

Hope in the Midst of the Muck

And so began the summer storms of 2008. And then the rains came and came and came, breaking levees and flooding farmland and towns. Then more tornadoes, including the one that hit Little Sioux Scout reservation, killing four Scouts and wounding others. And the rain kept coming and the water rose to record levels, displacing persons, filling homes, businesses, and churches with dirty flood waters beyond anyone's belief. As time goes on, have we forgotten?

Cedar Rapids was possibly the hardest hit. Trinity, Salem, and St. James United Methodist Churches had major damage from flooding. Yet in the midst of the muck, the United Methodist Churches brought hope to their hurting city. They opened their doors for those displaced persons and congregations. Marion 1st UMC committed to the mission of coordinating work teams. Flood buckets from UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief, were distributed by the thousands. The list goes on and on.

June 26 our son Jimmy and I spent the day in Cedar Rapids, sent out from Marion 1st to St. James United Methodist Church. We spent the afternoon pulling wet sheet rock and insulation from the walls in the church office and fellowship hall. The sanctuary had already been gutted. A youth group from the East Ohio Conference had spent the week mucking out the muddy basement.

Jimmy and I spent the morning carrying dirty, water-logged belongings from an 85 year old man's garage. Most of his belongings from his home were already in piles by the curb. I listened to stories of his life there as we worked side by side with his son from Missouri, and youth and an adult from St. Paul's UMC in Cedar Rapids.

Amazingly, in Dick's front yard was a rosebush in full bloom with beautiful, delicate pink roses. Those roses became God's Word for the Church to me. That plant had been totally submerged under the muddy, toxic flood waters of the Cedar River for 6 days! Yet, just as our troubles and hard times don't last forever, the waters receded, and the rosebush was again greeted with sunshine and cleansing rain. The muck was washed away, and the flowers were free again to beautifully bloom where they had been planted.

Just as those flowers gave hope in the midst of the muck, I believe our purpose as a Church is to bring hope in the midst of the muck of our world.

And there's plenty of muck out there. The sinfulness of humankind has created a world that has left many with feelings of hopelessness and despair.

But the good news is that we, as Christians, can offer that hope in the midst of the muck. We have the only real hope... the offer of a relationship with Jesus Christ... a relationship that transforms lives and can transform the world.

Bishop Trimble has offered us his FIT challenge... and the “T” in FIT asks us to “tell the stories of Jesus and His transformational love. Renew our membership vows as we give voice and vision to living the United Methodist way. His challenge to us for this quadrennium... 20,000 new contacts with residents in Iowa.”

Can we offer hope to 20,000 unchurched people in Iowa? How do we achieve those 20,000 contacts? Paul gives us a plan in his advice to Timothy. “Teach others what I have taught you, then they will teach it to others.” It’s the principle of multiplication...

Eleven year old Trevor gives us a clue in the movie “Pay It Forward.” His 7th grade social studies teacher has challenged his students to spend the year in an extra credit project. The assignment? “Think of an idea to change our world– and put it into ACTION!”

Trevor has come up with the idea of “paying it forward” and has already begun his experiment by befriending the homeless man you will see talking with Trevor’s mom.

“Trevor has made an attempt to interact with the world... and that was the assignment.”

Isn’t that what God calls each of us and each of our churches to do... to interact with the world? We need to care about people. Their physical needs, yes... but also their spiritual needs, their very salvation. They are not exclusive to each other. Christ does not call us to invite people into a relationship with the Triune God and then ignore their physical needs and hurts. BUT... He also does not call us to meet people’s physical and emotional needs alone and then ignore their greatest need of all, their need for a Savior.

We can help the homeless by building homes through Habitat for Humanity... and we should. We can feed the hungry through our local food pantries... and we should. We can help eliminate killer diseases through organizations like Rotary International or Lions Club... and we should. But the one thing these other groups can not offer is a relationship with Jesus Christ. Only we in the Church can do that.

Jesus often taught using parables because of people’s capacity to better understand and remember the message He wanted them to learn. I would like to share a parable I first heard in a sermon many years ago, The Parable of the Lifesaving Station. As you listen, think of where we are as a church in the story... and which lifesaving station God is calling us to be.

“On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat; but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves they went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt a more comfortable building should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots and beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building.

Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely, because they used it as sort of a club.

Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motifs still prevailed in the club's decorations, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where club initiations were held.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in loads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some had yellow skins.

The beautiful new club was considerably messed up. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where the victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and were told that if they wanted to save the lives of various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that coast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.”

Do we dare make the parallel to our United Methodist Churches in the United States... in Iowa? Have we become exclusive clubs along the highways and byways of our land?

The purpose of the lifesaving station was to save lives. The few devoted members knew their call was to rescue the shipwrecked.

The purpose of the Church is to save lives... by physically meeting the needs of those who need our help, by spiritually offering the Good News of new life in Christ.

From Romans 10...

“But before people can trust in the Lord for help, they must believe in Him. And before they can believe in the Lord, they must hear about Him. And for them to hear about the Lord, someone must tell them.”

Yesterday, in the Laity Session we spent a lot of time learning about the focus of our denomination: our 1 mission statement, 2 kinds of holiness, 3 simple rules, and 4 areas of focus. We closed with these words...

“It has been our prayer that you will go back to your churches and share the numbers of our denomination, the “1. 2, 3, 4” of The United Methodist Church. But if you can only remember one number, remember our 1 mission statement. All the other numbers are really by-products of our discipleship.

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church reads, “The mission of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” It does not say “a mission” or “one of the missions.” The statement reads loudly and clearly that the one, single, exclusive mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Put more simply and directly, a mission is what we are supposed to be doing and what we are to do. Our mission is our reason for being. It is the cause for which we exist.

Our mission is what we are given to do by a higher authority. Our mission is not something we choose or define or modify. Our mission is not optional.

The higher authority is not The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, or the General Conference of The United Methodist Church, or a group of bishops. That higher authority is God through Jesus Christ. It is God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit who gives us our mission.

Have we accepted that mission? Can we be the lifesaving stations that offer hope in the midst of the muck?

I believe we can!