

Zooming Out
Acts 2:1-21
May 11, 2008 (Pentecost)
St. John United Methodist Church
Anchorage, Alaska
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My goal this morning is to give you a glimpse of the United Methodist Church that may elicit tears of sadness and joy. For those of you who are new to Methodism let me say this. We are not a denomination of individual congregations with full authority to act independent of each other. We are a connectional, worldwide church who take seriously the challenges of working through our many differences. United Methodists are not of one mind on the view of scripture, or doctrine, or homosexuality, or the death penalty. Every four years 500 lay and 500 clergy called General Conference gather to discern the will of God. No one would admit that the thousands of decisions that are made represent the absolute will of God. These decisions represent the majority of the elected delegates' views. Sometimes that majority is huge. Sometimes it is very small. No one who leaves General Conference is totally happy with the outcomes. And neither was I.

I liken my experience of General Conference to a camera. It was like I had been looking at the world through a lens that was zoomed in on St. John and Anchorage, Alaska. Sitting there in opening worship with United Methodists from all corners of the planet it was as if my lens was suddenly zoomed all the way out! My world had just become very large. I could not control the tears as over 6000 people had gathered led by a mass choir, huge orchestra, and liturgical dancers. Visual images danced across six screens. The preaching of Bishop Janice Huie was powerful. Here's how she began her sermon.

+video clip+

During this short sermon time I hope that your view of the world will also zoom out. It is so easy to become inward focused, to lose sight of the larger perspective. It takes effort to zoom out to include others because the temptation is to stay zoomed in on our issues and problems.

Today is Pentecost Sunday where we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit in fire to give birth to the Church of Jesus Christ. I want to give you a glimpse of the fire of the Spirit that is expanding and renewing the Church all over this globe!

We changed our mission statement. The mission of every United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ, and we added, for the transformation of the world. Think about this. Our goal is to change the world! Just as God desires all of humanity to be fed, clothed, educated, and whole so do we! We adopted a new social creed in litany form. I'd like us to experience it right now.

+sing social creed+

We talked about Katrina and Nothing But Nets fatigue. And it does seem that we have a limited capacity to hear about and respond to human need. The worship tables and pulpit were made from cypress trees blown down by Hurricane Katrina. This was a visible symbol that God can redeem suffering.

We saw a video about the progress of the Nothing But Nets campaign to purchase anti-malaria nets for families in Africa. I couldn't believe it. On the video was our church! It was only about 5 seconds of our free throw challenge, but I nudged the delegate from Kansas sitting next to me, "That's my church! That's my church!"

Then Bishop Thomas Bickerton walked onto the stage bouncing an ordinary basketball. Delegations began to bid on that basketball. I was proud that my home conference of West Ohio won the basketball with a bid of \$80,000!!! During General Conference we raised almost a half million dollars for Nothing But Nets!

Bill Gates Sr. spoke to our conference. He co-chairs the foundation begun by his son and daughter-in-law to fight poverty and improve the health of the poor. Working with other secular agencies the United Methodist Church is the only religious group invited to the table to address important issues such as malaria and poverty. Here's what he said to us.

+video+

In other important actions we raised funds for pensions for retired pastors in Africa and other central conferences. We raised the retirement age of bishops from 66 to 68. We authorized a new hymnal committee who will present a new hymnal at the 2012 General Conference. In order to fund bishops in Africa we decided to reduce bishops in the US. In 2012 the Western Jurisdiction, of which we are a part, will change from 6 to 5 bishops. Our Church is becoming a worldwide Church.

We were honored to receive the president of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. President Sirleaf graduated from a United Methodist school and is an active United Methodist laywoman. Listen to some of her opening remarks.

+video+

The sadness for me at this General Conference was the way we excluded United Methodists who are gay and lesbian. With only a 10 point margin we retained the language in the Discipline that homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching." We also voted to exclude homosexual United Methodist members from being ordained as pastors. Although I do not see myself as a social crusader I felt compelled to stand in silent protest of this action. I also participated in a protest witness. For me it comes down to this. I may be wrong about the way I voted. But if God is going to judge me for my inclusion of all people in the life of the Church, I would rather err on the side of grace than of law. May God forgive us for discriminating against others simply because we are different.

Do you know about the Advance? The Advance is a giving program where you decide the mission you want to support and 100% of your gift goes to that mission. We celebrated the Advance's 60th birthday by viewing a video about an Advance project in Bolivia. Here is what we saw.

+video+

Immediately following the video the woman you saw walked onto the stage and spoke through a translator to the delegates. Her name is Justa Mamani. Here she is.

+video+

Her words, "We Methodists..." hit me hard. In God's world no one is better than another. In our United Methodist Church it is all about "WE." This Bolivian woman doesn't have much, but she has the exact same rights and status as a member of the United Methodist Church as does you and me! We are becoming a worldwide church!

I am offering a study class on Tuesday, May 20 in the sanctuary at 6:30 to share more about this important experience. My hope is that the lens through which you look at the world will zoom out. My hope is that you will be proud to be a United Methodist. My hope is that together we will commit ourselves with new energy and passion so that all of God's people will have a future with hope!