

SERMON TITLE: "A Way Forward"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 24:13-35 and Acts 18:24-28
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 30, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Despite what some of you may think, the Utah Jazz vs. the LA Clippers hasn't been the only contest going on this past week. As most of you know, on Tuesday morning, the United Methodist Judicial Council heard arguments regarding the election and consecration of our bishop, Karen Oliveto, who happens to be a lesbian. For many in the United Methodist Church, this week has definitely been a nail-biter. For LGBTQ persons of faith, and especially for those who feel called by God to serve in ministry, this test had significant implications for their lives. For all of us United Methodists in the Rocky Mountain Conference, and especially us clergy for whom the bishop is our boss, this Judicial decision had us sitting on the edge of our seats, waiting and wondering, "What's next?"

We finally got at least part of that answer late on Friday. The news story was released in various ways. After having read about it from several different sources, I thought I understood what happened. But then, on Saturday afternoon, I received a letter from the joint cabinets of the Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone Conferences, and I began to wonder what had really occurred. Finally, I was able to read the Judicial Council's ruling* itself and found out it was much more nuanced than it first seemed. As the Mountain Sky Area cabinets wrote in their letter, not everyone will be happy with this decision that both upheld Bishop Oliveto's election *and* made it more difficult for LGBTQ persons to serve the church that they love. The effect of the Judicial Council's decision is that, at least for a while, Karen Oliveto will remain our bishop in good standing, *but* the Western Jurisdiction must also continue a judicial review. In other words, this is a work in progress. God isn't done with this matter yet. We United Methodists are still trying to discern a way forward.

I guess the good news in this situation is that Christians have been down this road before. After Jesus' death and resurrection and in the early development of the church, there were a lot of confusing situations. The people of God had to figure out what to do and where to go. They had to seek God's will about whom to include and what to believe. So, I invite you to consider today's scripture readings with me. I'm going to suggest to you that, no matter what our problem or concern, there are some common elements in determining a way forward.

1—WALK TO EMMAUS

Let's begin with the gospel reading from Luke 24. There we read about the walk to Emmaus. That's the story of two disciples who were walking from Jerusalem to their village of Emmaus on Easter Sunday evening. So much had happened in the big city. Jesus had been arrested, put on trial, crucified, and then mysteriously reported missing and miraculously seen in resurrection appearances. As the two followers of Jesus were walking along discussing all that, "Jesus himself came near and went with them." For reasons we can't determine, the two disciples didn't recognize that their fellow-traveler was Jesus. And Jesus played along, as if he didn't know what had occurred.

When the two disciples finished telling the news, finally their road companion revealed deep knowledge about the Old Testament, sharing with them the abundant ways in which the Jewish scriptures anticipated the Messiah. Not yet recognizing who he was, the two disciples invited their guest to stay overnight with them and get something to eat. Only when Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them did they finally see him for who he was. But, as soon as their eyes were opened, Jesus vanished from their sight. The two disciples then hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples that the risen Lord became known to them in the breaking of the bread.

If you think about that story, you can see that there are some important elements. The disciples were overwhelmed with the events of Easter. They knew some confusing details, but didn't yet have a framework to understand it. They needed a way to move forward. Their path to Emmaus involved

reviewing the Old Testament scriptures and Jewish tradition. It also involved some new reasoning about how all those things fit together. And then, to top it off, they had a spiritual communion experience in which their hearts burned and their eyes were opened in recognition.

In United Methodism, we talk sometimes about the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. That's the idea that good theology, ethics, and beliefs come from four important sources: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. In the walk to Emmaus story, the two disciples found a way forward by engaging all four of those sources of wisdom.

2—APOLLOS AND PRISCILLA & AQUILA

The second story, from Acts 18, told us about a Jew named Apollos, who was from Alexandria, Egypt. He had travelled to Ephesus and spoke in the synagogue there with burning enthusiasm about the way of the Lord. In those early days of the Christian movement, Alexandria was a place of great learning, so it's no wonder Apollos was eloquent and well-versed. Apollos had mastered the Jewish scriptures and tradition, and, because he taught accurately about Jesus, Apollos was a good spokesman for the Christian way.

But there was something a little bit off about Apollos' teaching. His education and message were dated. For some reason, he knew only about John's baptism of water. He hadn't yet learned that, by being baptized in the name of Jesus, believers could receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Fortunately, with some gentle correction from Priscilla and Aquila about the way of God, Apollos was able to become an even more effective spokesperson for the way of Jesus.

Again, we see the elements of a way forward. Solid grounding in scripture and tradition are necessary beginnings. But reason has to be updated from time to time. What was accurate in the past might not be accurate later on. The Spirit of God isn't stuck. It keeps moving, and we need the Spirit's guidance and power to stay effective in our faith and relevant in our Christian message. By taking him

aside and giving him a gentle explanation of the baptism of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, Priscilla and Aquila were able to show Apollos a way forward.

This experience with Priscilla and Aquila was just what Apollos needed. Besides what they taught him intellectually about baptism, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, Apollos was also exposed to a new and growing role for women. Bible scholars point out that by naming Priscilla and Aquila with the woman's name first, the writer of Acts was identifying Priscilla as the stronger leader of the two. She, a woman, took the lead in capably teaching and correcting Apollos, an eloquent and well-versed man. Normally, such a thing would be unheard of and unaccepted. But by having this up-close and personal experience that Priscilla was an effective leader in the Christian way, Apollos was persuaded that this way of the Lord was expanding beyond the old limitations. This way of God was moving forward.

3—APPLICATION FOR US TODAY

I believe we can apply these same truths to our life situations today. When we are stuck, confused, or uncertain which way to go—and sometimes even when we think we already know it all—there can be a need to find a way forward. Whether we're experiencing conflict, boredom, or even great success, we sometimes need a new dose of God's direction. We need to revisit what God's will is for our lives. We need to find a spiritual path that leads us to God's abundant life. We need the Holy Spirit to move our thinking and feeling. We need to discover a way forward.

We can do that by practicing this Methodist method called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. We begin by asking, "What does scripture say?" We take this task seriously. We don't guess at what the Bible says, assume we already know, or take other people's word for it. We read and study the Bible ourselves, with Bible study groups, and we learn from sermons and books. Memorizing scripture or marking passages in our Bibles can help us hold on to those ideas.

Next we ask, "What does our Judeo-Christian tradition tell us?" In many ways that's harder because we don't have just one book to read. Our religious tradition is long and rich, with many

different authors and practitioners along the path. But, for many of the decisions we make in life, we can begin to get a sense of church tradition by thinking about what our religious grandparents might have thought and believed. How did they practice their faith? Then expand that a bit by considering the major leaders of denominations. What has the Roman Catholic Church said? What did Martin Luther teach? What did John Wesley say? How have other churches responded?

If you don't know the answer to those questions, some reading might be in order—in books or on the internet. Do you know that we United Methodists have a publication called *The Book of Resolutions*? This book, revised every four years by our United Methodist General Conference, contains statements of wisdom on hundreds of topics. Attending Adult Sunday School and worship regularly are also good helps for learning about church tradition.

The third part of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is reason. Reason can be logic, ethics, and philosophy. Reason can be hard sciences like biology, chemistry, physics, and geology. And reason can be soft sciences like psychology and sociology. The more we learn about all these things, the more we are able to incorporate them into our faith. You know that, centuries ago, people believed that the sun rotated around the earth. That was a convenient Judeo-Christian belief because it reinforced the idea that human beings were at the center of God's creation. When scientists determined that the earth actually rotated around the sun instead, that upset a lot of religious people. They thought such ideas were unbiblical and untraditional. There was a lot of turmoil over that. But eventually Christians moved on to accept that God can still love us even if we are like little ants in the giant universe. In partnership with the Bible and Christian tradition, reason is a powerful light to show us a path forward.

The fourth aspect of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is experience. That's what you and I know from our own everyday lives. We've seen it, felt it, heard it, touched it, and sometimes even tasted it. We know it from our own personal experience, and we've learned about it from our family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. Think about divorce, for example. Some verses of the Bible speak against it.

Church tradition long prohibited it. Many of us would reason that children do best in a stable home, and that divorce is a bad financial decision. And yet, how many of us have known marriages that did more harm than good because of the constant arguing and stress? I think most of us here today would agree that some couples and their children are much better off divorced than remaining in unhappy families. We come to this wisdom through using all four authorities of scripture, tradition, reason, *and* experience.

CONCLUSION

The situation with our bishop is only one small part of a much bigger discussion that's going on in the United Methodist Church. Because our world-wide denomination is very conflicted over issues of human sexuality, the 2016 General Conference and the Council of Bishops have established a 32-member group called The Commission on a Way Forward. That commission has members from around the world, clergy and laity, straight and gay. Over the course of two years and nine meetings, their task is to formulate a recommendation for a specially-called General Conference in February 2019. That General Conference will then make decisions about the future of our denomination.

I'm not on the Commission, and I'm not one of the 800 and some members of the General Conference. But, if I were, I would want to make sure that they used the Wesleyan Quadrilateral—scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—as their sources of wisdom. Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and like Apollos learning from Priscilla and Aquila, I think that's how our United Methodist leaders will best discern God's will for us. I think that's how they will determine a way forward.

* <http://www.umc.org/decisions/71953>