worked together, each doing his/her part.

IV. THE CHALLENGE

- A. In just a few minutes, each of you will come to this stage, kneel at the chancel rail, have hands laid on your heads by your bishop and others, and take your vows to be spiritual leaders of The United Methodist Church and the Church Universal. Indeed, this is an awesome responsibility and challenge.
- B. You are inheriting a legacy that links the first General Conference in 1784 when Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury were elected bishops. They, and bishops to follow, sent out pastors to join with laity in spreading scriptural holiness throughout the land. Since then, our church has gone through many peaks and valleys. At the turn of the 20th century, we were flourishing. It was said that we had more churches than there are post offices.

- C. But becoming deeply embedded in the culture, our church experienced a valley in 1844, when we split over the issue of slavery. In the merger of 1939, we experienced a valley with the creation of the segregated Central Jurisdiction for “colored people.” Following the merger in 1968 that eliminated the Central Jurisdiction and set us on the path to racial inclusiveness, we experienced another valley in 1972 when the General Conference placed the “incompatibility with Christian teaching” language in our Social Principles regarding gay and lesbian people. In each of the successive General Conferences, efforts were made to remove that derogatory language. Rather than remove that language, more restrictive laws have been codified in our *Book of Discipline* prohibiting clergy from performing same-sex unions or marriages, and prohibiting the use of church facilities for such ministries. Forty years later at the 2012 General Conference, our efforts failed to open our church and all its ministries to all people, especially to GLBTQ people. Plus, our church in the US has experienced increasing membership across all five jurisdictions.
- D. I share this brief historical perspective as a reminder that you are not inheriting a vibrant and growing church. And, you are not inheriting a perfect church. Much has been said about what happened during the 2012 General Conference at Tampa. When the compromise restructure voted by the General Conference was declared unconstitutional and unsalvageable, I felt like standing and singing the Doxology.
- E. But for many, we were devastated when the General Conference, after 40 years of continuous struggle, failed to affirm GLBTQ people as full members of The United Methodist Church with all rights and privileges, including being ordained as clergy in our church. The sad commentary is that GLBTQ people in partnered relationships are currently serving as ordained and consecrated spiritual leaders at every level at our church, and that is known by my colleague bishops and many other laity and clergy across the church. Yet, partnered GLBTQ persons are forced to live in silence.
- F. This 40-year struggle isn’t the only reason for our membership decline. But, I feel certain that it is a contributing factor. Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world is the focus of our attention for the foreseeable future. But, I’m convinced we will not see any significant membership growth in our denomination until we stop the hypocrisy and do the right thing.
- G. On Friday, May 4, at General Conference, the Love Your Neighbor Coalition gathered in the Tabernacle to reflect on the failure of the General Conference to do what is right. I was one of several speakers. Listen to this excerpt from the statement I made:

“As I stand before you today, I declare that God has already settled this matter. All human beings are created in the image of God. There are no exceptions or exclusions. We belong to the family of God. At the same time, I declare to you that the derogatory language and restrictive laws in our *Book of Discipline* are immoral and unjust and no longer deserve our loyalty and obedience...

So, in light of actions taken at this General Conference, I believe the time has come to call for and invite others to join in what I am calling “An Act of Biblical Obedience” based on the twofold commandment of Jesus...

What does this mean? I call on the more than 1,100 clergy who have signed pledges to stand firm in their resolve to perform marriages between same-sex couples in the normal course of their pastoral duties, thus defying our church laws which prohibit them from doing so. Plus, I encourage you to invite your congregations to (join) you in your efforts to be faithful to the gospel by taking actions to support ...using local church facilities for such marriages.

Also, I call on bishops, district superintendents, boards of ordained ministry, and investigating committees to be pastoral (when) implementing complaints against clergy who perform same-sex marriages...”

- H. My sisters and brothers, I share this statement as a challenge to you, not just these ordinands, but to each of you, laity and clergy gathered here tonight. I challenge you to do the right thing. Stop implementing immoral and unjust laws against those who dare to “Do What is Right” by being in ministry to and with all persons, especially our GLBTQ sisters and brothers.

- I. In Tennessee, I worship at historic McKendree United Methodist Church in downtown Nashville. Formally a seat of powerful members who were proponents of segregation of the races, the congregation is being resurrected as a multicultural, multiracial, multi-economic status, younger, open, and growing community of faith. All is welcomed and they mean it. GLBTQ people know they are welcomed. Each Sunday when I’m present, Pastor Stephen Handy invites me to participate in celebrating Holy Communion. In fact, he has invited me to be Bishop in Presence in the congregation. Now, I don’t intend hanging out a shingle that reads: “I will marry GLBTQ people.” But, if in my normal relationships with that congregation I am invited to participate in or to conduct a marriage between same-sex couples, I plan to do it, because I intend to “Do The Right Thing.”

V. Conclusion

- A. Sisters and brothers in this 2012 Class of Ordinands, you are entering into the ordained ministry at a turbulent time in the life of our church and in society. God has called you and your church is sending you into ministry for such a time as this. History has shown that the church has made its most valiant witness in difficult times.

- B. In the name of Jesus Christ, I declare you to “Take Thou Authority”, and “Do The Right Thing.” And remember this: you are called by God; and you are confirmed and sent by your church. There will be times when you will be called and challenged to choose between God and your church, because your church does not always “Do The Right Thing.”

- C. It is my hope and prayer that you will be among the future spiritual leaders of this church who will have the courage to speak truth to your church and condemn it when necessary. But at the same time, I pray that you will be among those who will make the commitment to stay and work within your church to enable it to be what God requires of it. For you see, even our church can be saved if it confesses its sins before God and chooses to “Do The Right Thing.”

AMEN!

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Given by Bishop Melvin G. Talbert, retired, The United Methodist Church, on the occasion of the Service of Ordination at the Cal-Pac Annual Conference, University of Redlands Chapel, Redlands, CA, June 16, 2012, 7:30pm