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Episcopal Address

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Crossing Over... and Over

*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us
To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death
To guide our feet into the way of peace. Luke 1: 78-79*

God, through the testimony of the Bible, has placed in our hearts the promise of salvation.

From slavery to sin and death.

Now, the bible I read doesn't say that sin was original. That's not in the bible. In the bible I read that blessing is original. Creation was original, and blessing followed, before there was any sin at all. And at every step on each day of creation, as the story is told and has come down to us, God surveyed what God had created, and said it was *good*.

God created and said it was *good*.

And when it was all said and done, at the end of the 6th day, God looked at ALL that God had created and said, it's *very good!*

And, when it was all so very good, God set Adam and Eve, the human ones, down in that beautiful garden, and said, it's all yours to take care of and enjoy, just leave this one tree alone: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Do not eat its fruit. And all the other good stuff in that garden, just wasn't good enough for

Adam and Eve. They had to taste it all. They couldn't leave it alone. And so they disobeyed. They ate. The apple. Or was it a fig? Or a Pear. Or a mango?

The fundamental sin we choose is the sin of Adam and Eve, which is **taking what does not belong to us and using it for what it was not intended for**, using it for our own pleasure or purpose, rather than for its God-given purpose. This is a **perversion** of God's Creation; **corruption** of creation, as Athanasius described it in the 4th Century.

THE APPLE! "Don't eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," God instructed them. But they did. And the human ones thought they had gained God's infallible knowledge: the ability to know what is good and what is evil. But they couldn't handle it. They only *thought* they knew. They ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but they made judgments based upon their limited capacity to understand good and evil. God couldn't let them stay in the garden any more. They had **corrupted** God's good creation by their **corrupt** understanding of good and evil. Knowledge gained by corrupt means is corrupt knowledge.

Adam and Eve had to go. They couldn't continue to live in the paradise, because their very presence corrupted the beauty, the glory, the peace, the harmony that God had created. It was bad. It was very bad. God's creation had to be protected from this human-caused corruption. This is why God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, to a life of toil and hardship. It is the same sin that leads to

- broken relationships with self, others and God
- habits of mind, heart and life that cut us off from the goodness and the beauty God creates us for

- the kind of selfish hoarding that undermines God’s preferred economy of sharing.
- It might even be the sin that leads us to a self-righteousness that thinks that people who don’t have what we have must not deserve it. Maybe they didn’t earn it. Or they are being punished.
- A life of secrets, lies and deception

But when God sees us – or anyone – in a sinful state, God doesn’t simply punish. God enters our loneliness, our alienation, our selfishness, our judgment, and do you know what God sees? **Goodness.** And God offers **blessing.** Because, God can handle the knowledge of good and evil. God sees us in *entirely*. Even the hidden parts. The motives that lurk in our hearts of darkness. In our inward being. Knows that we follow too much the devices and desires of our hearts, and with *tender mercy*, uncovers us to ourselves in the light of day. And, despite our sin, God, in Jesus Christ, shows us how rich and beautiful, and joyful our lives could be. God invites us to turn and repent, and to receive salvation, newness of life, and the blessing that God exclaimed at the moment of our creation; as we were being knit together in our mother’s wombs.

God says to us, time and again in the dark moments of our lives: Come out of the dark, the sun is shining. Come, live in the light of my love.

Crossing Over.

Over a year ago I looked ahead and said, 2018-2019 is going to be a CrossOver year. And at Annual Conference I said, we won’t be the same a year from now. I invited you to spend the year intentionally re-grounding your faith in the scriptures, by reading *We Make the Road by Walking* with me. Many of you have. In it, Brian

McLaren invites to re-ground our faith, not in the established Church so much as in the Adventure of Jesus. That's a good challenge for any time and place.

General Conference 2019 sought to chart a way forward for our church that would hold us together, despite differences about human sexuality, but it may turn out to be the tipping point that tears the United Methodist Church in two. So, here we are a year later – still Crossing Over. It's hard to say if we have left slavery and are wandering in the wilderness. Or if we are looking over the Jordan about to enter the promised land. Or if we are being led into exile by a foreign power. Or sitting in a tomb, waiting for resurrection. The bible has lots of stories about crossing over, and they each have light to shed.

The actions of the General Conference surprised the Church. Those that supported the new rules and those that opposed them were surprised. It has led to a period of chaos.

- Are the rules constitutional?
- How will they be implemented? What will happen January first?
- How will regulations that were adopted by a minority of the delegates in the US be implemented here?
- Who is at risk?
- Will we have a period of *cleansing*, when complaints are brought against clergy and bishops?
- Does the Wesleyan Covenant Association really want responsibility for our entangled UMC?

Something died at that General Conference. And there was an immediate and wild response. By *wild*, I don't mean irrational necessarily, but spontaneous,

uncontrollable. Clergy and church members who had stayed out of the fray for decades, letting the controversies pass them by, rose up to say in a thousand ways, this is too much. This is too harsh. This is mean-spirited. This hurts people. Too many people. People in our churches. Good people, people we know and love. We can't put up with these harsh rules, cruel punishments. It happened in Georgia, Texas, Michigan, Missouri, New York, California, Germany, Denmark, even here and there in Eastern Europe, Africa and the Philippines. And conversations began immediately about what a new Methodism might look like that is open to the new ways God is at work in human relationships. Even ways that may require that we stretch and reform the content of our "Christian teaching."

Conversations. Lots of them. On zoom. District Table Talks. Interest groups of all kinds. Queer clergy. Wesleyan Covenant Association, now part of the Renewal and Reform Coalition in the UMC. Over coffee, in church parlors, in the Western Jurisdiction, in the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters in Manilla (which I mention only because it is the group with the longest name that I have ever been affiliated with). Two groups gathered just in the past two weeks: I've written about them. **Our Way Forward**, which gathered over 300, especially people of color and LGBTQ+ people to gather in Minneapolis to work together for a church in "radical solidarity" with people on the margins.

And **UM NEXT**, Drawing over 600 people who oppose the actions of General Conference. This group met at the Church of the Resurrection, United Methodism's largest congregation in Leawood, Kansas.

And Traditionalists have been meeting to consider what the future of the UMC looks like since their plan was adopted and ready to be implemented.

Here's what I'm hearing.

1. Some people at every point along the spectrum feel victimized.
 - a. "I'm a traditionalist, and I'm ostracized in the northwest."
 - b. "I'm a queer person, and the conversation harms me."
 - c. "I'm 84 and I love my church, this is going to kill us."
2. People want to be able to influence the outcome. But it's not clear how to do so.
3. Most people don't want to see the church split, but on both sides, it's hard to see a way to stay together.
4. There seems to be a split between
 - a. People who feel the way of faith is a matter of following the rules.
 - b. People who feel the way of faith has to do with people's lives and relationships.
5. I hear lots of anguish for the attitudes being expressed toward LGBTQ+ persons
6. I hear a little, but very little curiosity about the lives and faith experience of LGBTQ+ people.
7. I hear some people who want this settled – let's just make a decision and move on. And those who want to take it slow, be sure we have considered all the options, all the implications of all the options before we act.
8. I hear a fair amount of denial. People who just love their church and don't see why it has to change. Don't want to participate in the change. And wish the whole thing would go away.
9. Many feel that the attention to gender identity and sexuality is blown way out of proportion to other pressing concerns

10. For people all along the spectrum of opinion and attitude this can be a matter of conscience, expressed in statements like, “I can’t stay in a church that allows gay clergy.” OR, “I can’t stay in a church that won’t fully welcome transgender people.”

11. There is new language emerging in this conversation:

- a. LGBTQIA
- b. Binary
- c. Intersectionality
- d. Personal pronouns – mine are she, her, hers
- e. Woke
- f. Snaps

There doesn’t appear to be a way forward that holds the present UMC together. Unless something unforeseen and very unlikely occurs at the General Conference next May, this means that every annual conference is likely to have to decide between a couple of choices. We don’t know what exactly they are now. But it’s likely that some of us will end up in a branch of Methodism that does not allow LGBTQ people to be married or ordained in the church, and some will end up in a church that allows such marriages and ordinations. And that means that every local church is likely to have to decide between a couple of choices: A) to go with one of the branches, knowing that some in the church may leave, or, B) to disaffiliate from the former UMC altogether. And that is likely to mean that every pastor will have to choose, and every member will have to choose, to accept the decisions of the General Conference, their Annual Conference and their local church.

There is another General Conference coming up next May. But it's not likely that the vote will tip a different direction.

IT'S A WORLD OF HURT. AND I CAN'T SAVE YOU FROM IT. We will have to live through it and find our ways. But the crossing is not over. Nor the pain or the harm. And God is not finished with us yet.

Finally, I want to say a word about Tradition.

Albert Outler was the esteemed professor of Wesley Studies at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University during the middle of the 20th century. As he dedicated his life to reading and understanding John Wesley, he identified a theological method that he called the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral." It encourages theological reflection that draws on four sources: Scripture, Tradition, reason and experience. You have probably heard those four before. You may have used them in a Sunday School class. They are included in the 2016 *Book of Discipline* section on "Our Theological Task," paragraph 105, pages 82 – 88.

In 1972 the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference sent me as a young adult observer to the General Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. And, having read Outler's book, *John Wesley*, in my History of Christian Thought course at the University of Puget Sound, I noticed, when Albert Outler was sitting on the kneeling step at the foot of the altar in the Sunday school room at St. Mark's United Methodist Church on Peachtree Street, where a sub-sub committee of the General Conference was meeting to discuss the new Social Principles that were to be adopted. And I noticed, when Albert Outler argued for including the language, "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching," as an alternative to "incompatible with scripture." As people argued that the scripture is not clear

about homosexuality – he asked, “Can we at least say that it is incompatible with Christian Teaching?” He explained that Christian Teaching changes over time, and that it does not have the same authority as Scripture.” He explained it to a room full of people. But the Church took those words and set them in stone and gave them more weight than was intended or understood at the time. I was there. I heard him. The times have changed. We know more than we did in 1972 from science, and from the open and out LGBTQIA people inside and outside the Church. But the Church hasn’t learned and hasn’t adapted. Until, today, the Church’s teaching seems archaic, willfully ignorant, divisive and deeply harmful.

And who decides what is traditional, anyway? We make Tradition by our practice of the faith. There are traditions in the West that do not match the “traditionalist” values adopted at General Conference

- Julian Rush, writer of the Hymn, “In the Midst of New Dimensions” for the 1985 session of the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference to welcome newly elected Bishop Roy Sano. Julian later came out as a gay man and was denied an appointment.
- Out clergy woman, Jeannie Knepper, in the Oregon-Idaho Conference who has served for 26 years, despite the prohibitions.
- 1999, when 68 clergy “performed” a wedding of two women leaders of the California Nevada AC in Sacramento. Known as the Sacramento 68.
- Amory Peck, PNW Conference Lay Leader
- Rev. Mark Williams and Rev. Karen Dammann, “came out” to the Pacific Northwest Conference in 2001.
- Randall Miller, former head of delegation from California Nevada and lay chair of the Committee on Episcopacy

- Karen Oliveto, bishop of the Mountain Sky Area.

You can't un-do those parts of our tradition by passing new exclusionary measures. And you can't really deny that these faithful, baptized United Methodist Christians bear fruits of the spirit in their lives and their ministries: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and yes, self-control. They told the truth about their lives, because the bible told them to. And the truth set them free. And yes, Jesus loves them.

Now, I know everyone doesn't see it the way I do. And I can live with that. I don't need everyone to agree with me. I know I'm wrong about some things, many things. God is smoothing my edges, and even chipping away at me every day. And, as a bishop, I won't and I don't punish people who don't see it the way I do.

But I've got Jesus in my heart. DO YOU HEAR ME? I've got Jesus in my heart. He got there a long time ago at grace before meals at the family table, in the waters of baptism at age 3, in Sunday School, at the communion rail, in the tears of sorrow and comfort at a graveside, preaching from pulpits, praying in hospitals, at the campfire at Ocean Park camp, kneeling with hands on my head, in the spirit made flesh at the birth of our sons, placing **my** hands on the heads of ordinands, and speaking words that we believe carry the power of the creator of the universe:

take authority as an elder

to preach the Word of God,

to administer the Holy Sacraments

and to order the life of the Church;

in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

I've got Jesus in my heart. And I can't lie to you -- the people down through the ages, who shared the stories and later captured the best they knew about how God wants us to live disciplined and abundant lives and wrote them down in the law, the prophets, the psalms and letters and the gospels -- I don't believe that if they were alive today, speaking to the Church, that they would say, "Church, exclude what you fear and don't understand, even if the marks of the Holy Spirit bathe it in light.."

I can't be silent in a church that won't see when the Holy Spirit is at work. That can't behold a new thing as it springs forth. That can't hear to a new song and learn to sing it.

I'm a bishop of the whole church. And I have seen the Church move and change. I believe it is moving now. The old wineskins are breaking. And the new wine is spilling out. How will we hold it so it can be enjoyed? So that it doesn't just leak out and seep into the soil? What will the new vessels look like? Who will create them?

In the days before Easter, in my prayers I asked God to show us a pillar of fire to follow. And I waited. And I waited. And I saw no pillar of fire.

But then the dawn broke upon ME, and I realized that through the people God has put in my path over the decades of my life, God has been revealing a pillar of fire to me all along. It couldn't be more clear. The sin of Adam and Eve in the garden, is the sin of taking what isn't yours, and using it for your own purposes. When any of us presumes to know the experience of another person, without asking, and makes judgements about that person's life, it is sin. And it is as original as the bite

from the apple. In the family of God. In the *Good* family of God. In the **VERY GOOD** family of God, we need to look at one another as God looked at the creation, with a clear and steady gaze, not overlooking sin when it is present, but willing to see goodness when it is. When we do, God's converting grace works in us and leads us like a pillar of fire. I weep for the church that cannot recognize goodness when it is right in front of us.

Our Book of Discipline says in black and white, in ¶ 105, “*that every generation must appropriate creatively the wisdom of the past and seek God in their midst in order to think afresh about God, revelation, sin, redemption, worship, the church, freedom, justice, moral responsibility, and other significant theological concerns. Our summons is to understand and receive the gospel promises in our troubled and uncertain times.*”

This is our theological task: in this generation: to think afresh about God, revelation, sin, redemption, worship, the church, freedom, justice, moral responsibility. To shrink from it is to turn away from God's living presence in our midst.

Now, we are going to have a serious conversation in the next two days. And it isn't really fair of me to compromise it by speaking my heart. But there you have it. Know that I want to continue to be in ministry with you, all of you. I hope you will be as unvarnished in your honesty as I have.

May God watch between thee and me in these days and throughout our days together.