

To Redefine The Connection: Loving our Neighbor with a Convicted Humility

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Redefining The Connection

In our journey toward a way forward, we were guided by the mission, vision and scope of the Commission on a Way Forward which included to “redefine our present connection” (2016). This is more true and needed today, after the Special Session in St. Louis last year and our annual conferences last summer.

Words like “dissolution”, “resistance”, “gracious exit” and “disaffiliation” have become the common language of our vocabulary. The connection in the words of the Mission Vision and Scope of the Commission “is strained.” Many have come to the conclusion that separation is a given.

Sometimes I receive letters and I am sure you do as well. Sometimes a letter will begin, “Isn't it obvious?” and then say:

“The scripture prohibits homosexuality.”
Or “Jesus commands us to love all people.”

And then others will say: “Let those who disagree depart.” Or: “It's a Paul and Barnabas moment.” “Our differences are irreconcilable.” “Let them go in peace.”

I want to say clearly that my diagnosis of what is going on is not a privileged one in contrast to those of passionate progressives or ardent conservatives. But I have found myself closer to some kind of center, where mission and unity and inclusion live. As I have written, this is not the mushy middle, and it is not unity at anyone's expense. It is something else.

It is an attempt to hold together the **tension of the opposites**.

I love being in relationship with vastly different people. I do not want to give up on them. I hope they will not give up on me. I hold a traditional and biblical faith, rooted in the radical grace of Jesus Christ, stretching the church toward a much greater inclusion.

To hold such a perspective crosses neatly defined boundaries. I sometimes do not know who my friends are. It is messy. But it is present throughout the New Testament, from the parables of Jesus to the decisions of the early church in Acts, to the apostolic definitions of sin and grace. This was at the heart of my book, Embracing the Wideness of God's Mercy (Abingdon, 2018).

We are a global church, we are a democratic church, we are an evangelical church, we are an episcopal church, we are a local church, we are a missional church, we are a prophetic church and we are a protestant church. We hold all of this in tension. And we struggle with unity and uniformity.

Unity and Uniformity

We can say that we value unity over uniformity, but, if we are honest, uniformity has its merits: It is efficient. It has clearly defined expectations. Think of a curriculum. Think of a meeting that begins and ends on time. It is less mentally challenging to be uniform. A uniform clearly communicates that I am a part of this group. Think of a medical coat or a clergy robe or the pin you are wearing. We can identify (and label) each other immediately.

So, as a church, how are we uniform? Our uniformity is found in the doctrinal standards (Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith) and in the General Rules in Paragraph 104 of our *Discipline*.

When I spoke to the Judicial Council in Zurich in the fall of 2018, and again last week in Chicago, we talked about uniformity and unity. This is related to our *Discipline*; the doctrinal standards is the basis of our uniformity and our theological task is basis for our unity. The church's doctrinal standards (Articles of Religion, the Confession of Faith) do not speak of domestic partnerships, or civil union, or sexual orientation, or gender identity, not to mention colonialism or migration. These were not articulated concepts when our doctrinal standards were written. Our actual work as bishops is to be guided by the *Discipline* in relationship to the doctrinal standards (Paragraph 104) and Our Theological Task (Paragraph 105). Our theological task is an underappreciated part of our *Discipline*.

A unity distinct from uniformity looks for something beneath the surface. Shared values. A common dignity. Sacred worth. The warm heart.

Which leads to a question: Is connectionalism unity or uniformity? David Brooks, in a [New York Times](#) editorial published while the UMC was gathering in St. Louis for the special session, articulated "An Agenda for Moderates." Central to his argument is the need for what he calls a "magnetic idea."

A Magnetic Idea: Love of Neighbor

Brooks wrote, "The problem with moderates has always been that they don't have a magnetic idea. Recent moderation has been a bland porridge that defines itself by what it doesn't like."

The bland porridge is the mushy middle. It is easily critiqued from the convictional edges.

Brooks continues: “*What is the core problem facing (us) today? It is division: The growing gaps between rich and poor, rural and urban, educated and less educated, black and white, left and right.*”

Then he asks: “*What big idea counteracts division, fragmentation, alienation? It is found in Leviticus and Matthew: **Love your neighbor**. Today’s left and right are fueled by anger and seek conflict. (In our work with The Anatomy of Peace we described this as collusion.) The big idea for moderates should be solidarity, community, conversation across difference. A moderate agenda should magnify our affections (our love) for one another.*”

As people formed in the Wesleyan tradition, we know something about affections for each other. These affections arise from our relationship with God, who first loved us, and our relationship with each other. We define this as **personal and social holiness**. This holiness is sustained by works of piety and works of mercy. John Wesley spoke constantly of this, in “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” in “The Almost Christian,” in “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” and I could go on.

Brooks again said: “*Moderation is not an ideology; it is a way of being. It stands for humility of the head and ardor (love) in the heart. When you listen to your neighbor, you see how many perspectives there are and you’re intellectually humble in the face of that pluralism. When you listen to your neighbor, you see that deep down we’re the same and you hunger to **deepen that connection**.*”

So, David Brooks, a secular columnist for *The New York Times*, has become an advocate for connection, at the time many of us are about ready to give up on the connection. And he has imagined that listening to our neighbor leads us to become intellectually humble in the face of pluralism. And what I am looking at is pluralism.

Convicted Humility

I hear an echo in his editorial of our concept of “**convicted humility**”, which was an essential concept in the final report of the Commission on a Way Forward. It was work done in collaboration with the Committee on Faith and Order, at the request of the Council of Bishops (particularly Bishop Rader), a conversation that included Bishop Scott Jones and Bishop Gregory Palmer.

I remind us what convicted humility is. What is convinced humility?

“*We begin from the recognition that our members hold a wide range of positions regarding same sex relations and operate out of sincerely held beliefs. They are convinced of the moral views they espouse, and seek to be faithful to what they see as the truth God calls the church to uphold. It remains the case that their views on this matter are distinctly different, and in some cases cannot be reconciled. **We pray the exaggeration of our differences will not divide us. We also recognize and affirm that as United Methodists we hold in common many more fundamental***

theological commitments, commitments which bind us together despite our real differences. These also have implications for how we understand and express our disagreements, and for what we do about them.”

*“Therefore, we seek to advocate a stance we have called convicted humility. This is **an attitude which combines honesty about the differing convictions which divide us with humility about the way in which each of our views may stand in need of corrections.** It also involves humble repentance for all the ways in which we have spoken and acted as those seeking to win a fight rather than those called to discern the shape of faithfulness together. In that spirit, we wish to lift up the shared core commitments which define the Wesleyan movement, and ground our search for wisdom and holiness.”*

“We remain persuaded that the fruitfulness of the church and its witness to a fractured world are enhanced by our willingness to remain in relationship with those who share our fundamental commitments to scripture and our doctrinal standards, and yet whose views of faithfulness in this regard differ from our own.”

Our Birthright Gift

So what if we began to **redefine the connection as the love of neighbor?**
And what if we did this from a **posture of convicted humility?**

This is essential work because we must begin to reestablish our public brand and regain a confidence in our public witness. Our public witness is to “**spread scriptural holiness**”. This language in need of retrieving is ancient, but it is our first language, our native language. It is near to us, like treasure hidden in a field. It is the call to love our neighbor, which is precisely where Brooks also leads us. And this is the birthright gift of our scripture and our tradition.

Jesus summarized the law as love of God and neighbor (Matthew 22).
Paul defined the love of neighbor as the fulfillment of the law (Galatians 6).
John Wesley defined Christian perfection as love of God and neighbor.

Which leads to a question we have all answered and asked:
Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?

For Wesleyans salvation is a developmental process, and in our best evangelical we know that all people are in this continuum (ourselves included) through the seeking and searching activity of God. This is prevenient grace.

In the remainder of this address I want to draw upon the work of my professor and advisor in divinity school, Tom Langford.

He would write:

“to love God with all our hearts and serve God with all our strength”—this is perfection. “(And) this is the ultimate goal of discipleship: the perfect love of God and of neighbor” (Langford, 34).

We are leaders in the church (all of us), but we are also disciples of Jesus. God is free to use extraordinary means to transform us, but we and all of God’s people are called to use the ordinary means (channels), including prayer, scripture, eucharist, preaching. Thus, the movement of God’s grace is aligned with the means of grace. This is our method in living a disciplined life. And this is the life we as bishops are called to in the *Discipline* (Paragraph 403). It is the spiritual and lifelong way of practical divinity, faith working through love. The God who began a good work in us will be faithful to complete it (Philippians 1).

The Distinction between Doctrine and Theology

And what is true for an individual is true for an institution, even a denomination. The God who began a good work in us will be faithful to complete it (Philippians 1). In a later essay on the nature of theological exploration, Langford makes the following distinction:

“Doctrine reflects the grasp of the church; theology reflects the reach of the church. To use another analogy: doctrine is the part of the cathedral that is already completed, exploratory theology is creative architectural vision and preliminary drawings for possible new construction.”

In contrast to Aquinas, Luther or Calvin, Langford suggests that “John Wesley has been a guide to theological reflection more than a definitive doctrinal source” (Langford, 248). Before we are a confessional church, we are a conferencing church. To exercise the teaching office of a bishop in this moment is to honor our doctrinal standards (Paragraph 104), but it is not to avoid our theological task (Paragraph 105).

I had the privilege of hearing the contents of Tom Langford’s text Practical Divinity as they were being developed, as lectures in our Methodism class. The book is a survey of over two hundred years of global reflection by those who have inherited our theological tradition, from the contemporaries of the Wesleys to more recent theologians such as Georgia Harkness, Albert Outler, James Cone, Thomas Oden, Rebecca Chopp, E. Stanley Jones, D. T. Niles, John Cobb, Geoffrey Wainwright and Jose Miguel Bonino.

Langford goes on to summarize:

“None of the theologians we have reviewed has merely repeated what was received. Each has participated in the tradition in his or her own time and place, and each has made selections, reshaped and added to it. Today the Wesleyan tradition is the result of its inclusive history; it has flourished because it has been vital; it has grown because it has allowed diversity; it has been enhanced by the continual infusion of new streams, both compatible and challenging.”

To make that plain for us, we do not merely repeat what we have received. We reshape it. We add to it. We build upon it.

Convicted Humility, Again

In an address given to this Council of Bishops, here at Lake Junaluska in 1999, entitled “*Grace Upon Grace*”, Tom Langford noted that his theological exploration had led, in the end, to the question of homosexuality. In this lecture, and some of you were present to hear it, he speaks of a grace which is “the reach of God even to those who are alienated from God.” He interprets the hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” with the phrase “Jesus thou art all compassion!”. He interprets I Corinthians 13 with grace “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things,” and grace “never fails.” And then he concludes with a dialogue between this grace and the issue of homosexuality and same sex marriage.

He cautions us to begin with humility, noting that each side of the debate “often claims the moral high ground.” He then invites us to “quiet down, recognize the awesomeness of God’s grace and be humble”. This humility grants us the time and space to seek God’s will, which is imperative for a matter with such complexity.

He writes: “*The issue is so complex that it cannot be quickly resolved. Perhaps United Methodism can become the exception and await the guidance of God. It may be that in the end we shall not reach consensus. It may be that we shall not be held together in the Body of Christ by agreement, but by love.*”

And then he notes that there is precedence for such a time of waiting, praying and being in relationship with one another. He mentions other moral issues on which Christians do not agree, among them war, divorce and abortion. He then concludes: “*If we can stay together, it may be only with tension and disagreement over the nature and implications of homosexuality to separate the Body of Christ. If we can stay together, it may be only with tension and disagreement, but until we know more and understand the will of God better, we may by grace have to learn to live with fellow Christians who disagree with us.*”

Redefining the Connection, Again

How can we live together, in a time of change, tension and disagreement? How can we collaborate with unlikely partners? As a matter of practical divinity, I would ask an additional question: How can we have accountability and restorative justice, in this season, without trials? How can we accompany conversations without needing to control them, conversations that we are sometimes tempted to avoid, conversations that are across our differences?

Having been with a cohort of Methodist pastors in Northern Ireland recently, learning from their reconciliation work, I was reminded that that talks about a cease-fire and a peace process and a peace agreement. They say, “the nature of a cease-fire and a peace process is precisely **negotiation, soul searching and compromise.**”

Compromise is not an option for any of us unless we are open to the practice of convicted humility.

The connection is “strained” (Mission, Vision, and Scope) and a part of our work is to redefine it and re-weave it together. In the coming years we will co-create the future of this mission together, as a Council of Bishops and as a church. This co-creation or new creation will hold together the tension of the opposites. As a composite body of divergent cultures and voices, it will not be uniform. But amidst all of that we can seek the unity we have promised to seek in the vows we have each undertaken.

This new connection may indeed have looser bonds of institutional affiliation. We may discover “new ways of embodying unity” (from the Mission, Vision and Scope of the Commission on a Way Forward). I hope this will create more space for contextual differentiation, even as we strengthen the bonds of our missional partnerships. If we can do this, we will be **faithful stewards** of a Wesleyan tradition that has an inclusive history, we will be **grateful participants** in a Wesleyan tradition that has flourished because it has been vital, we will be **courageous leaders** in a Wesleyan tradition that has grown because it has allowed diversity; and we will be **persistent advocates** for a Wesleyan tradition that has been enhanced by the continual infusion of new streams, both compatible and challenging.

So, to conclude:

- Let us claim our birthright gift, missional partnership across a world that is our parish.
- Let us let go of the desire for uniformity and seek the deeper unity.
- Let us redefine the connection for a missional purpose—the love of neighbor.
- Let us hold fast to our convictions, but in humility—we do see through a glass darkly.
- Let us support one another in our residential areas, to lead in ways appropriate to our contexts, and let us refrain from doing harm to one another.
- And—and this is the good news—let us imagine that God is using all of this to make us perfect in love in this life.

Amen.

Sources:

David Brooks, “An Agenda for Moderates”, New York Times, February 25, 2019.

Thomas Langford, “Grace Upon Grace”, Address to the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church, November, 1999. Also in Vision and Supervision, edited by James Mathews and William Oden (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

Thomas Langford, Practical Divinity (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983).

Mission, Vision and Scope, Commission on a Way Forward (2016).