

AC 2017: Bishop Hope Morgan Ward's Sermon

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

We celebrate the family of United Methodist people in the North Carolina Annual Conference and we celebrate our partnership with United Methodist people around the world. Together, we are a strong chain in ministry, sharing the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ out into the world.

With glad and generous hearts, we began our Annual Conference session. These beautiful hearts, made by a mission partner in Haiti, were gifts given to every person who came forward for Holy Communion in the opening worship. As we received the bread and the cup, we received this tangible reminder of the heart of God. This heart of God - always generous, always compassionate, never failing in mercy - is the fount of all our life in ministry together.

As United Methodists in eastern North Carolina, we share with glad and generous hearts out into the world. Our founder John Wesley said, "The world is my parish." He meant that "wherever in the world I am, that is my parish. That is the place where I share this overwhelming love of God. That is the place where my heart overflows, my cup overflows, my life overflows in mission."

That is the place where we engage in ministry. We begin in our local places and then we extend that life out into all the world. We commission missionaries and we support them in places all around the world. Volunteer and mission teams have experiences of the overflowing heart. We find our hearts filled to overflowing whenever we engage in God's world in helpful ministry with God's people. This mission is the heart of who we are as United Methodist people.

Our theme for this quadrennium is the great generosity of God flowing from God's overwhelming heart of compassion and we focus together on making disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of this entire world. We believe that will happen in every place as we do five things. We help every congregation be a healthy community of Christ followers. We help leaders grow in their capacity to shepherd God's people, lay and clergy leaders in every place. We go across the street to the nearest and most in-need of the public schools in our community and we partner with them to meet the needs of children. Through Congregations for Children initiative with public schools, 83% of our churches are in meaningful partnership, overflowing to the children in our communities who are in need.

We also focus on health and wellness. The early Methodists claimed this as a central piece of Methodist ministry, believing that abundant life is offered now as we are alive in this world, even as a foretaste of heavenly abundant and eternal life. Health and abundant life is God's gift to all people and we want to be a part of cultivating that in every community.

And fifth, we focus on unity and reconciliation. We want to be a people in love with one another. Jesus said, "The world will know who I am because of the way you love one another." We want to be never-failing in our love for one another so that in our communities, people will turn toward our churches and say, as the ancient Christians said, "See how they love one another."

Together, we are God's people, engaged in these five ways: healthy congregations, effective leaders, congregations for children, health and wellness, and unity. As I thought and prayed and read through the scriptures, looking for scriptural evidence of God's overwhelming love, I was overwhelmed, because it seems to be on every page of the Bible; the stories of God's abundant grace, God's ever-flowing heart. I delighted in a verse which I discovered – my strength, my heart may fail, the psalmist says in Psalm 73, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. We are weak, but God is strong. Our ministry flows because Jesus, who was rich, became poor for our sakes, so that we who are poor might become rich, in all the abundant blessing before God.

Perhaps the best-loved Psalm of all is Psalm 23, the Shepherd's Psalm. Remember it with me and give thanks for the images of God's great abundance.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. There is no need for me to be afraid, to think that there is scarcity because God leads me beside still waters and toward green pastures. God restores my soul. Even if I walk through the darkest valley, even the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil because God is with me. God's presence never fails us. The psalmist is right. What a beautiful expression of God abundance. My cup over flows, the psalmist says. Surely goodness and mercy follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Goodness, mercy, overflowing to us. Our cups run over. May that be the centerpiece of our meditations during these days. Our cups overflow.

Let us name the ways in which we are blessed. God gives us strength and life day by day; to love and serve God, to love one another well and to live outward into the world with grace and with overwhelming compassion. As you reach out into the world, into your community, may the Holy Spirit be with you. May you be blessed as you are a blessing and may you serve day by day with glad and generous hearts.