

February 17/18, 2018
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A Way Forward- Temptation

St. Paul UMC, Omaha
Mark 1:9-15

I imagine that when the District Superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Omaha District found out in mid-1920's that the Omaha Country Club and Golf Course were moving from its Dundee/Benson location to an area to the north and west, from away from the growing city of Omaha that he sensed an opportunity was at hand. Since 1899 the Omaha Country Club stretched from Maple Street on the north to Blondo Street on the south, between what would be 52nd Street on the east and 56th Street on the west. With the golf course moving the land left behind was going to be developed for housing. There might be space for at least one church in this new sub-division, at what would be about 54th & Maple Streets.

The District Superintendent knew that it would be a prime location for a church but he also knew that the Methodist church had already had three congregations in the general area. Might there be "a way forward" for these three congregations to come together and create a very strong Methodist presence on this new prime location? To figure out "a way forward" he had to talk with the pastors and church leaders of the three existing congregations to lift up the idea. Then the Bishop of the Nebraska Methodist Episcopal Conference would need to bless the ambitious endeavor.

"A Way Forward" was found because the three congregations merged and new church building was established as St. Paul Methodist Episcopal Church right here under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Lyle in 1930. Since that time Radial Highway was built and that chopped off some of our north church yard and parking space. In addition, the Methodist Episcopal Church merged with the Evangelical United Church in 1968 with the result this congregation becoming St. Paul United Methodist Church. The way forward was found for St. Paul to be born when the Omaha Country Club moved locations.

We are now at a fork in the road looking for "A Way Forward" as a local church and as a denomination. Did you know that?

As a local church the days of hundreds of people in each worship service and five full-time clergy on the staff are a memory. In 1930 when St. Paul was founded people in Omaha thought of 54th and Maple as the far edge of town in just the same way we think of 204th and Maple today. In the 30 through 60's this was the growing part of town. Now we are well east of center city and therefore need to image ourselves and our ministry in a new manner. The "Way Forward" for St. Paul in 1970 was vastly different from the way forward in 1930. Again the way forward in 2020 is vastly different from the way forward in 1970 or 1930. We are in the midst of discerning our way forward. For the last six months we have had a twelve member Vision Team discerning what that "Way Forward" might be. They will report their ideas at the church council meeting in March.

In another manner our denomination, the United Methodist Church is also discerning its "Way Forward." I have been reporting this to you through our church newsletter over the past six months. Let me give you a recap. Every four years the United Methodist Church has elected representatives, equal number of clergy and church members, meet in what is called General Conference. The General Conference which is hosted by the Council of Bishops reviews and revises the Book of Discipline (Rules for Church, local, regional and global) and Book of Resolutions (statements of faith on Social Issues).

Changes and revisions are made to each Book through petitions submitted by U.M. individuals or groups for General Conference delegates to consider. Sometimes those changes are seismic in nature. During the 1860's petitions regarding slavery in America split the denomination and the Methodist Church South and North did not reunite until 1939.

In the later 1800's and early 1900's petitions were made to allow women delegates to attend General Conference. It took a number of General Conferences but it eventually passed.

Right now our denomination is looking for a way forward on another issue that is seismic in nature. It regards our guidelines on ordination and marriage for Lesbians, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgression persons, commonly referred to as the LGBT community. Currently the United Methodist Church affirms that all persons, including the LGBT community, are persons of worth and children of God. Although there is an affirmation of worth the guidelines do not allow for ordination or marriage of self-identifying LGBT persons within the United Methodist Church.

As these issues were raised for consideration at the 2016 General Conference all agreed that there was not any consensus regarding a unified way forward. In fact, it looked as if there would be a split in the United Methodist Church. All proceeding halted as the members of General Conference requested that the Council of Bishops immediately address the issues and present a possible way forward. The Council of Bishops recommended the General Conference conclude all other business and place the LGBT issues on hold. The 2016 General Conference concluded its business and we are currently on hold regarding LGBT issues before our denomination.

There is a timeline for being “on hold” and specific steps are being taken. There will be a special session of General Conference next February in St. Louis to address LGBT issues specifically and future guidelines for the church. If there is not agreement on a way forward together the General Conference will provide guidelines for a thoughtful and respectful process for a split as two denominations may emerge from what is now the United Methodist Church. Yet, in the meantime, the Council of Bishops commissioned a 32 member group representing the many perspectives within the United Methodist Church to meet and provide recommendations on a way forward. They are called the “Commission on the Way Forward.” You can do an internet search on just that, Commission on the Way Forward, to read about its meetings over the last two years and their ongoing updates. The Commission on the Way Forward will make a report to the Council on Bishops this spring. The Council of Bishops will then provide a report to all United Methodists later in the spring or early summer this year. Then the special General Conference of the United Methodist Church will meet next February and decisions will be made. It will provide the official “way forward.”

In the midst of all of this we at St. Paul will be pro-active in preparation for whatever comes to pass at the St. Louis General Conference next year. We are starting with small group conversations this Lenten season. Your pastors will host study/discussion opportunities each week (Wednesdays at 7 p.m. and Thursdays at 10 a.m.) using the study guide “Toward a Faithful United Methodist Witness” developed by the General Board of Higher Education of the United Methodist Church. This summer your pastors again will host small groups so we can read and discuss the report the Council of Bishops provide this spring. We will wait to see if the larger church provides other study and discussion materials that we can utilize in the fall as we try to prepare ourselves here at St. Paul for the way forward following General Conference in February 2019.

The temptation whenever we are not sure what is going to come to pass in our lives is to be ruled by our emotions and therefore act before we think. Emotion based actions are not a healthy “Way Forward.” Yet, the wisdom of the 2016 General Conference gave us time to gather and talk. We will use that gift of time and join together in thoughtful and prayerful ways knowing that God will provide a Way Forward for St. Paul and the larger United Methodist Church.

In our gospel lesson from Mark this weekend, 1:9-15, we see Jesus is about to find his way forward for his public ministry.

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well

pleased.”¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Up to this point in time Jesus seemingly lived a private life. As he travels from Galilee to visit John at the Jordan River he is thinking about the way forward for his public actions of teaching, healing, challenging the status quo of Israel’s leadership and ushering in the kingdom of God. As he considers the way forward he perceives that step one is to be baptized by John. He does that and receives a divine affirmation as he hears that God is “pleased” by his actions.

What’s next? Jesus had many options regarding his next steps, some good and some bad as we read,
¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

No doubt Jesus had thought about his public ministry for years but now it was go time. The Spirit drives him into the wilderness to think through his next steps, his way forward, one last time before he acts. I think the temptations given to him by Satan refer to the bad options he thought of as he considered moving forward. Yet, with thought, prayer, and angels waiting on him Jesus discerned the best game plan for the way forward.

He went to the crowds to reiterate the message of John the Baptist, the kingdom of God has come near and therefore repent/prepare for it. Then he added the positive boost “believe in the good news.”

Think of the many times in your life when the way forward was not clear. Jesus provides a good model for us when that happens. First, let the Spirit of God to guide us, even if that is alone time in our wilderness. Second, consider the options and in the process reject the easy temptations. Third, remain hopeful when the way forward is not clear and believe that God will reveal the good news.

That process is good for us individually and collectively as a church or denomination as we consider the Way Forward.