

*Reclaiming an Inclusive Church: What Goes Up Must Come Down!*  
*Acts 1: 1-11 and 16: 16-34*  
*May 20, 2007*

Happy birthday, Bering Memorial UMC! Happy birthday. One hundred and fifty-nine years young. Today we are celebrating 159 years of caring, sharing and serving by this church of the wounded healer. You have a brief biography of the church in your bulletin. The differences that God has made in the world through this church are truly amazing – from yellow fever to influenza to HIV and AIDS. And think about this for a moment: next week we will celebrate the birth date of the church universal – a little less than 2000 years ago. Our little congregation has been around for a little less than 10% of the history of the church universal, about 1/3 of the time since the Protestant Reformation. That's significant stuff, is it not?

Of course a lot has changed in 2000 years. And some things have not changed at all. Among the more significant things that have changed have come through the scientific age and our understanding of Creation. This has affected our understanding of physics, metaphysics and our understanding of God's relationship to the world. I have entitled my last sermon of this series, *Reclaiming an Inclusive Church*, "**What Goes Up Must Come Down.** Ever since Copernicus we have begun to understand that the earth is a globe, not a flat plate, which the earth rotates on an axis and revolves around our Sun. By inference we no longer believe that God and heaven is just beyond the Earth's atmosphere up there in the sky. Although we may look up in our prayer time, we understand a new

metaphysic as well. We understand Jesus' ascension as not traveling up to God in the sky but as a mystical reunion in the spiritual realm. We understand the incarnation of Christ in earthly flesh and his death in a way that makes sense to our human minds. When Jesus had accomplished what he accomplished in human history he returned to God, who is Spirit, in spiritual form. So Ascension Sunday is really a kind of Reunion Sunday.

But I don't want to focus on metaphysics this morning. Instead I want to focus on the key questions and answers posed to Jesus and his disciples in our text from Acts 1. Let me take them in a kind of reverse order, although they point to the same thing. At the end of our text the disciples are staring into the sky as if trying to find the ascended Jesus – like looking for the Space Shuttle or something. Two messengers say to them, “Men of Galilee, why do you stare into the sky looking for Jesus. Jesus will return to you in the same way that he came to you.” In other words, “what goes up must come down!” Now while pondering on that one for a moment, especially on the *Second Coming*, consider the question and answer exchange before that between Jesus and his followers. These followers ask Jesus before he leaves them for a final time: “is this the time that you are restoring the Kingdom to Israel?” As oppressed subjects of a powerful Rome they felt powerless and were hopeful that Jesus was ushering in an immediate reversal in the political fortunes of Israel. Notice how Jesus responds: It is not for you to know the times that God has fixed for God's own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. And you will be my witnesses in

Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the remotest parts of the world. Then he was gone.

What I want to suggest to you this morning is that this same metaphysic exists today. The thing that goes up that must come down is power from God. You know on my really bad days I feel pretty powerless. Last week there were two events on which I want to reflect with you. On Tuesday I had the opportunity to visit with Project U, the GLBT Youth group that meets here at the church under the leadership of Tommy Calzadias. I was there to talk about homosexuality and the Bible and to answer their questions. As you might expect we spent most of the time discussing their questions. One of the more difficult questions I got was one regarding the United Methodist Church, our legislative process and the Book of Discipline, our canon law. In particular we discussed that painful and misdirected statement in that book that states that homosexual practice is incompatible with Christian teaching. One of the really bright youth, who is about to go off to college, asked me, “When do you think that language will be changed and we will have full inclusion of GLBT people?” Now I was tempted to respond, “It is not for you to know when God has fixed the time for things under God’s authority!” But I didn’t. I responded with the best guess I could. I said I think we will either see a change in the next twelve years or I think we will see a split in the United Methodist Church. This I believe will be caused by such a widening difference between U.S. society’s ever enlightening inclusion of GLBT people and the prejudice of the United Methodist Church that a split will be unavoidable.

I have to tell you that I wince when I say that. I love the United Methodist Church. I don't want a split. I winced similarly as I reflected on the life and witness of Rev. Jerry Falwell who passed away this past week. Rev. Jerry Falwell was largely responsible for the rise of the so-called "moral majority" in the 1980s. Rev. Falwell was also responsible for your pain when he blamed gay and lesbian people, among others, for God's judgment on America on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Of course, he later apologized for that statement but he couldn't take away the hurt. Both the memory of Rev. Falwell's words and the current language of the UM Discipline are hurtful reminders that God's Kingdom has not come yet. But I want each of you to know what I told those Project U youth. The Scriptures, which we affirm from its very first pages, also affirm that what God has created is very good. And that includes each of you. The psalmist says that God knew and loved your very inmost parts from the very first breath you took. You are loved, all of you, as God's precious children. Never forget that. And you are not powerless. You have received power. More about that in just a few moments.

Both the books of Luke and Acts are addressed to Theophilus. These are the only two books in our Bible that are addressed to a person. Who was this Theophilus? We don't really know but many theories abound. This was a common name among Jews and gentiles of the day. Some think it was a fictional character. But in Luke he is addressed as "most excellent Theophilus." That is an address for nobility, an important person. So it is probably a real, historical character. Since Luke was so interested in getting it right in all the historical

details that leads further credibility to the position that Theophilus was a real person. But it was dangerous to be nobility and to be a Christian in Luke's day. Many scholars believe this was a code name used not to reveal his true identity. The most interesting theory is that this really addressed to a non-Christian named Flavius Clemens, the cousin of Roman Emperor Domitian. Now Domitian was one of the cruelest persecutors of Christians of all the Roman emperors. So Luke was not only a piece of good news to you and me – probably the most inclusive of all the gospels to women, the marginalized, and the poor – but it speaks as a converting word to one who was powerful in the Emperor's very company! It was what was called an apologetic (a proof of the witness of Jesus Christ) to those who were afraid to believe because of the costs of discipleship. But one of the very good pieces of news that it reported is that the believer would receive power. We've seen that every week. Peter received power. Dorcas received power. Lydia received power. Now it was a different kind of power than the emperor had. It was the power to bring about a new kind of Kingdom – one of reconciliation and healing and love.

The final question I want to pose is “are we powerless or have we received the power of the Holy Spirit to bring about God's kingdom?” Are we looking in the sky for God to return and clean up this mess or are we actively using that power for good? Do you have power? Has what has gone up come down in your life? You know you have power when you build a Habitat home! You know you have power when you stand up to say, “I will feed the homeless one day a month.” You

have power when you answer criticism for who God created you to be with patience and civility, but with a reasoned convincing, Biblically based response. And when you do any of those things, whether gay or transgender or straight you bear witness to God in the world. You say “thy kindom come, thy will be done in the earthly realm as it is in the heavenly realm.” And you do it in a frightened world. Your actions reduce fear and anxiety and when you do it shoulder-to-shoulder with one who does not understand you or is frightened by who you are, you build bridges that no General Conference debate can ever construct. For you have built a bridge through the bricks of conversation through a shared act of service.

But you also have power at General Conference. This is a Book of Discipline that contains that problem sentence about “incompatibility” that I referenced earlier. These are the instructions for what is called a petition to General Conference. A petition is a request for change in the language in our book of canon law. Any member or organization (like a local congregation) can submit a petition. If it is properly submitted it appears in the *Daily Christian Advocate* (a journal of petitions that all the delegates read) and it must be considered in subcommittee discussions at General Conference. Recently one of our UM Bishops submitted a petition circulated among a Episcopal subcommittee that recommended replacing the unjust language that I referred to earlier with this: “the church does not condone sexual relationships between people of heterosexual or homosexual orientation "outside the bonds of a faithful, loving and committed

*relationship between two persons; marriage, where legally possible."* What do you think? Pretty good, don't you. I would like to consider this as a starting point with our Church Council to submit a Bering Memorial UMC petition. Now it must be postmarked by early October, so we have a few months to work this out. We as a church and you as individual persons have power. You have the power to witness to a frightened world, a world full of Theophiluses and ordinary folk as well. I invite you today not to look into the sky waiting for God to act but to reclaim the power of the Holy Spirit poured out among the people of Bering Memorial UMC.