

*Shall We Scatter or Reform?*

*Acts 2: 1-21, 1 Cor. 12: 3b-13*

*May 11, 2008*

Happy Mothers' Day. I simply must share you a few children's responses to questions asked about their moms.

*Why did God make mothers?*

1. She's the only one who knows where the scotch tape is.
2. To help us out of there when we were getting born.

*How did God make mothers?*

1. He used dirt, just like for the rest of us.
2. Magic plus super powers and a lot of stirring.
3. God made my Mom just the same like he made me. He just used bigger parts.

*What kind of little girl was your mom?*

1. I don't know because I wasn't there, but my guess would be pretty bossy
2. They say she used to be nice.

*Why did your mom marry your dad?*

1. She got too old to do anything else with him.
2. My grandma says that Mom didn't have her thinking cap on.

*Who's the boss at your house?*

1. Mom doesn't want to be boss, but she has to because dad's such a goof ball.
2. I guess Mom is, but only because she has a lot more to do than dad.

*What's the difference between moms & dads?*

1. Moms work at work and work at home and dads just go to work at work.

2. Moms know how to talk to teachers without scaring them.
3. Moms have magic; they make you feel better without medicine.

*What does your mom do in her spare time?*

1. Mothers don't do spare time.

*What would it take to make your mom perfect?*

1. On the inside she's already perfect. Outside, I think some kind of plastic surgery.
2. Diet. You know, her hair. I'd diet, maybe blue.

*If you could change one thing about your mom, what would it be?*

1. I'd make my mom smarter. Then she would know it was my sister who did it and not me.
2. I would like for her to get rid of those invisible eyes on the back of her head.

At one point in our childhood I think we all hoped that our mothers didn't know everything about us. Speaking of hope, just two weeks ago, some of your sisters and brothers here at Bering returned from the UM General Conference. The Conference theme was "A Future of Hope." That theme of hope had been developed against a 40-year backdrop of membership decline in the UMC. It had developed against a backdrop of a 35-year debate over ecclesial rights for GLBT persons. It developed against a backdrop of much divisiveness and meanness in the debate over full inclusion for GLBT people. The hope for us was lifted in the first week of the Conference in the legislative committee work as our petitions made it farther in early voting than they had made it in years. In particular, the Church and Society committee developed new language in our

social principles regarding sexuality that eliminated the hurtful “incompatibility” clause that had haunted us since 1972. It passed the committee by a vote of 37-27 and was introduced on the plenary floor on Wednesday afternoon. A painful debate ensued, a motion to replace that majority opinion with a minority position was passed, and before we knew it, the hurtful language was preserved and passed. Many other things happened at General Conference, but we tend to focus on this one scene. I have promised that on this Pentecost Sunday we would allow ourselves to begin the healing. And we will have some time to share our feelings in the middle of this service.

I also want to share the good news from the Conference authored by Tiffany Steinwart from Reconciling Ministries. I also shared these points with Tim Brookover of *Outsmart* magazine in an interview this past Thursday. Tiffany lifts up these victories with these words:

“despite ... set backs in our struggle for justice for all people, the General Conference did take some very powerful and prophetic actions that will indeed lead us into a more hopeful future. Here are just a few of these acts of hope:

- Dismissed all anti-transgender legislation by wide margins.
- Passed a Constitutional amendment that declares "all persons" eligible for membership.
- Weakened the funding ban against homosexual caucuses to allow for financial support for activities that would help the Church not "to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends."
- Passed a resolution against heterosexism and homophobia.
- Voted in a new definition of family that recognizes "two parents" instead of "mother and father."
- Created an ethics committee to monitor the action of lobbyists and delegates during General Conferences in the future.
- Installed new Judicial Council comprised of members committed to fairness and integrity.

- Created a study commission for the worldwide restructuring of the Church that gives the committee freedom to explore all options.

Tiffany is right. These are steps forward. Not all the news out of General Conference is bad.

Still, anytime we encounter bitter disappointment in the systems to which we belong, we pause to consider whether we still want to be a part of these systems. As my sermon title suggests, *shall we scatter or reform?* I have to be honest and tell you I have struggled mightily with this question. Fight or flight is the impulse that we feel, isn't it? That's what we feel when something awful happens in the church. Do we leave or do we stay? Do I become a UCC minister or keep within the order? My personality is somewhat questionable on the subject of submission to authority. I will admit that. Despite his best intentions, loyalty was not a gene that my dad passed on to me successfully. I did not hesitate to leave firms with which I disagreed, or with whom I struggled in my conscience, or who I felt did not treat me fairly. Salesmen you see are a dime a dozen. Methodist preachers are a dime a dozen as well. Fight or flight? Scatter or reform? This is a more serious question for church members who have made a covenant relationship. We do not and should not take that covenant lightly. One of our District Superintendents said in a recent sermon that a community is those folks to whom you are stuck. He quoted Stanley Hauerwas as saying that a Christian community is one that has a claim on you. How far does that claim go? I think it goes all the way to the Cross. But the question is really about how aligned is that community with the cross of Christ. Bill Taylor suggested to us last week that we need to stop, watch, and wait. I agree but when injured I think we need to

heal...pray...and then act. Ten days ago, as I was beginning to deal with the hurt of General Conference, I left my office to sit in our courtyard to pray fervently, "God, what should I do?" That is the wrong prayer. I should have prayed, "God, what are you about to do?"

The Biblical witness is filled with stories of God's reversals in history. Think about what happened at the Pentecost festival in our text from the book of Acts. Pentecost was the Jewish festival that I think of as the festival of first fruits. It celebrated the spring harvest in which the people brought the first fruits of the harvest to God's altar. It was not burned up for God but instead eaten in the barley loaves that were shared. In the midst of this rhythmic celebration of the reaping and sowing of their lives, God worked a powerful reversal. Remember the story of the Tower of Babel. The people were ambitious, even cocky. They threatened God with their ambitions. So God scattered them by confusing them with many new languages. They could no longer communicate with each other. But here we are, thousands of years later, on the Jewish Pentecost, and people from countries speaking at least thirteen different languages come together and by the power of God's Spirit here the good news of the gospel in their own language. They are reformed into one. They experience unity within diversity.

Finding unity within diversity was the aim of Paul at the church in Corinth. The church was growing like crazy but it was breaking apart as well. There were at least three leaders taking them in different directions – Paul, Apollos and Cephas. Paul writes that the thing that keeps the body healthy and whole was the Holy Spirit

poured out on them to do things to build up, not tear down the body. All parts are valuable and valued. It was because of Pentecost and through your baptism that God wants that for us as well.

A future with hope...Ezekiel gives us that hope as well in chapter 37 of his vision in which the scattered people of Israel, with their worship space destroyed, are given new hope out of the valley of dry bones. God's spirit breathes new life into the body. Tendons and ligaments and tissue reform on these chattering bones. They get up and begin to dance a dance to the hope that God has created in them. You are the most resilient people I have been around in my entire life. Not only do you "hang in there (thank you, Donna)," you have the tendons and ligaments of a world-class athlete. Paul says, "I have fought the good fight," "I have finished the race." You all are in the fight, you are in the race, and you know that it will go on for many more years. I salute you. We don't live in a valley of dry bones because you refuse to lose hope. You accept the new breath that God breathes into each of you.

I wished I could have claimed that resilience ten days ago as I prayed in the Courtyard for God's will for our lives together. It was in that moment of prayer that I was interrupted by a phone call on my cell phone. A good friend called me in crisis. He was driving to his parents' home in Pasadena. He had just received a call himself from his father. His father told him that he had just killed his mother and his was about to take his own life. This prediction came true. So began to enter his pain at that moment. We celebrated their lives together last Tuesday in what many expected to be one of the most difficult services imaginable. But from the dry bones

of that tragic moment God is working a reversal. The family is dealing with their loss. Why did that call come to me at that precise moment in the midst of the pain that I was experiencing? I am not completely sure. But I do know this. Sisters and brothers, pain is all around us in every moment of every day. We could allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by that pain. Or we could choose to enter it one instance at a time and try to be part of God's healing agency. It is the brokenness of humanity that unites us all. It makes us all one. It is in the brokenness of Christ's body that we celebrate the Eucharist. How amazing is that? It is because we share a future of the hope of the resurrection. We share a hope of God's reversal.

As we close I want to underscore the emphasis of this most famous passage from Acts that we read together. In those twenty verses we read the Greek word "panta" appears nine times. Now the word "panta" means "all." And as we know, in the button that I wear, "all means all." ALL MEANS ALL (repeat with me.) A Constitutional Amendment was passed at General Conference that slipped back the conservatives. In fact it was proposed by the conservatives in a package of legislature. They missed it somehow in the stack of legislation. It says that "all" are eligible for membership. At the upcoming Annual Conference, as our choir sings on the first night, as our saints serve in worship as Crucifer, acolytes and lector, as we present what God is doing through an Open Gate for our youth in Montrose, let us proclaim, "All means all."