

Bishop Hope Morgan Ward – Sacred Witness NC (3/28/19)

Hear these words from Psalm 36:

"How precious is your steadfast love, O God. All people may rest within the shadow of your wings. They feast at the abundance of your table and they drink from the wellspring of your great delight, for with you is light and life."

This, my friends, is a Wesleyan Methodist psalm. It captures the spirit of who we are at our very best. This little word A-L-L, all, is said to be the favorite Methodist word, the favorite Wesleyan word. It is that because our forebears, the Wesleys, saw in scripture so often the word "all" and embraced it for the people called Methodist. As we sing hymns, as we preach, as we read the scripture, listen for that word and you will hear it over and over and over again. And so in this time, we bring our witness of our commitment to that resonant all - all people may rest within the shadow of your wings. And in these days, in the middle of Lent, we remember as we approach the table, the feasting table of the people of God, the communion table, that we often pray this prayer of confession: "We have not been an obedient church, we have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves."

Tonight, I humbly pray that prayer in your midst because we, as a church, have lost our way, not only in the decisions which we have made but in the way, the mode, the manner in which we have engaged with one another. Tonight is a time to renew our connection with one another, our commitment to move into the future that God is still giving The United Methodist Church. Sam spoke so beautifully a moment ago about how each one of us has a place in the movement toward the inclusion of all people, the welcome, the full welcome of all people into the life of the church, the full blessing of the church upon people who love one another and upon families that are configured in ways that are not the majority configuration of years gone by.

As we live together in Christ, it is important for us to love one another well, for us to encourage one another in our ministries. There are things as a bishop which I am called to do, and there are things which you as clergy are called to do, and there are other things that you as laity are called to do. Together, God can weave a magnificent tapestry of the gifts, the commitments, the opportunities, the words, the ways in which we will live and lead.

As we move forward, waiting for the Judicial Council to decide on the constitutionality of the legislation that was passed at General Conference, it's my commitment to continue to engage with people who are United Methodist across Eastern North Carolina, to continue to seek to draw us together across our differences. Of all the families, all the conferences of The United Methodist Church, we have a unique history in the last 20 years. In 1998, rather than debate this matter, there was a motion passed that we would have dialogue with one another, and that's been referenced a couple of times and consistently, for 20 years, we have continued seeking to engage with one another in deep and honest conversation, to live peacefully with one another across the divides of those who are gathered here tonight and of others who feel very very differently.

Let us not fail to be an obedient church. Let us not fail to love one another well even across the divides. Let us respond as Jesus would respond, to live like Jesus in this time of divisiveness, not only in the life of our church but in the life of our nation and in the life of our world.

As we move forward together, may the grace of God fall upon us. As we move forward together, I invite your prayers for me as I will continue to pray for you and the entire family of our annual conference, all 790 congregations across the expanse of eastern North Carolina. We are called to live differently in the world. We are called to live differently with one another. We are called to welcome all and as we move forward together, may the Holy Spirit grant us courage to be faithful, may we be strong, may we speak the truth in love, may we stand for justice, may we be gently strong and strongly gentle so that our life together as well as our words, our commitments, our signatures give witness that God reigns, that God reigns over us and God is not through with us. In fact, God has only begun to do what God intends to do through us and with us.

Thank you for the invitation to renew together our commitment to be God's faithful people tonight and always.