



Central Conference Pension Initiative

Supporting Security For Those Who Serve The United Methodist Church

Sermon Starters: Texts and Notes

The following are six texts and pre-sermon notes for preachers. They are written by a United Methodist pastor who has experience administering our Church's mission and pension programs, and who now serves as the director of Central Conference Pension Administration.

The Reverend Paul Dirdak, Lent, 2009

1. "Some lowered a paralytic through the roof..." Luke 5: 17-26

Jesus sits in a crowded house. There are so many people already inside, that the building is effectively sealed against any newcomers. He has not had the presence of mind to adjourn the session to the out-of-doors. A few who are not part of the in-crowd are so ardent in their intent to see him on behalf of their damaged friend that they willfully vandalize the building. The text is so emphatic about the violence that these people do to their neighbor's house that it refers to their act of destruction twice.

Those who carry the paralytic's bier will stop at nothing. They will cross any boundary, any barrier, even any social convention to get what their friend requires. Jesus, himself, marvels at their persistence, even if his householder/host will suffer a pernicious roof leak for years to come.

We United Methodist elders can imagine a very similar conversation: "we have a colleague who has the same credentials that we do, maybe an even better education than we have, has built and carried churches like we want to, but we are protected and he isn't." All of us have gone to the mat for a colleague during the old "executive sessions," now the "clergy session." But this time the colleague is half a globe away and starving in the street after a lifetime of preaching and teaching and leading. It is time—past time—that we put an end to it. We are not being asked to "dig up" anyone's roof, but we are asked to go to extremes. And Jesus, despite the over-full house, will welcome us when we do.

2. "The poor you will always have with you" John 12:1-7

There are two pronouns in Jesus' sentence: "you" and, again, "you." In the passage just before the famous quotation, we learn to whom "you" refers. He is speaking to his disciples who have just reproved a woman for having poured an expensive vial of oil on Jesus as an expression of her love for him. Their anger is kindled because they wanted Jesus' undivided attention for themselves, so they rebuke the woman with the rather superior pronouncement that she should have sold the ointment and given the money to the poor. Jesus' approach is that anyone who has the disciples' view of poverty, and of their way to resolve it, will never succeed. The attitude expressed by the disciples would always perpetuate poverty. Monetizing small luxuries—buying relief supplies and, in effect, kicking sundry bags of rice off the tailgate of the truck—treats the poor as objects. Jesus came to show us a better way. God does not know God's people as objects, but as heirs. He comes

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among us in the same form as we came, as an infant. He gave us one who faced the same death that we face and stared it down. God does not objectify us and reveals to us in Jesus how the world can change if we choose not to objectify others.

United Methodists in the central conferences are often very poor. If we relate to them as objects of our charity, we will always have poverty. If our relationship is one of systems for sustainable, self-funded livelihood, such as bona fide pensions, we and they will overcome the obstacles of poverty—together.

3. “Their poverty welled up in extreme generosity...” II Corinthians 8:2

Many of us have sat in African congregations and remarked upon the time for the offering. Everyone comes forward in a long line and deposits her or his humble offering in a basket. In some places there are baskets for each of the class meetings and the meeting leader holds it. All can see the classes coming forward to support the church. In other places, at the end of the offering, the baskets are emptied upon the altar during a hymn and the treasurer counts the offering in front of the whole congregation so that there is no mistake. When the givers come forward, they dance up the aisle. The young ones swing and stomp and sing. The old ones shuffle forward, knees slightly bent, swaying almost imperceptibly to the music, small coins tightly clutched in front using both hands, the offering fists beating out the time. But they come as if it were their most holy moment. They are offering themselves.

I was reminded about the full extent of the contributions being offered when the poor move down a center aisle to deposit their gifts. A few years ago, I helped the church put together a prosthesis project to replace legs in Angola where there were nearly 1.5 land mines per person. The legs we made were not high tech; they were made of wood, sheet metal and rubber bands so that any family could learn to make them and replace them. These house-made prostheses worked better in an unpaved country than the fiberglass, resin and stainless steel varieties, and the users could get up and down from the floor to tend to their children without taking them off. When each family had been taught to make the legs they needed, the users needed to find a flat, level, hard place where they could learn to walk again. Often the only such place was the center aisle in the local church. So time after time, these severely wounded and newly enabled would learn to walk again up the church’s aisle.

I will never forget watching poor people bring their meager offerings to their class meetings’ baskets. But I also have never forgotten seeing wounded people bravely bringing what is left of their bodies up those same church aisles, and doing so to learn new and competent capacities to walk. People like these give their whole selves, every year, for a lifetime of years, with a toothless smile and a musical gate. And among them are our colleagues.

4. “Each tree is recognized by its own fruit” Luke 6:44

In many African cultures there are variations of a common aphorism, “A scarred tree bears good fruit.” One of the old, old, Methodist mission stations still has mango trees that were hybridized by a missionary many years ago. The trees are immense and have halos of bright red, beautiful mangos high in the tops. How to get them down? For generations, the people have been using their favorite method. They throw small stones at the high mangos to knock them down. Every time they miss (quite often, actually) the stone hits the tree trunk and leaves a bruise. Over the years, the trees with the best fruit are the ones with the most dings and cuts and scratches and scars. So it is with people, and thus the usefulness of the aphorism. Do some of John Wesley’s “worn-out preachers”

in the central conferences appear to be rather banged up, missing digits and limbs, having lost an eye or two, having lost a tooth or a whole mouth full? Well, now you know. They are the ones who have born good fruit, and their church is more grateful than it can say.

5. “Rejoice...I have found my lost coin.” Luke 15:9

We in the United States have encountered a major economic crisis. It was preceded by some other, smaller, crises. Taken together, they have popularized the reference to a “bubble.” The “dot-com bubble” has been followed a few years later by the recent, much lamented, “housing bubble.” What is a bubble? It is a very small piece of air surrounded by an even smaller piece of soap water. Therefore, when it pops, there is very little to be found in its place. Now, the fact is that some of our money was in the bubble and some of it was not. When the bubble popped, the money in the bubble vanished, but it also pulled down palaces of money that were not in the bubble. That is a crisis and it hurts. But to pretend that we “lost” the part of our money that was in the bubble is to miss an important point. What we lost may have been our own credibility, but it was not real value—a bubble is a bubble. The fact is that we did not “have it,” in any real sense, to start with. So, to complain of having lost it is to misunderstand what happened. When Jesus has a woman sweep her whole house to find a single coin, neither the fact of having something valuable, nor the fact of losing it are figurative—they are real and tangible. When the poor learn strategies for actual livelihood, such as pension plan membership, the value that they need—behind their money—is actual; it is their survival. When we, like them, lose outside the bubble, the losses are serious and we hope that good planning can minimize that loss. But when we, unlike them, appear to lose what was always in a bubble—that is, what was never “real,” we should wonder whether we “had” anything of genuine value in the beginning. In other words, if we find ourselves suddenly wealthier than we ever thought possible, it is probably because we aren’t.

6. Easter Sunday: Mission and Colleagues Luke 24: 46-48

“He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.’”

We preachers, you and I, have led congregations through the resurrection story year after year. We have recited it from the vantage of each of its several biblical witnesses and we have recounted the tale from its beginning and from each of its recapitulations and summaries. In Luke’s case, only one out of four gospels—the final chapter that we now set in the gospel text that we name for him—contains three recapitulations. The story is retold by the women at the tomb, by the disciples on the road to Emmaus and by the disciples gathered later, back at Jerusalem. Luke goes on in Acts to recount the events again and again through the voices of Peter, John, Stephen, Cornelius, Barnabus and Saul, both before and after Saul was re-named Paul.

Such repetition! But all these recitations turn around the only case in which Jesus speaks the tale, itself, directly and on his own behalf. And in that case, 24:46-48, the Easter story is essentially Jesus’ own description of mission. That forgiveness is extended to far places is his summary of Easter, the culmination of his witness among us. Guilt and violation need no longer be prosecuted *ad infinitum*. Wars and offenses need no longer be traded back and forth among offenders and defenders. We no longer need fear one another because our lives are safe on this side of the River

Styx or on the other. Maximal repentance and forgiveness can redeem all nations beginning with our own. That is the gospel according to Jesus, accounted by Luke. And all its recitations turn on the one recitation by Jesus, himself, and it is the call to mission.

Our colleagues at the core of mission are not our extracurricular activity. They are our activity. They are the “business end” of our whole program, just as we are of theirs. Pray for them as they do for us. But while you are praying, also see to their and our lives. The life of your colleague in ministry may be your most precious gift from God. Defend it with your life, for surely your Ugandan colleague and your Russian colleague and your Filipina colleague and your Swedish colleague and your Congolese colleague all defend yours.