

Theme of the Conference: "One In Ministry to All the World"

Sermon Title: Whose Interest?

Philippians 2:1-11

Key Scriptural Verse for the Memorial Sermon: "Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others." (Verse 4)

Beloved in Christ:

What a joy and a blessing for us to start our jurisdictional conference celebrating the lives of the saints who journeyed with us and blessed us with their Christian witness! What a privilege it is to celebrate their ministries in the context of the theme, "One in ministry to All the World," a prayer that we use often as we take part in the Lord's Supper - a sacramental theme indeed!

Our scripture lesson for today is from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, which he started in his second missionary journey. It is the community where the first European convert, Lydia, was received into the Christian community. While imprisoned in Rome, Paul is concerned about them maintaining unity and keeping the new believers centered in Christ. For Paul, that unity cannot be achieved without humility.

Pause for a moment! Here we are ... here you are ... gathered to elect new episcopal leaders to join the other United Methodist bishops from around the world to lead our global church in such a time as this, a time Rev. Wayne Lavender in his book *Counting Ants While the Elephants March By: Thoughts on Church and State, Poverty and Terrorism, War and Peace* describes as ...

I have witnessed passionate debates in local churches over the type of carpet to be placed in the sanctuary, the color of the walls in a Sunday School classroom, the physical location of the baptismal font, or where the choir should sit for the worship service. I have even seen members leave the church over issues such as how often the Apostles' Creed should be read during Sunday morning worship, or in anger over the selection of a particular person to serve in a position of "power." Far too often and for far too long, the church has

fought the wrong battles at wrong times - attempting to kill the ants while the elephants are rampaging through the land.<sup>1</sup>

Though Rev. Lavender's book was written fifteen years ago, his prophetic words remain true to this day. Human beings are slaughtered on our streets because of human phobias and prejudices toward anyone different from ourselves. Many of our churches refuse to do something about these and other crises, not even saying a prayer for such injustices at worship services. Many a time I wonder and lament: are we simply a private social club or are we truly the Church of Jesus Christ? When did we stop being the global church who cares about God's children *everywhere* and the stewardship of God's creation? As we come to the Lord's Supper, we say through our lips Christ's Table is an Open Table, yet we don't demonstrate that *all* means *all*. We are called to leave a global footprint with a local interest and concern, called to be a headlight as described by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail": "So here we are moving toward the exit of the [twenty-first] century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading people to higher levels of justice."<sup>2</sup>

How is it that, at this juncture, we are ready to come to the Lord's table, affirming our desire to be "one in ministry to all the world?" Friends, through the successors to Lydia and Paul, the gospel has spread throughout the world, and we affirm that good news today sacramentally, for our ministry is not just confined to our buildings, communities or zoom platforms. Our ministry serves the *whole world* – or as John Wesley put it, "The world is our parish."

Beloved, pause for a moment. Since COVID, on any given Sunday, our virtual worship services allow people from around the world to join us. In this sense, Wesley's vision of the world being our parish has become a true reality. We have become circuit riders of the Google age.

In that same spirit, we are also here to remember and honor the saints who have joined the Church Triumphant since our last jurisdictional conference in 2016.

One definition of a saint is "an agent of change." These saints we remember today, as well as many other saints we remember in our hearts and minds, changed us, changed others, and changed the world by modeling through their ministries and missions that it is not about

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<sup>1</sup> Lavender, Wayne, *Counting Ants While the Elephants march by: Thoughts on Church and State, Poverty and Terrorism, War and Peace*. Ithaca: Ithaca Publishing, 2007, p5.

<sup>2</sup> <https://learning.hccs.edu/faculty/emily.klotz/engl1302-7/course-readings/a-letter-from-birmingham-jail-martin-luther-king-jr/view>

glorifying self-interest but looking toward the best interest of others that will advance God's mission to the entire world.

Letters from prison also changed the world. It was true in the time of Paul; it is still true today - the writings from prison of both Rev. Dr. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. touched and changed the world. In fact, one such writing offers us good advice for our work this week. Dr. King wrote in his "Why We Can't Wait" letter from the Birmingham jail, "If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the [twenty-first] century."

How can the decisions you make this week raise these voices for the sake of the church and all of God's children? Who are the best choices for the episcopacy to lead through these times? Let us first reflect on the humble and servant leadership of the saints we are honoring today, some of whom truly fought to name and deal with elephants of all kinds of isms in our churches and world.

Eunice Mathews claimed, "I do not want to be identified as the daughter of Evangelist E. Stanley Jones, nor do I have to be identified as the wife of my husband (Bishop James K. Mathews), but I do have permission to be myself." Having been raised in a male-dominated society with the people of India, her statement gave courage and a voice to the voiceless.

Bishop Felton E. May always knew what was most important and then acted on it. He had the courage to say to the Council of Bishops, "Allow me to leave my office as bishop at least for the time being so that I may help others to rescue the life of innocent victims from the drug culture." He told me personally that though the Council of Bishops supported him, not all agencies of the church did, yet he kept on going because of his love for innocent victims. In addition to his work on the enormous damage of illegal drugs, he was instrumental in developing the Salt 'n Light Ministry to young people, first in Central Pennsylvania and then far beyond the borders of that annual conference. It is still a vital and growing ministry leading young people to follow Christ.

Bishop C. Dale White, in his own style of servant leadership, changed others through his passion for justice and equality, not just for all of God's children, but for all creation. A prophet who raised questions without fearing anyone, changed society. Among these transformational changes is the lives of hundreds of youths in this jurisdiction since 1986 when his vision for Mission of Peace became a reality. Perhaps no one has articulated it as well as Beth Capen, Esq, who said "He modeled the fact that our work and our mission is not about us, it is about

those who we are serving in the name of God.”<sup>3</sup> Committed to world peace, in December 1979, Bishop White and six other Protestant clergy unofficially traveled to Iran to meet with Ayatollah Khomeini regarding the Iran Crisis, leaving behind his family during Christmas time.

Gwen Ruth White fully supported her husband and encouraged him throughout his ministry, traveling with him around the world studying world hunger and peace and justice issues. Gwen was a gifted musician and a true spiritual giant and mentor whose eyes could read you before you even shared what was on your heart. She enabled many people to also become spiritual mentors.

Rev. Sherrie Dobbs Johnson, with great humility and a beautiful smile, touched our hearts and minds with sincere questions and statements. Before my election, we discussed my discernment regarding the episcopacy. She told me to do what was best for me and the church. She said something like, “Be yourself!” In her own quiet style, Sherrie empowered others with her thoughtful suggestions and guidance.

Bishop F. Herbert Skeete, according to a colleague in the NEJ College of Bishops, made it one of his practices to be very intentional about appointments to missional contexts and inclusiveness in the staff/cabinet. Though he received vocational scars for it when all people did not see the wisdom of his ways, the New England Conference is better today because of his courageous leadership in bringing the Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Southern New England Conferences together. This action was not to get a feather on his cap, but to create one conference with better opportunities for pastors, congregations, and mission. A passionate supporter of local mission, Bishop Skeete envisioned a strong United Methodist Foundation in New England that was birthed during the challenging times of that merger. He was also a strong advocate for Africa University. Wherever he served, his prophetic mind and courageous leadership led him to speak the truth even at the cost of losing popularity.

Bishop Joseph Yeakel’s understanding of the Book of Discipline and its interpretation was second to none. He knew his people by name, often wrote personal notes to clergy and laity, and deeply cared for both clergy and laity. A respectable layperson in our denomination commented that during Bishop Yeakel’s episcopacy, he noted the gifts and graces of laity, nurtured them, and brought them to the table. As one of my mentors, he advised me to let the clergy make the decisions when presiding at clergy session and not to forget to use the privilege of executive session where there can be honest discussion with transparency and within the covenant.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/bishop-white-strong-convictions-gentle-touch>

Jack Middleton's love for all the people of God was much broader than his well-known love for cars. He would talk to everyone irrespective of color and creed. Needless to say, without Jack even realizing it, he changed others by discovering their interests through respectful and open conversations and engaging them. He not only loved being an episcopal spouse, but truly cared and supported his beloved spouse, Bishop Jane Middleton. Whenever Jack was in the room, his presence brought out the light in others.

Dight Crain had a deep love for the church and was a true financial steward for the jurisdiction. All his decisions as a dedicated NEJ treasurer were made in the best interest of the entire jurisdiction. A member of the New England Conference, Dight was a quiet but faithful friend, often humbly helping others outside the public view.

Tom Price, a jurisdictional delegate from Baltimore-Washington Conference, loved serving God, his beloved wife Becki, music and helping youth explore their faith. Tom directed choirs from the age of 17. He founded Joyful Noise! Youth Choir, which sang at The White House, The Crystal Cathedral, EPCOT and The US Air Force Academy Chapel and with Becki led ROCK!, the BWC youth worship for over 30 years.

Rev. Dr. Shirlyn Henry Brown was a faithful servant leader in the Peninsula-Delaware Conference. She led several congregations, served as Director of Connectional Ministries and a district superintendent. She has a passion for kingdom building and kingdom living as well as incorporating theatre and the arts into her ministry. She served on the Programs and Arrangements Committee of Jurisdictional Conference up until the time of her death.

Warren A. Heil, Jr.'s love for Jesus was one of the first things you noticed when interacting with him. He was faithful to the end, committed to being a delegate despite facing serious health challenges. His dedication was all based on his unwavering love for Christ and the Church in all circumstances.

Faith Weston Geer was a faithful, gifted, and humble leader in the Western Pennsylvania Conference. Her administrative skills were a true blessing to her local church and the annual conference. Her compassion and love for the church was contagious, and her ability to work with all people complemented her passion for full inclusion and social justice.

Former Bishop Hae Jong Kim and his wife, Wha-Sei, brought us a new glimpse of what it means to be a global church by giving us an understanding of Korean culture. In addition to being a gifted hymn writer and author, Bishop Kim was responsible for birthing Korean churches in the

Northeast. Wha-Sei modeled the essence of Christian love as a spouse and the best of Korean culture.

Friends, as we celebrate these saints who changed, molded, and influenced us, do you notice a similar quality in their legacies? All of them served with humility and grace and in the interest of others. The question now is what have we done with these teachings they left us? What are we doing or what can we do to put the interest of others and the interest of God and the Church above our own interests?

We are gathered here to make some crucial decisions. As you fondly remember these saints and others who left a legacy that shifted their corner of the world for good, can you envision what their advice would be to you today as you interview episcopal candidates and decide which leaders the church needs to truly be the church? God has given the key to God's kingdom for such a time as this to elect leaders who may serve for four years or twenty-four years but will serve with the heart and humility of Christ himself.

Your task is to look at the rear-view mirror and through the windshield with deep prayers and wide-open eyes to determine who are the right persons to lead our jurisdiction through these challenging times with bright headlights. Who will roll up his/her sleeves in the mission fields around and beyond us?

Friends, let's be frank. This vote is not about us ... or our preferences. It is about engaging in true Holy Conferencing, listening to one another, looking at the realities of our churches, communities, and world with deep humility and without arrogance or an "I know it all" attitude.

As the late Rev. William Sloane Coffin has said so eloquently, in a different context, "We are ordained [I would add baptized] to unrest, in deceptive times to reach for truth that seems to many like madness; in the darkness of the world's hatred and prejudice to keep the small flame of love alight. For the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth, too small for anything but love."<sup>4</sup>

Beloved in Christ, as Easter people, as the people of Pentecost, we are gathered here in this room like the Apostles gathered in the Upper Room to choose Matthias to join them. As you make decisions, remember these words from Bishop James K. Mathews at the 1996 NEJ Conference to first decide who we are as a jurisdiction:

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<sup>4</sup> The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years, Volume 1. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p 404.

Citing the renown Spanish philosopher and writer, José Ortega y Gasset, “Tell me the landscape in which you live and I can tell you who you are.” Mathews went on to say, “Who then are we in the Northeast Jurisdiction

- We are mountain people.
- We are a seashore people.
- We are a valley people.
- We are an island people.
- We are a peninsula people.
- We are urban; we are metropolitan; we are rural; we are suburban; we are small town; we are county-seat residents.

Wherever we dwell, whatever our status, whatever our race, whatever our vocation:  
Here our story lies.

We are on the Edge – where God is at work. Therefore, we must work with God where we are or some things will not be done. This is our identity.”<sup>5</sup>

I would add to Bishop Mathews’ description of our identity that we are first and foremost people of God.

As such, you are here to cast your ballots and to make other vital decisions. Think about our identity as a jurisdiction and a denomination. Who are we? Who do we want to be? Whose interest are we protecting or advancing?

Needless to say, there are many current concerns to consider. Are you worried about disaffiliation? Look at the early eighties when people believed the attack made on the character of the Church by a major television show and magazine article regarding the church’s stand against apartheid in Africa. Some of the bishops remembered today provided robust leadership when people started leaving the church because people believed the news media rather the gospel of Jesus Christ. Forty years later, in part because of the work of these bishops, two leaders from South Africa - Bishop Ivan Abrahams and Rev. Dr. Jerry Pillay - hold the position of General Secretary of the World Methodist Council and the World Council of Churches, respectively. I thank God for the ecumenical strength of the churches in raising leaders directly or indirectly for such a time as this and challenge you to provide that same leadership today

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<sup>5</sup> Journal of the 1996 Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference, *On the Edge: Holy Living in a Secular World*, pp 75-76.

in your discernment regarding our future episcopal leaders. As you discern, ask yourselves in whose interest your decisions lie. It must not be in yours or even in that of the saints, but in God's interest that your discernment is based.

Friends, we are truly "on the Edge where God is at work." It is my prayer that the Holy Spirit takes over our gathering like it did it for the early church nearly two thousand years ago.