

DAKOTAS CONFERENCE

CONTINUE THE NAMING

Acts 3:1-10; 4:5-12
Celebration of Life in Ministry

September 18, 2020
Sioux Falls, SD

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ, whose name is above all names.

This evening we gather to celebrate those called by God and set apart for ministry among the people within the Dakotas Conference.

We gather to remember, with profound respect and adoration, those who have finished their course in faith and now rest with Christ from their labor. We praise God for graciously receiving each of our beloved colleagues, friends, and family members into His presence and into the glorious company of the saints of light. They bear witness that, even in death, our hope is in Christ Jesus. On behalf of a grateful Dakotas Conference, I extend to the families and friends of these we mourn, our deepest sympathy. May God grant us grace, that in pain we might find comfort, in sorrow hope, in death resurrection.

We also gather to celebrate the remarkable service of the 2020 retirement class. Their witness and work, their sacrifice and service, their prayers and purpose in ministry have set a standard for all of us. We thank God for each of you, your distinguished careers, your faithful discipleship and your kingdom fruits. I share the sentiments Paul expressed to Philemon:

⁴ Philemon, I thank my God every time I mention you in my prayers ⁵ because I've heard of your love and faithfulness, which you have both for the Lord Jesus and for all God's people. ... ⁷ I have great joy and encouragement because of your love, since the hearts of God's people are refreshed by your actions, my brother.

Philemon, verses 4, 5, 7 (CEB)

The 2020 retirement class has collectively contributed 405 years of service to Christ and The United Methodist Church. We and all of God's people in the Dakotas and beyond are the beneficiaries of your service.

We gather this evening for yet another reason, as well. We celebrate those who have said yes to God's call upon their lives and are being credentialed as licensed local pastors or commissioned as provisional elders. It is a holy privilege to be a part of your journey into vocational ministry. I affirm with Peter, the Rock upon which Jesus built the Church:

“Everything that goes into a life of pleasing God has been miraculously given to you by getting to know, personally and intimately, the One who invited you to God. The best invitation you ever received!”

II Peter 1:3-4 (The Message)

Today, the Dakotas Conference and the Church universal affirms “the best invitation you ever received.” We delight in thanking God for each of you saying “yes” to God’s invitation!

Please pray with me:

Holy and merciful God, send your Holy Spirit
to bless this Celebration of Life in Ministry.
Awaken in us the sacred memories of loved ones
who are a source of resurrection hope and eternal light in our lives.
Grant to those who are entering into a season of retirement
the satisfaction of a journey well done and the joy of rest and renewal.
Anoint those who will be licensed and commissioned
with the assurance and authority of your abiding presence.
Prompt and warm the hearts of those
who may yet be discerning your invitation to ministry,
to respond with clarity and conviction.
Revive in all of us the courage and commitment,
the urgency and passion, the hope and joy,
to lift up the name of Jesus to the lost, the least, the left out.
Open our hearts and minds and souls, by the power of your Holy Spirit,
to hear with expectation and wonder
your Word for us on this sacred occasion,
and unleash us to go forth to be the light and live hope.
In the precious and powerful name of Jesus. Amen.

I am very mindful that this is the final Celebration of Life in Ministry I will preside over in the Dakotas Conference. I am very mindful this is the final class of clergy I will license, commission or ordain in the Dakotas Conference. Including the two outstanding candidates seated before me this evening and those I will commission and ordain in Minnesota in October, I will have commissioned 286 clergy and ordained 339 clergy since being elected a bishop in 2000. Each and every one has been a personal spiritual blessing and privilege for me. I am equally mindful this is the last sermon I will preach at a Dakotas Conference session as your resident bishop.

So, I am going to preach a sermon some of you may have heard in other settings because it conveys the final word, the final instruction, the final encouragement I want to leave with you. Continue to name the name of Jesus! Continue the naming!

It was after Jesus' Resurrection. It was after Jesus gave his disciples the Great Commission. It was after Jesus' Ascension. It was after Pentecost. Peter and John were walking to the temple in Jerusalem when a lame beggar asked them for help. Peter took the beggar by the hand and said, "I don't have a nickel to my name, but what I do have, I give you: **In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, rise up and walk.**" (Acts 3:6)

How many times have we thought we can't do ministry because we don't have enough nickels, and forgotten that what we do have is the presence and power of the Risen Christ? To the astonishment of the witnesses, the man was instantly healed, and danced around and praised God. A crowd gathered, wondering how such a miracle was possible. When Peter saw he had a congregation, he did what every good pastor would do – he began to preach! He began to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus. This is the same Jesus whose betrayal and crucifixion the Jewish religious authorities had plotted. The same Jesus they were afraid of had, indeed, risen from the dead.

The priests and Sadducees were so upset that they had Peter and John arrested. But, the problem was not that Peter healed the lame man. There were all sorts of itinerant preachers and magicians and wonder-workers in first-century Palestine. The problem was that Peter healed a man in the name of Jesus. You'll recall, the priests and Sadducees did not question Peter and John about whether or not a healing took place. They questioned them about the source of that healing. "By what power or by what name did you do this?" The high priests knew there was power in the name of the risen Jesus. Greater power than theirs. They were worried. They were threatened. They were embarrassed. They knew that there was power in the name of Jesus.

- Power to save.
- Power to forgive sins.
- Power to heal.
- Power to right injustice.
- Power to conquer death.
- Power to bring peace.
- Power to do miracles.
- Power to set people free.
- Power to turn the world upside down.

Dakotas Conference, I urge you to let the naming continue!

The name of Jesus is as controversial in our day as it was when Peter and John appeared before the Sanhedrin. Then, as now, people do not object to "wonders" or miracles so much as to faith claims about Jesus Christ. Too often, the way we live and proclaim our faith is calculated not to offend any contemporary Pharisees or Sadducees we encounter. There are times and circumstances when we bend over backward to avoid claiming the power of Jesus' name.

Almost anything is preferable to hearing others talk about what Jesus means to them; or being, God forbid, asked what Jesus means to us.

Too often we have abandoned the name of Jesus and given it over to passionate religious eccentrics, fundamentalists or blasphemers. We are proud that we would never act like them. Sadly, the result is that all too often, we do not have much to say about Jesus, in public witness or private conversation. And, the result is that the world does not know that the reason we do no harm and do good and witness for peace and justice is because of Jesus. All too often, we are afraid or reluctant or embarrassed to tell our personal Jesus stories, even when we know our story is what God will use to talk about God to others. We need to be bold and continue naming the name of Jesus. Dakotas United Methodists, it is time to let the naming continue!

Too often, the name of Jesus is conspicuous by its absence. Several years ago, I drove up to a church in West Ohio to speak at their centennial worship celebration. A huge banner was hung on the side of the church: "Celebrating 100 Years of Community Presence." Community presence? What is that? Is that anything distinct from what the Lions Club or Rotary Club or Chamber of Commerce or local bank or lumberyard could claim? I pray that when a similar banner next goes up on the side of that church building, or any church building in the Dakotas, it says, "Celebrating 100 Years of Proclaiming the Name of Jesus."

- When Jesus' name is not proclaimed, his power to heal and forgive and transform is not experienced by God's people.
- When Jesus' name is not proclaimed, his power is removed from the stuff of life around us.
- When Jesus' name is not proclaimed, the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice and oppression evaporates.
- When Jesus' name is not proclaimed, his power to bind us to God, our Creator, is lost.
- When Jesus' name is not proclaimed, intimacy with Jesus evaporates and we starve for grace and love and joy.
- When Jesus' name is not proclaimed, we cannot be the light rising in the darkness.

Please, please, let the naming continue!

I need to confess to you that I, at times, have been a reckless bishop! Maybe it is my advanced age! Maybe it is my futuristic and visioning strengths. Maybe it is Holy Spirit-inspired imagination. For eight years:

- I recklessly envisioned every congregation in the Dakotas Conference being a healthy, growing, spiritually vital center for making new disciples.
- I recklessly called us to start new congregations, new satellites, new faith communities and new worship services – to multiply our kingdom work and witness.
- I recklessly called us to raise millions of dollars for congregational development and to raise up the next generation of clergy leaders.

- I recklessly led us into expanding our outreach into the Bakken.
- I recklessly urged us to stand against the sins of racism and xenophobia, to embrace the sojourners and immigrants, to protect the vulnerable and to welcome all to the Table of Grace.
- I recklessly called for every Dakotas congregation to embrace and build capacity around Jesus' core missional imperatives: love God and neighbor, reach new people and heal a broken world.

But, now for a healthy dose of truth and gospel. As important as it is for the Dakotas Conference and each of our churches to have a clear, concise vision for making new Christian disciples, **vision is not enough**. As important as it is for us to have a strategic plan for congregational growth and vitality, **strategies are not enough**. As important as it is for us to invest significant capital to start new or revitalize ministries, **money is not enough**. The only thing that will ultimately give true energy and integrity to our mission and vision is reaching the lost, forming them into disciples and sending them to be servant leaders – disciples and leaders who are willing and able, like Peter and John, to proclaim to a hungry, hurting, hopeless world:

- In the name of the risen Jesus Christ, stand up and walk.
- In the name of the risen Jesus, you are healed.
- In the name of the risen Jesus, you are forgiven.
- In the name of the risen Jesus, receive new life.
- In the name of Jesus, be unleashed.
- In the name of Jesus, be the light – live hope.

Dear friends, creating vital, missional congregations is, by definition, a resurrection revolution. Missional congregations are, by definition, every-day Easter experiences. Making a new disciple is, by definition, unleashing a person from their grave clothes. Transforming the world is, by definition, making the Kingdom reality every person's every-day reality. Let the naming continue! Are you ready to continue the naming? Dakotas Conference, are you ready?

Some people shy away from the name of Jesus because they are troubled by verse 12 and its seemingly exclusive claims. Let me remind you what it says. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given us by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) Some shrink away from evangelism that seems to proclaim no salvation outside Jesus Christ. What about people who never had the opportunity to hear the gospel? Remote tribes and such? Or, what about truly devoted persons from other faith traditions? You know, our Jewish, Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist brothers and sisters? But, I suspect we are less concerned about well-meaning people in faraway places as we are anxious to excuse ourselves from bearing witness to Christ right where we are – in our families, work places, neighborhoods.

This gets to the root of the matter. We often lack the boldness to use the name of Jesus because we are afraid of that power in our own lives. The prospect of a life-changing encounter with the living Lord is awesome and terrifying, and some of us, even in the church, aren't ready

for that. Why, it might change the very systems which we have built and over which we preside. Now that would be meddling! Why, it might mean acknowledging one's privilege and position of power. That could lead to inversion; talk about meddling. It might mean being unleashed from our joyless, debilitating cynicism, disunity and resentment so that new life might spring forth. That would really be meddling. It might call for the extravagant generosity and stewardship of all God's gifts – including our planet. That would be sacrificial meddling. It might change your congregation. That would be extreme meddling. Oh, God, hear our yearning, aching hearts, and empower us to let the naming continue!

I preached my first sermon in the Dakotas Conference at four regional Installation Services in the Fall of 2012. In those services I told a story about an encounter I had with Rev. James Forbes, then senior pastor of Riverside Church in New York City. I have told the story all across the Dakotas Conference for the last eight years. I want to share it again in my last sermon to the Dakotas Conference. For those who have heard it, thank you for indulging me.

During an Upper Room Academy for Spiritual Formation session many years ago, I heard Dr. James Forbes speak of his airline travel experience. Even in retirement, Dr. Forbes remains one of the prominent preachers in this country. He receives and responds to many invitations to preach and teach. He shared with us that in his travels he generally found himself seated next to strangers. In most cases, a litany of introduction began to develop. You know this litany. "Where are you going? Where are you from? Do you fly often? Is this a business or pleasure trip?" Somewhere in the conversation, the question always popped up: "What do you do for a living?" Dr. Forbes responded by informing his seatmates that he was a preacher. He reported that it always stopped the conversation.

Over time, Dr. Forbes began to feel that the answer to the question, "What do you do for a living?" was inadequate, in part because of his traveling companions often had exotic vocations as engineers, actors, CEOs of major corporations, politicians and the like. Dr. Forbes felt he needed a different, more commanding way to describe his vocation. So he gave the matter considerable thought and prayer, and prepared himself for his next trip. Sure enough, on his very next trip he found himself seated next to a man who quickly and obligingly initiated the litany. "Where are you from? Where are you going? Is this a business or pleasure trip?" Finally, the question Dr. Forbes was eagerly anticipating – "What do you do for a living?" Without so much as a flinch, Dr. Forbes looked the man in the eye and said, "I'm in the business of raising the dead! I'm in the business of raising the dead!" Dr. Forbes reported that this comment also stopped the conversation.

What a wonderful description of who we are as Christians. What a wonderful metaphor for our mission of making and equipping disciples of Jesus Christ. This has been my personal mission statement from the day I heard it. What a wonderful and playful, yet utterly profound formula for our calling to be the light rising in the darkness – to be the hope of the world. We are in the business of raising the dead! We are called to declare:

- that there is hope after despair;
- that grace is available to those who are sin-sick and ravaged by guilt;
- that justice prevails over injustice;
- that economic exploitation and poverty are unacceptable;
- that all God's children are our children;
- that evil is not victorious;
- that war is not God's way;
- that there is life after death.

We are called to proclaim a resurrected Christ; to tear away the grave clothes; to drive out the stench of death and oppression; to proclaim liberty and to set the people free. We are called to proclaim, witness to, and live resurrection – the promise of new life, new love, new hope, new joy, new possibilities. Sisters and brothers, let the naming continue! Let the name of the risen Jesus be lifted up. "Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, till all the world adore his sacred name." (Hymn 159, *The United Methodist Hymnal*)

Dear friends in Christ, especially those coming to be commissioned this evening, hold fast to this eternal reality:

- Naming Jesus will turn your life upside down.
- Naming Jesus puts you in the presence of the resurrected Savior.
- Naming Jesus brings you face to face with the One who knows your failures and weaknesses and anxieties, but also your strengths and gifts and graces.
- Naming Jesus places you in the presence of the One who can take away the burdens you are carrying.
- No other name, but Jesus, can give you new life.
- No other name, but Jesus, can raise the dead!
- No other name, but Jesus, can heal your wounds.
- No other name, but Jesus, can forgive your sins.
- No other name, but Jesus, can give you peace.
- No other name, but Jesus, can free you to be the light.

And, when you invoke the holy name of Jesus, the powers that would silence you hold no power over you. When you confess the holy name of Jesus, life is transformed. Let the naming continue!

Matthew and Joleen, come today. Come to this altar with the name of Jesus on your lips and in your hearts. Come and remember what a privilege it is to bear the name of Christ. Come and claim your authority to proclaim the name of Jesus and be a vehicle for His saving, healing, transforming power. Come and embrace the “name that is above all names.” Come, so that the naming will continue. May it be so! Amen.

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