

SERMON TITLE: "What's It Mean to Be a United Methodist? Presence"
SERMON TEXT: Hebrews 10:19-25
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 17, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

One day this past week, my husband Steve and I expected the hospice nurse to come to our house. She didn't. And she didn't even call to explain. Since we had some questions we wanted to discuss with her, we were a little disappointed. But the next morning, she contacted us early and, before long, she was present at our house. She explained that someone in her care had passed away the day before. That's why she had been busy and absent from us. Hearing that explanation, of course, we understood. A person can only juggle so many balls at once, and the hospice nurse certainly was needed much more at the home where a patient was passing from this life into the next. We missed her presence at our house, but we were glad that she was able to be present with the family who needed her most.

Last Sunday I started a sermon series on the topic "What's it mean to be a United Methodist?" While there are many different ways we could define who we are as Christian people within the tradition of John Wesley, one way to identify ourselves is through our membership vows. When we join any congregation of the United Methodist denomination, we indicate that we will uphold that church by our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Last week, I talked about prayers. So, today, on this second Sunday of the series, I invite you into Hebrews, chapter 10, where we can consider together what it means to practice our faith with our presence.

1—ENTERING THE SANCTUARY WITH CONFIDENCE

Let's begin with verses 19 through 22. There we see, first of all, that United Methodist "presence" involves entering the sanctuary with confidence. The writer of Hebrews lived during the latter part of the first century, when Christians were still mostly Jewish people who had also come to see

Jesus as their Messiah. They were people who had either grown up with, or at least heard about, the great temple in Jerusalem, which was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. They also knew the Old Testament stories about the tabernacle in a tent that Moses and the Hebrew people carried around during their wilderness wanderings. With both the great stone structure and the traveling tent, there were outer courtyard areas in which gentiles, and Jewish women and children, could enter. Jewish men could get a little closer to the sacred space. Priests were allowed a bit further inside. But, in both the stone temple and the tent tabernacle, there was an inner room behind a curtain, called the holy of holies, where only the high priest could go. And even that one most special person could only enter the holy of holies once per year, on the Day of Atonement.

I give you this background so you'll understand the importance of what Hebrews 10 is telling us. Early Christians perceived that, by the saving grace of Jesus Christ, everything changed. In the spiritual temple of Christ's body, no longer were Jewish lay men kept outside. No longer were women and children second class citizens. No longer were gentiles excluded. By the redemptive action of Jesus, the separating curtain was torn down. Jesus, the new high priest, opened the way for those on the outside and invited them into the inner sanctuary. Jesus washed away our sins and cleansed our consciences, so that we can approach God with a true heart full of assurance.

I know there are some good reasons why, in religion and society, we sometimes limit who can do certain things. We don't let kids drive cars until they reach a certain age of maturity and size, pass a written and driving test, and have practiced their skills under many hours of adult supervision. Certain kinds of construction can't be done without using licensed plumbers and electricians, who have served their time as apprentices and journeymen. We don't allow persons to perform surgeries without a medical license, which is obtained after long years of study and supervised work. Likewise, in the United Methodist Church, we don't allow lay persons to initiate baptism or Holy Communion, reserving those sacramental functions for ordained and appointed clergy.

Yes, there are certain things in life that are and should be limited. But we United Methodists believe that entrance into the holy house and heart of God isn't one of them. Through the saving act of Jesus Christ, we are all equal recipients of mercy and forgiveness, which make us clean and pure. And, so, we United Methodists are confident to enter because we know that our presence is welcome in God's holy sanctuary.

2—HOLDING FAST TO OUR CONFESSION OF HOPE

If United Methodist presence means entering the sanctuary with confidence, our presence also means holding fast to our confession of hope. We specifically see these words in Hebrews 10, verse 23. But the idea is found throughout the Book of Hebrews. The author's purpose in writing this lengthy treatise was to encourage his readers not to give up their Christian faith. In an environment where Christianity was relatively new and different from what their neighbors believed, those first-century Christians were suffering considerable adversity and persecution. Consequently, some of the Christian believers were starting to weaken and fall away. They were giving in to the majority culture around them. So, the writer of this letter, their spiritual mentor, was admonishing them to persevere in their beliefs and practices. Come on, he says, stick with this. Don't drop out. Stay present.

Some advice is easier said than done. But these instructions weren't given without resources. To the question, "Why and how can faith and hope be maintained?" the writer of Hebrews gave his first-century readers and us several helpful suggestions.

In verse 23, he says that we can stay present in our faith because we know that "he who promised is faithful." We can stick with our hope and faith because we know that God will come through for us. **We** can keep on showing up because we can trust that **God** will keep on showing up also.

Most of us have been part of some group or class sometime in our lives in which the leader was consistently late or maybe didn't prepare well or maybe cancelled a lot of the gatherings. It's hard for us as participants to be very motivated to show up for groups like that. If we take seriously our

responsibilities to be on time and follow through on commitments, then we expect others to do likewise—especially if they’re the leader. Fortunately, we can rest assured that God is a good leader. If we show up in faith and hope, if we present ourselves, we can be sure that God will also be present there for us—because “the one who promised is faithful.”

In verse 24, the writer gives another suggestion of how we can practice our United Methodist presence. We can hold fast to our confession of hope by provoking “one another to love and good deeds.” This kind of presence means that we’re investing ourselves in each other. We’re keeping our own faith alive and strong by encouraging and prodding others to be and do the best they can. I know sometimes it can be a lot easier to take on a task and do it all by ourselves. We don’t have to make any phone calls or send any emails or text messages. We don’t have to coordinate schedules. We don’t have to put up with other people’s excuses or limitations. We can be at peace and hear ourselves think. There’s certainly a time, place, and need for some of that.

But there’s also a time, place, and need for us to be present as mentors to other people. Every one of us needs to find someone who is less experienced in life and faith and make ourselves available as a teacher and coach. Whether we’re training others to play sports, teaching them how to manage a budget, showing them how to cook a recipe, or guiding them to live as followers of Jesus, we all need to be sharing our knowledge, values, and faith. Every person who has an important job or role in a church, family, or community organization should be actively training their replacement and bringing someone else up to speed. Being present means being available to guide and direct others to love and good deeds.

In verse 25, the writer to the Hebrews gives yet another important suggestion about how to be present without allowing our faith to waver. He says we should not neglect meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing. This advice applies to us United Methodists, just like it did to the Christians of the first century. One of the best ways to hold on to our faith is to show up for worship, where we

collectively recite and confess our beliefs in songs, scriptures, and prayers. The same goes for Sunday school classes, weekday studies, choir practice, committee meetings, and fellowship and mission activities. When we meet together, we reinforce our faith and the faith of others.

I have read that the “l-i-g” in the word *religion* comes from the same root word as the “l-i-g” in the word *ligament*. Just like a ligament is the connective tissue that holds two bones together and makes a joint healthy, so religion is the connective tissue that holds us members of the body of Christ together and makes us healthy. Yes, of course, a person can miss a certain amount of church and still be a Christian. But the less we attend, the weaker our faith will be. And the more we gather together, the stronger our faith will be. We United Methodists hold fast to our faith by being in the habit of meeting together.

CONCLUSION

I remember one time in the past when our Children’s Ministry Team was meeting. We were discussing plans for the upcoming season of Children’s Sunday School classes. We talked at length about the curriculum and who the teachers would be. We thought we had a solid plan. Of course, we recognized that our success in training children in Christian faith would also depend on the children’s level of participation. The only way we could help connect them to Jesus and the Bible was to get them to attend. As one children’s team leader said, “Rule #1 is ‘Show up!’” Whether we’re talking about Sunday School or worship, Christian fellowship or mission activities, a huge part of what it means to be a United Methodist is presence.