

## **Together in One Place**

a sermon on Acts 2:1-21 and John 14:8-17 (25-27)

by Nancy Raca, May 15, 2016 (Pentecost), Covenant UMC

*Why did you come to church today?*

For me, well, obviously I *had* to be here today, but I am happy to be here and to be among you. I confess, though, that before I was a pastor, I was not always the most regular of attenders. In fact, in my 20s, I almost never went to church.

But today, for whatever reason, here we are: together in one place. Just as the disciples were, as we read in Acts: *When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place.*

What a blessing. What a gift. What an opportunity for the Spirit to move among us!

At Pentecost, we celebrate the arrival of the Holy Spirit in our midst. The promised Companion, or Helper, referenced in John 14, has been sent in the name of Christ to help us, to teach us, to remind us of everything Jesus taught us

Pentecost also represents the birth of the Church. This is where, in modern parlance, the Good News goes viral. It's where Jesus' followers start speaking in every language imaginable, a sign that the message of Christ is for everyone.

A lot can happen when everyone is together in one place. When we are together in one place, the Holy Spirit moves among us.

Together in one place. I believe it is no coincidence that Pentecost this year coincides with the biggest meeting of the United Methodist Church, the General

Conference, which brings together lay and clergy delegates to consider matters of church polity and theology. From May 10<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup>, people from churches around the world – together in one place. It's no coincidence, because this meeting – which happens only once every four years – *needs* the Holy Spirit. It needs a Helper who reminds us of everything Jesus taught us.

There are many issues before the General Conference this year, but by far the most anticipated question has to do with the church's position on human sexuality, most specifically whether to allow LGBT people to marry and serve as clergy in the United Methodist Church. Currently they cannot, and there are about 100 petitions on this issue alone. The General Conference delegates have their work cut out for them.

Added to the immense volume of reading and prayerful consideration of the petitions themselves are the emotional and political pressures of some recent events. Last week, 111 United Methodist clergy from around the U.S. and the world signed and published a letter outing themselves as LGBT – an action that, legally, could cost them their ordination. In Ohio, a United Methodist pastor married his male partner in defiance of church law. In the New York Annual Conference (which covers New York City but not us up here) and in the Pacific Northwest, the Boards of Ordained Ministry have stated that they will no longer ask candidates about their sexuality as a part of the ordination process, effectively clearing the way for ordination for LGBT persons.

This is the backdrop for what is happening at General Conference this year, and the debate is by no means one sided. United Methodists from around the nation – and

particularly from growing global areas of Methodism, like Africa – want to keep church law the same.

General Conference, and the Church as a whole, has already begun a tense and potentially divisive conversation.

But it is in this conversation that we pray for the Holy Spirit to work. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, identified five “means of grace” through which God works in us to strengthen and confirm our faith. Wesley calls on us to engage in these means of grace as often as possible.

Does anybody here know what those five means of grace are? They are:

- Prayer
- Taking Communion
- Studying Scripture
- Fasting
- Christian conferencing

We could have a sermon on each one of these, but for today, we’ll stick with Christian conferencing. We are called to practice it, but what is it, and how why is it important to this year’s General Conference? Christian, or “holy,” conferencing is conversation led by the Holy Spirit, in which people are filled with faith and the fruits of the Spirit. Christian conferencing is something that God does for us and in us.

How do we recognize holy conferencing? Wesley tells us to look for the following:

- Are we convinced how important and how difficult it is to order our conversation right?
- Is it always in grace? Seasoned with salt? Meet to minister grace to the hearers?

- Do we not converse too long at a time?
- Would it not be well to plan our conversation beforehand? To pray before and after it?

Bishop Sally Dyck of the Northern Illinois Conference says that, in modern language, this translates to these tips for holy conversation:

1. Every person is a child of God
2. Listen before speaking
3. Strive to understand from another's point of view
4. Strive to reflect accurately the views of others
5. Disagree without being disagreeable
6. Speak about issues; do not defame people
7. Pray, in silence or aloud, before decisions
8. Let prayer interrupt your busy-ness

There are many discussions about how to ensure “holy conferencing” at this year’s General Conference. The first few days of the Conference were spent debating various ways of structuring the conversation to make room for the Holy Spirit. In truly human fashion, the delegates could not even agree on this.

But it’s not too late to hope and pray for a movement of the Holy Spirit in that convention center in Oregon. Because, right now, our delegates *are* together in one place.

Despite all the advances in technology and communications, there is no substitute for being *together*, face to face, in the presence of one another and the Holy Spirit. We cannot have Christian conferencing if we are not together.

And that goes not just for our delegates at General Conference but for all of us in the Church. You see, I have come to understand since my younger days that coming to

church is *not optional*. Engaging with fellow Christians is *not optional*. It wasn't optional for John Wesley. It wasn't optional for the apostles. And it certainly wasn't optional for Jesus.

If we want to grow in faith, as disciples of Christ, we have to get *together in one place*. Even if we don't always agree, it is through this gathering that the Holy Spirit works.

Now, the weather is getting nicer outside. There are going to be Sundays where you (and I) really would rather be on a picnic or working in the garden. I feel you. But we need you here. Among us. Because coming to church is not just a commitment you make to yourself or to your pastor or your church friends – it's a commitment to Jesus, to having Jesus be the Lord of your life, to inviting the Holy Spirit to work in your life.

Maybe you think, as many people have, that you can find the Spirit in the quiet of your home or the solitude of nature or the company of your friends and family. I have no doubt that you can find God in these places. God is always with us.

But here's the thing: when Jesus tells us that "The Companion, the Holy Spirit, who the Father will send in my name, will teach *you* everything and will remind *you* of everything I told *you*, the YOU is *plural*."

The YOU is PLURAL.

God sent the Holy Spirit to us as a Church, as a collection of people, to work not just on you or you or me but to work among *us*.

I believe that God gives us a special gift when we are *together in one place*. It's the gift of the Holy Spirit among us, the gift of peace and of love and of prophecy and wonder. Don't miss out on that gift. Be here, together in one place.

Let us pray.