

Annual Conference 2015

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Before I begin, I want to thank you for your willingness to enter into this process - both Annual Conference and the process of seeing. My work as a visual artist depends on your willingness to see, and so I thank you for that. Seeing is a conscious act.

I also want to invite you to join an informal conversation this evening immediately following adjournment where we will remember the leadership of Bishop Rueben Job. We will gather in the gallery (room 104) where you can see an exhibition of work by photographer Don Mendenhall, as well some of my own work - all done with Bishop Job in mind. The conversation will be recorded, edited, and posted by the Communications Office in a way that will allow the conversation to continue electronically on our Conference website.



Eleven disciples are gathered in one place in the 28th chapter of Matthew. The story is coming to an end; this is Matthew's final chord - that handful of notes that will linger after the Amen. If you listen carefully, you can hear the added weight of these words. The closer one gets to the edge, the heavier the words become, and the edge of this narrative is upon us.

The resurrection happened earlier in the chapter and now we are ready for the response. The resurrected Christ is standing before the eleven - all eleven, gathered in the same place, at the same time.

Some of them believed what they saw, and some of them questioned what they saw.

The disciples differed. This is an important detail. The disciples did not interpret the same experience in the same way. We have had difference and diversity and doubt and belief entangled from the beginning. There was never a time when we all believed the same thing. Not then. Not now.

So the eleven are gathered - and they hear the same thing - no litmus test or voting guide, or endorsement necessary, Jesus says to all of them, "Go and disciple the nations." Doubt does not disqualify you from this vocation - "Go and disciple." (The verb in that sentence, by the way, is "to disciple," not, "to make." There's a whole lot 'o making going on the scripture, but this passage is not about that.) To disciple is to teach. "Go and teach the nations," is how King James renders this verse.

Thanks to Socrates, the process of education rests on dialogue sparked by question. To teach is to ask compelling questions and then to wait... for the answer - that first response - to pass while the second one is still forming. To disciple, to teach. It is to ask compelling questions and listen in a way that draws the hidden out into view.

Bishop Job did that. He listened in a way that gave room for the words to come. He listened for the second answer to pass while the third was waiting to be conceived. And he asked compelling questions.

One of his books bears the title, "Three Simple Questions." None of them are simple, by the way. You can find them printed on cards that have been lovingly placed on your tables. While you are reaching for them and passing them around, I'll tell you that the image on the screen is a piece that hangs downstairs in the gallery. It's called "Answer and Question," and it is a response to Bishop Job's book, "Three Simple Questions." That's the actual book covered in wax on the lower left side.

I'm giving you the invitation and instruction about the card you now have in your hand, but you can do this activity whenever you like. It comes out of the understanding that the space between question and answer is sacred space. And it is cyclical - answer the question and then question the answer. The first one is, "Who are you?" Write your answer on the first line. Then answer the question again, using different words; and then a third time - again, no words repeated. (Varsity thinkers do this six times - you know who you are.)

Do the same thing with the second question, "Who is G\*d?" and again with the last one, "Who are we together?" If you are so inclined, you are invited to take your card down to the gallery, room 104 and add it to those that you'll find there.

Who are you?

Who is G\*d?

Who are we together?

The last one is the hard one - at least for us in these edgy times.

Who are we together?

My answer, in visual form, can be seen in the installation surrounding the baptismal font. It is dry like exile. It's dry like us. We know what exile feels like. We know what it means to be far from where we felt at home - and to be far from where we are going.

The rocks form two circles in a Venn diagram - a visual expression of the intersection of two sets. The overlap is what they share in common.

Who are we together? We share our baptism, but in the light and warmth of the hot-button iceberg in the room, we are two sets of disciples with beliefs that differ wildly about human sexuality in the 21st century and biblical interpretation.

One set of us would have the United Methodist Church move away from where it is on the issue (confused) and move toward other faith communities like the Presbyterians, Lutherans (ELCA), UCC, Disciples of Christ, and American Baptist. Some would say that these communities are reading scripture faithfully and we should stand with them; others would question that.

The other set of us would have the United Methodist Church move away from where it is on the issue (confused, still) and move toward other faith communities like Catholics, or Cross Point Christians of Bondurant, or Westboro Baptists of Topeka, Kansas. Some would say that these communities are reading scripture faithfully and we should stand with them; others would question that.

Who are we together?

The answer won't be found in a pile of rocks or a haunting photograph.  
It won't come from a bishop.

It will come from us.

We will know who we are together by how we treat each other, by how we talk to each other, and about each other.

We will know who we are together by the way we question each other and by the way we listen to each other.

This ground, the dry, rocky ground upon which we stand with all of our beliefs and questions woven and tangled together - this ground is sacred - this ground between question and answer. This is sacred.

It's time to listen.

And question.

Amen.