1. The opening lines from A Tale of Two Cities have repeatedly come to my mind amid this troubled season for our nation and our churches. Charles Dickens began his classic novel by writing, *“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way.”*
2. That is a particularly apt description of how many United Methodists are feeling, depending on their enthusiasm or utter distain for the legislative outcomes of the last General Conference. I lift the words of Charles Dickens however to bear witness to what I am convinced is a deeper abiding truth. No matter how you are feeling about the special session of General Conference or any of the other controversies facing modern Christianity, one fact is indisputable: There has never been a better time to be the church.
3. I realize my proclamation itself may generate incredulity. But I am convinced nevertheless. Now is the time for every one of us individually, in congregations, districts, synods, dioceses, and annual conferences to be the church.
   1. Now more than ever let us be the church that does what the church is supposed to do.
   2. This begins as we reach out with radical welcome offering Christian hospitality to everyone, especially those who have been pushed to the margins. There are so many whom God yearns for us to embrace with the gospel message of unconditional love and transforming grace.
4. That has certainly been our experiences at the United Methodist Church for All People where I served as the founding pastor in the inner city of Columbus, Ohio and continue as the executive director of CD4AP.
   1. All of our ministries began 20 years ago when we launched the United Methodist Free Store.
      1. At the time I was a newer D.S. and the idea of the free store was simple
         1. We rented a store front
         2. Invited folks from all 78 churches to donate gently used clothing and household items
         3. Then follow their donations into inner city
         4. Volunteer in the store, getting just a little bit outside their comfort zone to build relationships of authentic mutuality.
   2. The store took off in ways we had never imagined.
      1. More and more folks came to shop in a store where everything was free.
      2. Amazing mixture of hard living folks coming alongside the middle class folks from several of our congregations.
   3. We never ran out of good things to give away and wondered why? Our searching led us back to the Bible where we discovered the answer was right there, starting with opening page of Genesis.
      1. God made it all. God made it good and God made it abundant.
      2. There is more than enough if we share what we have.
      3. We live inside a divine economy of abundance.
   4. This message flows through entire Bible all the way to the last page, where we are told in Revelation 21 that it is all back.
      1. The garden of Eden is restored
      2. More than enough for us all.
   5. In the middle of the book all sorts of stories reinforcing this central truth including the accounts of Jesus feeding the multitude; the only miracle found in all 4 gospels.
      1. I especially like John 6.
      2. There Jesus told disciples to feed the crowd of thousands.
      3. They panicked, saying impossible, too expense.
      4. Jesus insisted.
      5. Andrew came back and reported he had found a child’s lunch.
      6. Yet, Andrew immediately belittled the gift saying, “but what good is this any way when there are so many to be fed.
      7. Jesus in disgust told the disciples to just sit down, in fact told the entire crowd to sit down and watch.
      8. Jesus took, blessed broke and gave.
      9. All 5,000 fed and more at the end than there had been at the beginning.
   6. Yes we live inside a divine economy of abundance.
      1. When we give what we have, no matter how meager it may seem God takes what we offer and multiples it for God’s purposes.
5. As we embraced this truth that we dwell inside the divine economy of abundance, we realized God was inviting us to much deeper levels of transformation.
   1. Up until then we had been just trading used clothes.
      1. What if we began to give away the very best, not just what was left over?
      2. And surely the best gift any of us had ever received was faith in Christ and the amazing grace of new life that Christ alone provides.
   2. So in 2002 we birthed the Church for All People out the shoppers and volunteers of the Free Store, and began to invite anyone in the community to join us.
   3. Now 17 years later C4AP is one of most inclusive Um congregations in the nation
      1. Half white, half black like the community
      2. 2/3 low income
      3. As the name suggests we have become a church home for all people which obviously includes many folks who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender.
   4. As far as we are concerned there has never been a better time to be the church.
6. Tony McGrapth and his wife Faye are a good example.
   1. African American couple who first came to shop in the store and fell in love with the community.
   2. Tony started volunteering to help clean up
      1. Now is our full time building care taker who coordinates a cadre of volunteers
      2. He and his wife became founding members, with Faye baptized on the day we chartered the church.
   3. When their landlord was foreclosed on several years ago they were forced out on the street.
      1. We were able to move them into one our transitional housing units
      2. Then they went to work with a leader of our church to repair their credit and ultimately purchased one of our completed rehabbed houses.
   4. They are an inspiration to so many of their friends and neighbors.
      1. Together they have welcomed and discipled dozens of folks.
7. As the inclusive body of Christ we strive to be in ministry every day by doing what the church is supposed to do.
   1. Preach good news to the poor, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, provide housing, care for those suffering offering health and wholeness, while working to set the prisoners free.
      1. Each year we touch lives of 30,000 persons
   2. All of these ministries emerge as we continue to embrace opportunities inside the divine economy of abundance.
      1. Instead of focusing on needs and deficiencies, we listen as folks share hopes, dreams and aspirations.
      2. This becomes the starting point for every ministry.
8. When we launched our housing ministries in 2005, many folks dreamed of a better place to call home.
   1. We looked around at all the vacant blighted houses and realized they were assets.
      1. Listened more and heard from people who wanted to go to work
      2. Realized we could with God’s grace bring these dreams together.
   2. Started with one vacant duplex
      1. Owner gave us the property and money for materials
      2. Invited us to hire folks from neighborhood
      3. Made all kinds of mistakes, but got it done.
   3. This small start gave us credibility and others began to join with us in this journey.
      1. Turning blight into light, one house at a time.
      2. Gradually entire blocks were transformed.
      3. All together we have done $85 million of affordable housing
   4. Similar journeys unfold in all our ministries. Lots of families and individuals shared their dreams of living healthier by eating healthier which led us on a journey with multiple partners to create the All People’s Fresh Market.
      1. Today located in a former drive thru beer and wine store that we acquired 18 months ago.
      2. We took and remodeled, keeping all the coolers, now stocked with fresh produce.
      3. We serve over 30,000 individuals a year.
      4. Now the largest distribution site in the 20 county area, and one of the 20 largest points of distribution of free food in the nation.
9. Of course there has been opposition along the way.
   1. Early on there were individuals in the community that wanted to shut down the Free store.
      1. They said we attracted more poor people. If we left the poor would leave too.
      2. Even accused of promoting prostitution because we clothed them
      3. We just kept building relationships, reaching out.
      4. We let the truth speak for itself and thus moved past the early critics.
      5. Soon became clear they were irrelevant because their accusations lacked integrity. The more these critics complained, the less attention they were given. So what, who cares, doesn’t matter anyway.
   2. Other folks scoffed at the whole idea of forming a body of Christ for all people.
      1. Folks said we could not build the body of Christ that is black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight.
      2. We did not let that stop us
      3. So what, who cares, just did it anyway.
   3. Right now folks ridicule the whole idea that we can stop the forces of gentrification and create a sustainable mixed income community.
      1. They say the front porch of the kingdom shall never come on earth as it is in heaven, at least not here on the South Side.
      2. We just keep building up ignoring those who would tear down.
      3. So what, who cares what they say, doesn’t matter anyway.
   4. Across the past 20 years amid all the challenges, this has been the best of times to be the church.
10. It has always been this way going back to the early church. Consider the experience of the Apostle Paul.
    1. Filled with the Spirit of the living Christ, Paul went forth to spread the good news to all who would believe.
    2. As set forth in the Book of Acts and his own letters, Paul followed the same asset based approach everywhere he went.
       1. He started by sharing with the religious leaders in the local synagogue.
       2. Each time he was quickly rejected because of the radical nature of the inclusive gospel he proclaimed.
       3. But that never stopped him. So what, who cares, did not matter that much anyway.
    3. Paul then went out into the community and embraced whatever people and assets were available.
       1. Most gentiles
       2. Low income and marginalized
       3. Preached in the market square or in people’s homes
    4. His approach worked, because he worked around the opposition.
       1. When appropriate he ignored, defied and violated the obstacles placed in his path.
       2. He never renounced his Jewish heritage or the core principles of his Jewish faith. Instead, he allowed the living Christ to use all of this for the foundation of what was coming next.
       3. His confidence was grounded in the greatest asset of all, the assurance that he was doing all of this in Christ.
11. The same is true today. As long as we stay in Christ and keep building the inclusive front porch, we can have confidence that there has never been a better time to be the church that does what the church is supposed to do.
    1. There are of course some prophets of doom who bemoan that the struggles confronting the church today are too much to overcome. And these struggles do seem to be Legion.
       1. Clergy sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic church
       2. False prophets in portions of the religious right who have ensnared authentic Christian love and witness with their xenophobia, nationalism, racial bigotry and narrow cultural biases
       3. Not to mention the current polarization and open talk of splitting apart in the United Methodist Church, to which many of us in the room belong.
    2. The struggles and obstacles are out there, but so what, who cares, doesn’t matter anyway.
    3. None of that stuff can stop us from doing what the church is supposed to do.
12. In this regard we have much in common with John and Charles Wesley, the founders of the Methodist movement.
    1. John Wesley was filled with a spiritual desire to share God’s love with folks who were being ignored and excluded by much of the established Anglican Church of his day.
    2. He taught a gospel of unconditional love and invited people to open themselves to the divine grace that sets in motion life transforming changes in each believer.
    3. Wesley’s preaching was truly good news to so many who were poor and marginalized in 18th century England and over in the American colonies.
13. Wesley also attracted the attention and opposition of the Church of England.
    1. When the Anglican Church hierarchy ordered John Wesley to stop preaching he refused to comply. Instead Wesley continued to preach and teach. When banned from parish churches, he preached in various outdoor settings.
       1. One Wesleyan scholar Heit describes it this way: “The open air preaching was called “field preaching”, even though it did not necessarily take place in the fields. Any open-air site sufficed, as long as people could gather and the preacher could be heard. By this method, the gospel could be brought to the people where they were, to people who could not or would not go to a church at the appointed hour for services. Wesley soon discovered that graveyards were a good location, with a tomb as a pedestal and the church as a backdrop and sounding board. Market squares were an even better amphitheater…” (Heit. P. 99)
       2. Not surprisingly most Church of England clergy condemned what John Wesley was doing in his methods of preaching outside the church walls as well as his content of “free grace” and universal redemption.
    2. As the movement caught hold, Wesley formed chapels where the Methodist Societies could meet that many viewed as being in direct conflict with the Anglican parish churches.
    3. Starting in 1739 Wesley began to appoint local lay preachers. He did this in large part because he was unable to convince most Anglican priests to join the movement.
       1. As an alternative he recruited and trained lay people to lead the Methodist societies, authorizing them to preach and do pastoral work.
       2. Needless to say, this generated even more consternation among the Anglican hierarchy, who were appalled that he went outside the established system of selecting pastoral leaders.
       3. Late in his life, Wesley went even further and openly defied the authority of the Anglican bishops by ordaining a few people on his own that he then immediately sent to the new United States of America to lead the Methodist people there.
       4. Wesley also ordained Thomas Coke as superintendent of the Methodists in America. He directed Coke to then ordain Francis Asbury as a second superintendent in America.
14. Despite all of these actions and the tensions created, John and Charles Wesley remained ordain pastors in the Church of England. They never withdrew. Never disaffiliated.
    1. In large part they stayed because they were so deeply rooted in their faith tradition. Their father had been an Anglican priest.
       1. This foundation had supported them across the years.
       2. As they had matured and grown in their understanding, they realized that this growth was still rooted in the Church of England.
       3. If they withdrew, then they risked cutting off their own roots and the spiritual sources they provided.
       4. Great wisdom here for you and me to ponder.
    2. In 1758 John Wesley wrote an essay entitled “***Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England***” in which he explained why he refused to disaffiliate.
       1. Wesley affirmed that he had been so committed for so long, he would never renounce what had nurtured him.
       2. He went on to point out that if he and Charles withdrew it would cause such an uproar that all sorts of other folks would also have to take sides, threatening to consume the good work of drawing people to fuller faith.
       3. Wesley also argued at the pragmatic level, disaffiliating would produce all sorts of new conflicts that he would have to address and that would undermine his primary work of preaching and teaching.
       4. And if they left, they would have to spend enormous time and effort creating new structures that might not to be that much better than what they would be leaving.
    3. But that did not mean the Wesleys had decided to conform. In fact three years later on April 10, 1761 John Wesley wrote a letter to a friend explaining why and for what reasons he repeatedly violated aspects of the rules of the Church of England, while choosing to remain inside the Church.
       1. In the letter Wesley acknowledged that by preaching outside the parish churches he had become an “irregular preacher”, yet he had been left no alternative. If he did not preach irregularly, he could not preach at all.
       2. He went on to explain, “It is [my] duty to submit to the laws of the Church and State, as far as they are consistent with good conscience…But woe is me, If I preach not the Gospel. This is not consistent with good conscience.”
       3. A little later Wesley continued, “This preaching is not subversive of any good order whatever; it is only subversive of that vile abuse of the good order of our Church, whereby men who neither preach nor live the Gospel …palm upon their congregations a wretched mixture of dead form and maimed morality.” (p.233)
       4. Wesley acknowledged that in some cases he authorized lay preachers who were not ordained and explained, “in some circumstances we do this, particularly where thousands are rushing into destruction, and those who are ordained, and appointed to watch over them, neither care for nor know how to help them.” (p. 235)
       5. I particularly like the section of the letter where Wesley emphasized, “***In every point of an indifferent nature (we) obey the Bishops for conscience’ sake. But (we) think Episcopal authority cannot reverse what is fixed by Divine authority. Yet (we) are determined never to renounce communion with the Church,*** ***unless they are cast out headlong***.” (p.236)
15. As you can tell I love to tell stories about the United Methodist Church for All People and the traditions which have shaped us. Yet, what relevance does any of this have for other congregations and denominations in these troubled times?
    1. For me the answer is simple. Our experience bears witness to the central truth there has never been a better time to be the church.
    2. This asset based approach to ministry is not limited to inner city neighborhoods or the development of affordable housing. This is how all ministry takes place.
    3. We start with what is available in the moment.
       1. Do not focus on needs or deficiencies.
       2. Stop bemoaning what is missing or the obstacles.
       3. There is nothing going on out there around us that can stop us from giving ourselves fully in ministry.
    4. No misguided efforts or legislation designed to keep some folks out can prevail as long as we keep opening the doors wider and wider, welcoming everyone in.
       1. You do not need anyone’s permission to keep following the great commandments to love God and love all the people who God made in the divine image.
       2. Stop worrying about what others think or the limitations they attempt to institute upon you. Who cares, so what, doesn’t matter anyway.
       3. There has never been a better, more important time to just be the church
16. We have the opportunity to be the harbingers of a new 21st century Wesleyan revival where once again the gospel of grace and love is being extended in ever increasing scope and breadth. It should therefore come as no surprise that the radical message of God’s grace transforming the lives of all people, especially those who have been ignored by the established church is being met with opposition in many quarters.
    1. We can gain inspiration as we learn from the Apostle Paul and the witness of John and Charles Wesley. Like them we can faithfully preach good news and extend the love of the church to all people, no matter what the organized Church may say. We can ignore orders to stop or prohibitions intended to silence our ministries.
    2. At the same time, we can choose to continue to identify ourselves as United Methodists or other communions operating in good faith and good order, even complying with the rules of the institutional church that do not violate our authentic preaching and living the Gospel.
    3. The Wesleys did this without “being thrown out headlong”. Perhaps we by God’s grace will be able to do the same.
17. Finally, I invite each of you to step out boldly believing the people in your congregation and community are the primary assets. Just keep loving on and with them.
    * 1. Listen to their dreams and aspirations.
      2. Then join together and go to work building an inclusive community right where you live and worship.
      3. Give forward your five loaves, along with your neighbor’s two fish.
      4. Never denigrate what you have to offer, no matter how meager it may seem to you in the moment.
    1. The entire Christian community is intended to be a Church for all people. It is up to us to keep building this church into an authentic front porch of the kingdom of God.
       1. Nothing can stop us, as long as we do what the church is supposed to do.
       2. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was right, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”
    2. Oh to some it may seem the best of times. To others the worst of times. Yet, with eyes of faith it becomes so clear, there has never been a better time to be church.