

Bishop G. Lindsey Davis, preaching
Assigned to the
Kentucky Conference and Red Bird Missionary Conference

World Communion Sunday, October 5, 2008

First United Methodist Church Lexington

8:30 a.m. worship service, downtown

It's a joy to be with you this morning. It's a joy for me and for Jennifer to be back in Kentucky. We've been laboring in a far country for the last 12 years down in Georgia! Kentucky has at least two things that Georgia doesn't have much of lately these days. Kentucky has water and it has gasoline—and I'm thankful for both of them. Jennifer and I were in Atlanta a few weeks ago for an event at Emory University. We got down there and didn't realize what a gas crunch they were having. So when we got to the hotel, there was just no gasoline available anywhere around there. And since I was flying to another location after my meeting and Jennifer was going to be driving back, we were afraid we wouldn't find enough gas for her to get out of town. And so I rented a car for a couple of days. Actually what I rented was a tank of gasoline! The most expensive tank of gas I've ever purchased! But you do desperate things in desperate situations.

It's great to be here, great to be with you on this World Communion Sunday.. I'm going to share a scripture a little later on within the context of the sermon. And so, if you would, pray with me now.

Loving God, we give thanks to you for this day. Although we are just moments into this service, we've already felt your presence here. Help us to hear your Word this morning. And let nothing get in our way—including the personality of this preacher. In Jesus' name we pray, AMEN.

It's good to see so many familiar faces today, but it's also good to see some that I don't know, for that speaks to the health and vitality of this congregation. Jennifer and I joined this church as lay people in 1972. John Pratt, who is here this morning, was the chair of the Staff Parish Relations Committee. We had just been married a few months before by Billy Ray (Jennings). And when he was assigned to this church, we came as lay people. We stayed here three years and then we moved away for a couple of years to the University of Alabama. And then when I entered seminary here in town, Jennifer and I moved back and became a part of this congregation once again. Then I was privileged to serve as your associate pastor for three years.

I learned how to be a pastor in this church. Back in those days we had Wednesday night services. Billy Ray decided that since I needed to practice preaching a lot, that we would divide the preaching responsibilities on Wednesday nights. And on those Wednesday nights that I preached, he would lead the singing, and on those nights when he preached, I would lead the singing. Well, we got to that first Wednesday night when I was to lead the singing, and I did what I knew to do.

The next morning Billy Ray came into my office, and he said, "I'll tell you what Lindsey, we'll still divide the preaching 50-50, but how about if I lead the singing ALL the time?"



It was THAT bad!

I learned to do a lot of things here: first weddings, funerals, baptisms. I learned to serve communion at this altar. I just never learned to sing!

My parents are members here. My daughter, Laura, and her husband were married in this sanctuary. I was privileged to be your District Superintendent for a couple of years. And now to come and be your Bishop.

My roots run deep in this place. So I have felt your pain—the pain of recent weeks. I care about all my churches in Kentucky—all 800 of them, but this church is special to me. When you rejoice, I rejoice, and when you hurt, I hurt.

I had a dandy World Communion meditation to share with you this morning, talking about the connection of our church around the world and how this sacrament binds us together. But in recent days, I just felt like that was irrelevant for this morning. And that I needed perhaps to bring a pastoral word. And so I hope you'll hear it that way.

The Church in Conflict

The church of Jesus Christ has always experienced conflict. Even the handpicked disciples of Jesus, if you'll remember, argued over and over about who would sit at the right hand of Jesus. St. Paul's heart was broken over and over again by division in the church at Corinth. Sharp differences of perspective, hard feelings within the community of faith—that's been a part of church life from the beginning. It's not the part that we like to advertise, it's not the part we enjoy, but it's been part of the reality of church life since the beginning. We are Christians, but we're also human. We're saved, we're redeemed, but as far as I can tell, we're not yet perfected. Not yet fully mature in the faith.

I'm in my 13th year now as a Bishop in the church, and I've seen just about everything. I have the practical equivalent of a PhD in church conflict. By the time a church quarrel arrives on my desk, it is usually full blown with emotions raging. Sometimes I can help—quite often, I cannot. But I have learned a few things about conflict and about reconciliation. I've learned a few things about settling differences. I've learned that reconciliation is a persistent need of the church—no matter what church it is, and no matter what time it is. There are many ways to settle our differences.

Settling Our Differences

Flight

- Some of us try to settle our differences by taking “flight,” by running away from them. We try to handle our differences, handle our conflict, by simply “not handling it.”
- We stay home from church.
- We avoid those brothers and sisters with whom we have conflict.
- We start attending another church. I've always been puzzled by the City of Lexington. I used to tell pastors who would move here to serve for the first time that on any given

Sunday, there are at least 200 Methodists circling New Circle Road trying to find a church to go to!

- Sometimes we handle our conflict by going someplace else. We go into denial. We settle our differences by ignoring them.
- We simply fly away from a situation that has become painful for us.

Fight

Then there are those brothers and sisters who choose to fight.

- They don't run away, they clench their fists, and set their jaws. Acting out of resentment we choose up sides.
- We violate that first general rule of the church which Brother Wesley articulated, which is to "do no harm."
- We gossip.
- We email.
- We send letters.
- We speak disparagingly about those who are involved in the conflict.
- We forget to guard our language and we dial up our rhetoric, and injure and wound other children of God.

In short, we fight.

Another way...

Flight or fight. But there is another way to settle our differences. There is another way to resolve conflict. It is, in fact, what I like to call "higher righteousness." A higher righteousness that can lead to reconciliation in life, rather than destruction and death.

Here it is. It's found in the fifth chapter of the *Gospel of Matthew*. I want to read it to you from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*. It will sound perhaps a little different to you.

38-42"Here's another old saying that deserves a second look: 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' Is that going to get us anywhere? Here's what I propose: 'Don't hit back at all.' If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

43-47" You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.

48" In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."

Resolving Division in the Church

Friends, deep division in a church is seldom resolved by:

- Citing the *Discipline*,
- Charge Conferences or Church Conferences, or
- A Bishop or a District Superintendent, for that matter.

Because deep, painful conflict in a church is, at its core, a spiritual issue, not an administrative issue.

- It's more a matter of the heart, than the head.
- Division is something that is resolved not by flight, or by fight, but by prayer. By falling on our knees at the altar of our Lord.

Deep division is resolved by:

- Listening to the still small voice of God,
- Humbling ourselves before the Lord,
- Listening—really listening—to our brothers and sisters with whom we disagree.
- Lowering our voices
- And by changing the climate of conflict so that we create a safe place for everybody to stand while the hard and faithful work of discernment and reconciliation is done.

And when the climate of conflict begins to change, gossip and hateful speech gives way to gracious truth telling and generous listening. And division gives way to the redeeming and restoring love of God.

Now don't make a mistake about what I'm saying. Sharp differences may still remain, strong differences of perspective and opinion may still remain. But their power to destroy our witness begins to diminish, and then—then—the spirit of God might just have a chance to be felt and the Word by God might just have a chance to be heard among us.

Colossians 3 shares these words:

As God's chosen ones (that who you are), holy and beloved, clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another. And if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Living a Good and Faithful Life in Christ

I'm convinced you are here this morning because in the deepest recesses of your heart, you yearn to live a good and faithful life in Christ. I know you well enough to know you want to practice your faith in ways that are healing and life giving, not destructive. But we all need help doing that from time to time, don't we? The Lord knew there would be times like this in the church, and so Jesus gave us a means of grace call the Lord's Supper. A simple, yet powerful and

mysterious sacrament. And it is through the bread and the juice, through the act of kneeling in prayer with arms outstretched that we often find our way forward when no way forward seems clear to us.

It is when we kneel at this altar that we so often discover the courage, the strength, and the direction to walk with Jesus where we are able to place our brokenness at His feet.

For the past four years I've been dealing with a bout of cancer. Things have gone well for me; I've been very blessed. But four years ago I was diagnosed with that disease. Some of you have been along that journey yourself. I learned a lot about myself and about life during these past four years. One of the things I've learned is when you get to that place of deepest discouragement, the Lord will always meet you there.

A Means of Grace...The Lord's Supper

The same can be true for other experiences in life as well. And the same can be true for all of us as a church. And so as we prepare to receive this sacrament this morning, I invite you to bring your joys and your celebrations, but also your disappointments, your stress, your anxiety, and your heartache, your sadness, your confusion, and maybe even anger and place them at the altar wherever you might be experiencing brokenness this morning, I invite you to come and place that brokenness at the feet of Jesus. God will meet you're here. I guarantee it. God will meet you here.

So open your hands, and open your hearts, and allow the Holy Spirit to engage your life. The way forward for this congregation may just begin here this morning in this place at this altar.

Speak, O Lord, your servants are listening.