

## **An Encouraging Word from Pastor Mike for October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

Hello Everyone! **The 237<sup>th</sup> Session of the Baltimore Washington Annual Conference has concluded.** FYI – ours is the oldest United Methodist Annual Conference. There will be more on what was discussed in an upcoming Encouraging Word. The 238<sup>th</sup> session of the Annual Conference is anticipated to be held in person on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> of 2022. That will be held in anticipation of General Conference Meeting which is now anticipated in September of 2022. At this Annual Conference which just concluded the Conference Budget for 2022 was set, reports from various ministry areas heard and approved, various resolutions heard, perfected and approved, virtual celebrations, memorial, ordination, and worship services attended, pastoral appointments affirmed, and nine United Methodist Churches closed with properties transferred to the Conference Board of Trustees. Here are some observations gleaned from my time watching the conference unfold on Zoom.

1. Technology is wonderful – when it works. (The voting platform crashed on Tuesday.)
2. There is only so much soprano saxophone elevator music that one can stand. (It was used during intervals for voting, transitions, technical difficulties, etc. ) Just think of incessant Kenny G for hours on end.
3. Our Bishop Easterling is a woman of amazing grace and patience.
4. Where there is a will there is a way!
5. The human butt CAN fall asleep even on the most comfortable of couches.
6. Even pastors can doze off when someone else is preaching.

All kidding aside this was a very productive Annual Conference and a great deal of critical and important work was accomplished. As I said before you will hear more about this in an upcoming encouraging word.

**There are several upcoming bible studies that I would like to announce.** The first is an Advent Study which will begin on November 10<sup>th</sup>. This study will last 5 to 6 weeks and will conclude mid-December. It's entitled "Faithful: Christmas Through the Eyes of Joseph by Adam Hamilton. The student book is available as paperback, hardcover, or Kindle through Amazon or Cokesbury. The next bible study will begin in January, also by Adam Hamilton it is entitled Words of Life and is a ten weeklong study on the Ten Commandments. It is also available from Amazon and Cokesbury. Both will be Zoom classes since that format seems to work very well for most of us. I'll be sending the Zoom invitations to the list compiled from past bible study participants. If you would like to be included on this list please let me know or notify the Church Office.

Since the retailers around us seem to be putting out Christmas items, even before Halloween, let me include this promotion for a possible Christmas gift. **We have lots of cookbooks for sale! THE AMAZING PUBLICATION – LOAVES & FISHES & UNITED METHODIST DISHES – Is once again on sale in our church office for the AMAZING PRICE OF \$20.00.** This classic publication includes the tasty and mouthwatering recipes of some of your favorite Mount Carmel cooks. It even includes my own Chili recipe which was previously marketed as Pastor Mikes Hotter Than Hell Chili but renamed for proprieties sake. These make wonderful Christmas gifts for family, friends, co-workers, and even random strangers if you're so inclined. Buy a few of these timeless classics to save away for future generations! Hurry while supplies last! Proceeds will go to our general expense fund. There will also be a few on hand for sale on Sunday mornings.

**Here are some announcements worthy of repeating.**

**"The Outreach Committee met several weeks ago to finalize opportunities for the upcoming holiday season.** On October 17th we will start collecting certain canned goods for the Thanksgiving bags for our friends at the Soup Kitchen. Each bag should contain: a box of instant mashed potatoes, a can of cranberries, a box of stuffing mix, a can of sweet potatoes or yams, a can or jar of turkey gravy and a can of vegetables of your choice. If you want to help with this project, please bring some or all of the above items to the narthex starting October 17th. We will be handing out the "Fixing Bags" up until the Monday before

Thanksgiving. Our church has been helping with this local project for many years. Last year we helped supply Thanksgiving dinner to 63 families

Watch this space for additional opportunities to help others throughout the holidays.

Thanks, Outreach Committee"

We are preparing for our celebration of **All Saints Sunday on November 7<sup>th</sup>**. If you have lost someone dear to you over the past year and would like them remembered during the worship service that day please contact the church office with details. We would also like to share a picture which you can forward to the church as well. Then please plan to be present when that person is remembered.

**Signing On For Zoom Worship Services.** As most of you who Zoom our worship services know, I greet Zoom attendees as they sign on, take Zoom attendance, and assign names to phone numbers as phone callers sign on. I open the Zoom meeting at 9 a.m. in order to give people time to sign on. If you are Zooming, I encourage you to sign on early to avoid the crush of people signing on at the last minute. At 9:30 I have to make a mad dash from the office to the sanctuary to lead the service. The earlier you sign on the easier it is for me to attend to the greeting responsibilities. It also gives us a chance to chat, and share prayer requests

The Announcements and Bulletin for Sunday's service are included as attachments to this encouraging word. Please feel free to print them out and either bring them with you to the service or to use them as your guide as you Zoom the service. For those attending in person the worship order is provided on the monitors.

In person worship is open to everyone. We are not requiring the wearing of masks in the sanctuary but asking that you space yourselves appropriately. If you are not vaccinated are otherwise at risk, or simply uncomfortable going maskless we strongly suggest that you wear your mask. It goes without saying that if you are sick stay home! You can always enjoy our worship service via Zoom. We do have a fellowship time in the breezeway following our worship service.

Thank you to everyone who has been diligently supporting our ministry with your tithes and offerings. Your contributions have kept us open and in ministry through a very difficult period. Your faithfulness in supporting our church with your prayers, presence, gifts, and service has made all the difference!

### **An Encouraging Word**

My encouraging word to you today is quite simple but getting to it may be a little complex. It's rooted in an Ah-ha moment experienced by Peter but initiated by God who was leading Peter in ways to "think outside the box." A little more about that later.

Have you ever been stuck in the mud? Somehow, you've ended up in the ditch, or a snowbank, and the realization has dawned, you're not going anywhere. You rock the car back and forth alternating between drive and reverse and it seems all you are doing is digging yourself in deeper. Nevertheless, you continue shifting and spinning until you have proved Einstein's adage that, "the definition of insanity is doing things over and over expecting different results." Well, as Einstein expected you keep getting the same results and end up with the undercarriage of the car resting solidly on the ground and mud flinging everywhere. ( I've actually done this, not in a car but with a tractor in a barnyard and what was being flung was definitely not mud!)

Stuck and going nowhere. That's a familiar feeling for many of us these days, at least it is for me. Covid is still with us. Toilet paper shelves are getting sparse. Again! Supply chains are breaking down. Civility continues to deteriorate (I've never seen so many birds flying around still attached to hands.) Somehow it feels like we're

just digging ourselves in deeper. It's like the plot of the movie "Groundhog Day" when we are forced to live the same day over and over again.

Groundhog Day used to be just a day on the calendar. Now, due to the movie bearing the same name, produced in 1993, and starring Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell, it has also come into our common English lexicon to mean living the same day over and over again with little or no change from one day to the next. In the movie, Phil Connors (played by Bill Murray) is going nowhere fast. He's a T.V. weatherman who is assigned to cover the appearance of Punxsutawney Phil on Groundhog Day. He soon discovers that he is somehow having to live that same Groundhog Day over and over again. Over the course of countless repeated Groundhog Days, he learns to approach each day, his life, and his relationship with others differently. In short, the experience teaches him to live outside the box. Though it may seem like a curse, each repeated day is a gentle reminder to change and to stop living in the same unproductive way.

So how does the Apostle Peter fit into all of this? Peter was living in a society that was highly polarized. Jews did not associate with Gentiles believing Gentiles to be unclean. There was a heated debate going on among Jewish Christians as to whether Gentiles had to convert to Judaism before becoming Christian. Peter, being a pillar of the early Church and a Jew was stuck in a particular way of thinking that excluded the legitimacy of Gentile Christianity. In other words he was kind of a bigot. We all know that this kind of thinking is divisive and unproductive – not to mention just plain wrong. But that was where Peter was.

Peter was also the man that Jesus had designated as being the rock upon which he would build his church. However, Peter's attitude towards the Gentiles was not conducive to the building of anything! His thinking concerning who could be included under the Christian umbrella was restricted to one tiny little box. God had to invite Peter to think outside that box and broaden his vision concerning the church.

God accomplished this in Peter's encounter with Cornelius, a Gentile and Roman Centurion. For Peter to accept Cornelius a Christian brother he would have to abandon the box altogether and envision the church in a completely new way. In fact, that would be the only way forward for the church. The narrative of how God accomplished this can be found in Acts 10.

To make a long story short, God prepared Peter for the encounter with Cornelius, and his consequent acceptance of him, with a vision. While in a trance Peter sees heaven opened and a large sheet being lowered to the ground. In the sheet are all sorts of creatures, four footed, reptiles, and birds. Many of these creatures had been forbidden as food by Jewish ritual dietary laws. Peter hears God's voice inviting him to kill and eat without restriction any of the creatures he desires. Peter responds that he won't do it since nothing profane has ever passed through his lips. God responds, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Then the vision repeats itself three times leaving Peter very puzzled. Peter worries about this vision for a while. When he finally meets Cornelius he does accept him as a brother Christian with the following explanation to those who are assembled, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." God invited Peter to broaden his vision and perspective. God invited Peter to think and act outside the box and establish the broad foundation upon which the Church would be built.

God is not afraid of doing new things. God declares as much in Isaiah 43:19, "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland." Here God is addressing the problem of wayward Israel (a seemingly perennial problem for them) and declaring a new direction in handling the problem of their salvation. What God has tried so far hasn't worked so it was time to try something different. God did not hesitate to think outside the box.

Sometimes we Christians find ourselves stuck in a box doing the same things over and over again while expecting different outcomes. Sometimes God is moving on but we are stuck in the mud spinning our wheels. We experience déjà vu quite often over the course of our ministry seemingly unable to move ahead

in some things or grow in our ways of understanding our relationship with God. When we perceive that happening perhaps it's God's way of urging us to think outside our boxes of tradition and "we've always done it that way" attitudes. Jesus himself warned us against pouring new wine into old wineskins, "And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins." *Mark 2:22*

As the church and as individual Christians we are living in liminal time, a time of transition. We are living in a time when we are invited to think outside the box and move on with God or stay stuck. Circumstances have invited us to worship and gather in whole new ways and to embrace technology – not as a necessary evil, but as a way to move forward. We are living also in a liminal time as it pertains to our attitudes in areas ranging from racism to human sexuality and finding this new wine not working with our old wineskins. Perhaps with this liminal time God is inviting us to think and live outside the limiting boxes we have built for ourselves. It's just a thought.

That's all for today. I'll see you tomorrow either in person or on Zoom. Until then be well, stay safe, make good decisions in this Coronavirus environment, and in please stay connected to each other and to God.  
Blessings & Peace, Mike