

**ONLY ONE THING**  
**Episcopal Address**  
**Dakotas Annual Conference**  
**June 7, 2018**  
**Sioux Falls, South Dakota**

**INTRODUCTION**

Good morning Church! I remind you this morning that we are the ones Jesus calls friends, because everything he heard from God he has made known to us. Jesus chose us to be his friends; we did not choose him. He even gave up his life for us; there is no greater love. Jesus chose us as friends and put us in the world to bear fruit; fruit that won't spoil. (John 15:13-16)

I also want to remind you this morning why we gathered for this 25<sup>th</sup> Session of the Dakotas Annual Conference. We are on a shared journey – A Journey Toward Vitality. For the past several years we have been aligning all the Dakotas Conference resources – leadership, staff, finances, programs, structures – toward our ultimate goal -- to increase the vitality and missional impact of each existing and newly formed congregation in the Dakotas Conference.

We believe God's preferred future – God's vision – for every congregation in the Dakotas Conference is to be providing all-in, fully mature, joyful expression to Jesus' core missional imperatives:

- to love God and neighbor,
- to reach new people, and
- to heal a broken world.

Congregations that are continuously building intentionality and capacity in these missional imperatives invariably fulfill our mission of "making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." They carry on the great Methodist revival movement "to spread scriptural holiness over the land." (*2016 Book of Discipline*, p. 51). They foster genuine, practical divinity in the lives of Jesus' followers. They change lives, families, neighborhoods, communities and the world.

And, there is good news! Your intentionality and increased capacity in these three missional imperatives is bearing fruit; fruit that will last.

- The total number of persons professing their faith in Jesus through our churches increased by a whopping 112% in 2017 over 2016.
- For the first time in a great long while, the Dakotas Conference had an increase in total professing membership. Our membership increased to 36,577 in 2017, a 2.4% increase over 2016.

- Our weekly average attendance in Sunday Church School or other weekly education classes increased by 17% in 2017 over 2016.
- The number of persons served by our community ministries of outreach, justice and mercy continues to grow, with an 11% increase to 193,954 persons in 2017 over 174,194 persons in 2016.
- We are engaged in 18 different church plants or multiplication projects across the Dakotas Conference.
- And, for the seventh consecutive year, the Dakotas Conference had an increase in average worship attendance. In 2017 our attendance grew by 5.5% over 2016.

This is the tip of the iceberg. The evidence of your faithful leadership and our congregations' fruitfulness is abundant, flavorful and lasting. This fruitfulness is reflected in the Missional Report you will receive today. This fruitfulness will be evident tomorrow morning when we receive our Miracle Offering of hundreds of names of those God is calling to spiritual leadership. You are ready, aren't you, to participate in our *Called One Word, Many Ways* Miracle Offering? As we pray for the persons God is calling from among us to lead us, it will be a profound testimony to your commitment – our Dakotas Conference commitment – to call forth and equip God's people to “discover joy and live deeply” in Christ.

### **DISCOVER JOY, LIVE DEEPLY**

Throughout this annual conference session, we will be exploring Jesus' gospel imperative to grow in love of God and neighbor. Our theme, *Discover Joy, Live Deeply*, reminds us that our capacity to love God and neighbor is born of being deeply rooted in Christ Jesus. It is no surprise that as Jesus was giving his final instructions to his disciples before his death and resurrection he commanded them to “remain in me and I will remain in you.” In the span of the first 10 verses in John, chapter 15, Jesus uses the phrase “remain in me”, or “stay united to me” or “make your home in me” 11 times to remind the disciples – and us – that apart from Jesus we cannot bear the first fruit of discipleship – love. “I give you these commandments,” Jesus said, “so you can love one another.” (John 15:17)

And, here is the bottom line: when we remain in Jesus, his joy is our joy, and we discover fully mature, fully complete, joy for our lives.

The literal translation for the word “joy” in John 15 is (I love this) “dance within the heart.” A complete joy, born of making one's home in Jesus, is like a “dance within the heart.” The “dance within the heart” is the culmination of our thirsting, yearning, searching for God. The “dance within the heart” is complete joy born of obedience to sacrificial love.

## ONLY ONE THING

How many of you remember the 1991 movie *City Slickers*, starring Billy Crystal? Billy plays a character named Mitch. Mitch, who has just celebrated his 39<sup>th</sup> birthday, is experiencing a mid-life crisis. He is worried and distracted by many things. He is preoccupied with worries about his mortality. He is dissatisfied and disinterested in his job. He is distracted by the lack of romance in his marriage. He is worried that his children don't respect him. He feels depressed much of the time. In a word, Mitch is on the verge of becoming a basket case. Does Mitch's condition describe any of you here today? How many of you have "been there?"

So Mitch and two of his buddies, who are also struggling with their own mid-life crises, decide to vacation at a working dude ranch in New Mexico. They go to "find themselves." There they meet Curly. Curly is one of the last real cowboys. Curly is old, rough, independent, intimidating, crude, and filled with great wisdom. Curly takes this group of "city slickers" on a real cattle drive. Along the way Mitch begins to question Curly about the meaning of life. Let's listen in on 30 seconds of that conversation.

Curly: How old are you? Thirty-eight?

Mitch: Thirty-nine.

Curly: You all come up here about the same age, the same problems. You spend about fifty weeks a year getting knots in your ropes and then – then you think two weeks up here will untie them for you. None of you get it. Do you know what the secret of life is?

Mitch: No, what?

Curly: This!

Mitch: Your finger.

Curly: One thing. Just one thing.

So what is the "one thing" that is the secret of life? What is the "one thing" that gives focus and direction, energy and meaning to life? Is it our many possessions? Is it our job? Is it the next academic or vocational achievement? Is it another person – a spouse, our children? What is the "one thing" that gives focus and direction, energy and meaning to ministry? Is it the size of our church? Is it pirating among the open pulpits? Is it achieving the admiration and approval of other people?

Curly never really answers the question for Mitch. He just tells Mitch it is up to him to figure out what the "one thing" is for his life. There is great power, and great freedom, in being focused on only one thing. Many organizations and movements have discovered the value of focusing on the "big idea" – the one thing that brings alignment to their mission, vision, values and strategic initiatives. The greatest challenge most of us face in our lives is discovering what the one thing necessary is, and then keeping that one thing the main thing. Curley is right. The secret of life – the secret of our mission and vision – is one thing. Only one thing!

## JESUS' ONE THING

So, what is Jesus' "one thing?" What is Jesus' big idea, around which all his praying, teaching, healing, miracle-working, dying, and rising is aligned? What is the "one thing" Jesus wants his disciples to get, to comprehend, to live, to make known, "so that the world may believe that God sent him"? (John 17:21b) What is the one fruit – the fruit that will last – that Jesus wants his disciples to produce?

The answer is repeated throughout the gospels. I turn to Mark's Gospel for Jesus' one thing. One of the scribes is listening in on a debate Jesus is having with some Sadducees about resurrection. Hearing the lively exchange of questions and answers and seeing how sharp Jesus is in his answers, he puts the question to Jesus: "Which is the first of all the commandments?"

Listen again to Jesus' response as paraphrased by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*.

Jesus said, "The first in importance is,  
'Hear, O Israel: The Lord your God is one;  
so love the Lord with all your passion and prayer  
and intelligence and energy.'

And here is the second: 'Love others  
as well as you love yourself.'

There is no other commandment that ranks with these."

The religious scholar said, "A wonderful answer, Teacher!

So lucid and accurate –

that God is one and there is no other.

And loving God with all passion and intelligence and energy,  
and loving others as well as you love yourself.

**Why, that's better than all offerings and sacrifices put together."**

(Mark 12:29-33, *The Message*)

In response to the scribe's question, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus recites the *Shema*. The *Shema* is the most basic, essential profession of faith for practicing Jews. It is recited twice a day, during morning and evening prayers. The *Shema* is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. *Shema* is the Hebrew word for "hear" – the first word of the profession. "Hear, O Israel; the Lord is our God and the Lord alone; you shall love the Lord with all your heart and all your soul and with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

Hear, O People of God! Love First begins and ends with God – God’s love made known to us in Christ Jesus. “For God so loved the world that God gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) Hear, O People of God! Love First is about remembering that God alone is God. Hear, O People of God! Love First is about staying in love with God.

But, Jesus quickly adds a second commandment to the first: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” While the scribe asked for only the first commandment, Jesus refuses to separate what is truly inseparable. He puts the two into one. For Jesus, genuine fulfillment of the *Shema* will result in genuine love of neighbor.

For Jesus, love is a commandment, not just an emotion. This does not mean love does not have an emotional component. It certainly did for Jesus, as he expressed the very real and raw emotions of grief and pity, compassion and empathy, loving patience and anger born of love. However, loving God with our whole being is not dependent on whether we feel good about God, or feel God has done something good for us. Loving our neighbor as ourselves is not dependent on an emotional attraction or emotional bonding with our neighbor. If it were, our circle of “neighbors” would be very small and would exclude the vast majority of God’s children in our communities and around the world. It has to do with understanding we love that which God has created. God created you and me. And, God created our neighbors – black and white, straight and gay, Muslim and Christian, African and Asian, city folks and country folks, immigrants and citizens, more conservative and more liberal, rich and poor.

M. Scott Peck in his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, defines love as “a willful and intentional action for someone else’s well-being.” Hear, O People of God! Love First, as Jesus commands, is a willful and intentional action. Hear, O People of God! Love First is a reflection of Christ’s sacrificial love, not just for you and me, but all humankind. Hear, O People of God! Love First is the first fruit.

I first learned of Brother Robert from Danny Morris at the Upper Room’s Two-Year Academy for Spiritual Formation. Some of you may have heard me tell of Brother Robert in other settings. Brother Robert is a Trappist monk who lives in a little cabin on a mountain in Tennessee. He is a hermit. He has 180 square feet in his little house, a bunk, a little table, one chair, a few books, a portable gas stove, no electricity and no plumbing. He gets up at 1:00 a.m. and begins to pray. He prays until 5:00 a.m. He stops and has a piece of toast for breakfast and then he returns to prayer until 5:00 p.m. when he stops and fixes himself supper. He is in bed by 7:00 p.m. Once a week he makes his way down the mountain to the monastery to report to the Abbott and keep his communal obligations. While there he picks up scraps of food left over from the community’s meals to take back to his cabin. When Danny Morris visited with Brother Robert, he asked about his vocation and how he understood his ministry and what constituted success in his ministry. Brother Robert’s simple response was: “I want to grow old loving God.”

Now, dear friends, we are not monks. I doubt if anyone here this morning is feeling a call to become a hermit. That’s not the point in sharing the story. My point is that Brother Robert practices one thing. He practices Love First. Through his discipline of unceasing prayer, Brother

Robert has discovered and practices the essential truth of Jesus' Love First commandment – to grow old loving God and all that God loves, namely our neighbors, our earth, ourselves.

I invite each of you, each of our nearly 250 congregations and our entire annual conference connection to grow old loving God. I don't mean old in years. I mean to grow up. To grow onward, to grow forward, loving God and loving our neighbors. Let us make the first and essential commandment of Jesus the very core of our lives, and the very core of our congregations. If we do, we will be transformed. If we do, our congregations will be transformed. If we do, all those we encounter will be transformed. If we do, our communities will be transformed. If we do, the world will be transformed. If we do, we will become Love First congregations. If we do, we will become a Love First conference. If we do, we will become a Love First movement.

### **LOVE FIRST CHURCH**

The Dakotas Conference has scores of churches that are, what I call, Love First congregations. They are focused on “the one thing.” They understand the big idea is love -- God's love made manifest in Christ Jesus. All they are and all they do is aligned around loving God and loving neighbor. They are growing old, not in years, but in the maturity, in the breadth and depth, of their love life. They have designed their discipleship programs to help all members and constituents – and their neighbors -- discover joy and live deeply in Christ. These congregations display several common characteristics. I want to share three of the most distinctive characteristics. Love First congregations:

- Live the United Methodist Way
- Tell their Jesus stories
- Generate Love First fruit

### **LIVE THE UNITED METHODIST WAY**

Love First churches encourage and enable their members and constituents to live the United Methodist Way. They actively assist individuals to live as United Methodist Christian disciples. They intentionally encourage, invite and equip persons to embrace and live a life of personal holiness and social holiness – to embrace the piety of loving God and to engage in the Kingdom work of loving all of God's people. Love First churches encode this Methodist DNA in the souls of those they disciple. Love First churches teach those they disciple to act and speak and model this Methodist DNA. Love First churches teach those they disciple to make their home in Jesus.

John Wesley in writing on “The Character of a Methodist” (in *Works*, Vol. 8, pp 341-346) responded to the question, “What then is the mark? Who is a Methodist, according to your own account?” (Remember Wesley wrote in a time that was not sensitive to inclusive

language.) Wesley wrote: “I answer: A Methodist is one who has “the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him; one who loves the Lord God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength. God is the joy of his heart; and the desire of his soul.”

Wesley continued by writing, “And while a Methodist always exercises his love to God, by praying without ceasing, rejoicing evermore, and in everything giving thanks, this commandment is written in his heart, ‘That he who loveth God, love his neighbor also.’ And he accordingly loves his neighbor as himself; he loves every person as his own soul. His heart is full of love to all mankind, to every child.”

Our Methodist ancestor, John Wesley, not only set the mark for a United Methodist disciple, he gave us a way or method to grow and mature and be made “perfect” in our love of God and neighbor. Wesley invited those who had encountered the love of God and desired to live a faithful life in response to Jesus’ First Commandment to live according to three General Rules. You know these rules, don’t you? You are living these rules, right? Bishop Rueben Job described these General rules as three simple rules (say them with me):

- Do No Harm
- Do Good
- Stay In Love With God

Love First churches are forming Christian disciples who know and practice this distinctive United Methodist Way of life and witness.

### **Do No Harm**

Think for a moment about a conflict in which you have found yourself recently. Or imagine for a moment the conflict that exists within our United Methodist body, even here in the Dakotas. We fight fiercely over differences of theological perspective and over the social issues of the day. We do harm to one another. When we agree that we will not harm those with whom we disagree, conversation and discovery of new insight become possible. Doing no harm means that all our actions and even our silence will not add injury to another of God’s creatures or to any part of God’s creation.

### **Do Good**

Wesley spoke of doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all. Doing good means putting the needs of others first, placing the common good above our own personal needs. We have to be careful here. Wesley was not suggesting we give up self-care. Rather, he was inviting us to put our individual lives in a context of care that is larger than ourselves. It is about focusing on relationships and willing the well-being of those relationships.

### **Stay In Love With God**

Wesley patterned his rule on staying in love with God on Jesus’ life. Jesus was always cultivating his relationship with God. He stayed in love with the Creator. He regularly went apart to pray.

He studied the Torah and psalms and prophets, the scriptures of his day. He worshipped with his religious community. He stayed in conversation with others about the life of faith. He fasted. He was always setting a table for and feasting with his followers, with the rich, and especially with those who lived on the margins and in the shadows and seams of his society. Practicing regularly these habits opened Jesus to receive God's love. It aligned Jesus' heart with the heart of God so that when others encountered Jesus they exclaimed, "The Son of God!" Today these same practices – prayer, reflection on scripture, Christian conversation, worship, fasting, Eucharist – open us to God's love and align our hearts to God's heart when we practice them regularly. These are the means of grace. These are the ways to remain connected to the vine.

These three simple rules – do no harm, do good, stay in love with God – are the hallmark of the Wesleyan Christian disciple and the Love First church.

Those of us gathered here this morning are the ones entrusted to lead The United Methodist Church in the Dakotas toward its mission and vision. We are those entrusted to teach the United Methodist Way. We are the ones, who by our own practice and teaching of these three simple rules, can demonstrate the dynamics of a Love First church. The people called United Methodist will live the United Methodist Way only as we, the leaders, do so.

### **TELL THEIR JESUS STORIES**

Love First churches encourage and enable their members and constituents to tell their Jesus stories. Curly reminded Mitch that he needed to discover the "one thing" for his life. We all have to discover or recover the "one thing" for our lives. This is our why story –

- why I love Jesus;
- why I follow Jesus;
- why I love my neighbors;
- why I seek the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven;
- why I stay united to the vine;
- why I work for peace and justice and healing a broken world;
- why I maintain the unity of the church;
- why I strive to do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God;
- why I have given my life to encouraging others to have faith;
- why I continue to say "yes" every time Jesus calls.

Last fall, I preached at Canyon Lake United Methodist Church in Rapid City, South Dakota. Between the two morning worship services, I spoke to the confirmation class – about 25 young teenagers. They were ready for me, having prepared excellent questions. I was surprised, but also absolutely delighted, that one of their first questions was: "When did you first believe in



Jesus?” I was surprised because I typically get questions like: “What does a bishop really do?” or “What is your favorite food?” I was delighted because they wanted to know my Jesus story. They wanted to hear my profession of faith. They wanted to know who I say Jesus is. They wanted to understand my why.

I began my response by telling the confirmation class there is a difference between being a cultural Christian – going through the motions of observed or taught religious practices – and a Christian who knows Jesus from above or through an encounter with the Holy Spirit. Remember how Jesus responded to Peter when he declared Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” (Matthew 16:16) Jesus said, “You didn’t get that answer out of books or from teachers. God in heaven let you in on the secret of who I really am.” (Matthew 16:17, *The Message*)

And, then I told that group of teenagers my Jesus story. Not my only Jesus story; I continue to have encounters with God in Christ, as do all of you. But, I told them of my encounter with Jesus when I was their age. Some of you have heard me tell this story in other settings. I also shared it in my 2014 Episcopal Address.

I grew up in the church – actually two Methodist churches, a Lutheran church and a Presbyterian church in northwest North Dakota. We moved often and there was not always a Methodist church in the area. Through loving parents, a doting grandmother and several nurturing Sunday school teachers, I knew God loved me. And, I learned to profess my love of Jesus. But I didn’t really hear Jesus say my name until I was sixteen. I didn’t really have that moment when it hit me that Jesus desired to forgive me of my sins and set me free until I was sixteen. God had been using my Uncle Ed to prepare me for the moment. My uncle could spot the difference between a cultural Christian and a Spirit-born Christian. He knew I was the former. So, nearly every summer weekend, when we had completed our work on the family farm, Uncle Ed would haul me off to a good, old-fashioned, sawdust-aisle, tent revival. He was determined to get me saved. What he didn’t know is that the story of his own conversion, which he shared with me like a fragile, treasured gift one summer evening, is what caused my spirit to stir.

And then the moment came. Uncle Ed and I were watching a Billy Graham crusade on television. It was youth night. Mr. Graham had just issued the invitation. He invited those watching at home to kneel or touch the television. I knelt right there in the living room. And in that moment, Jesus finally had my full attention and I heard him speak my name. From that moment on, I could not get enough of Jesus. I wanted to spend every free minute reading the *Bible*. I wanted to live deeply. I would spontaneously break into songs of loud, sometimes nonsensical praise. I had discovered joy. I had been unleashed, unburdened, set free.

It is in experiencing, remembering and telling our Jesus stories that we come to learn our true identity. After Simon Peter’s declaration of Jesus’ true identity as the Son of the Living God, Jesus says to Peter, “And, now I’m going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church...” (Matthew 16:18, *The Message*)

I believe the lesson is clear. Our Jesus stories, our why stories, our declarations of who Jesus is in our lives and the world, are the only foundation upon which the kingdom of heaven on earth

can be built – not our programs, not our structures, not our human cleverness or even our human teaching, but our Jesus stories. It is our why stories – our Jesus stories – that:

- give rise to our passion to love others, reach others, have compassion on others, to seek justice for others;
- inform our mission to make disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world;
- compel us to make our home in Christ’s love;
- drive us deep into the very heart of God;
- make our joy complete.

### **GENERATE LOVE FIRST FRUIT**

I love being a grandparent because it calls forth a mature, generative love. And, the grandchildren know this. They yearn to come to grandma and grandpa’s house because it is a place where they experience the liberating and nurturing environment of unconditional, extravagant love. Such mature love is generative. Mature love generates new life, new hope, new possibilities. Mature love generates transformation. Mature love enables us to live and minister with convicted humility, servant leadership, extravagant generosity and sacrificial love.

Mature love generates Love First fruit. Jesus made this absolutely clear to his disciples when he connected his commandment to “love one another as I have loved you” with his appointment to “go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.” And, then Jesus makes the most profound, most astounding statement. “This is how God shows who God is – when you produce fruit, when you mature as my disciples.” (John 15:8, *The Message*)

Love First churches are generative. They generate Love First fruit. Love First churches know it is not enough to say they love God. Love First churches know it is not sufficient to say that they love their neighbors. Love First churches put their love into action. They build transformative relationships. They go to the edges. They are radically inclusive. They seek out the lost, the least, the lonely, the left-out and left-behind. They lead people to Jesus. They love justice. They walk humbly with God.

You know this Love First fruit. Most of the congregations in the Dakotas have been generating this Love First fruit for generations. It is the same fruit that the Holy Spirit enabled the earliest followers of the Risen Christ to generate in Acts, chapter 2. It is the fruit that is generated when congregations have a disciple-making process in place designed “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:12, *NRSV*)

### **THE IRRIGATION SYSTEM**

In a sermon on social justice at New York City’s Riverside Church, Rev. William Sloan Coffin quoted the familiar words of the prophet Amos, “But let justice roll down like waters, and

righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24) He then went on to quip, “It is one thing to have an ever-flowing stream, but where is the irrigation system?”

This is a powerful metaphor for us. We stand in the ever-flowing stream of God’s love and grace. God’s love cascades down upon us moment by moment. A love made known to us in Christ’s life and teaching, death and resurrection. And, now God has called us and blessed us with being the irrigation system for God’s love. We are the channels through which God’s ever-flowing love is delivered to our neighbors, to our communities, and to the world.

I want every congregation in the Dakotas to be part of this irrigation system. Don’t you? I desire to spread God’s love to every person in the Dakotas. Don’t you? I want every congregation to have channels of love that are unimpeded, unrestricted, unhindered. Don’t you?

In order for our irrigation systems to work effectively, we need to become Love First congregations.

- Congregations that live the United Methodist Way with ever-flowing devotion.
- Congregations that tell their Jesus stories with free-flowing passion and grace.
- Congregations that generate Love First fruit in ever-increasing abundance.

The Dakotas Conference is going on to perfection in love. This is a journey that lasts a lifetime. This is a journey to become Love First congregations. This is a journey toward the one thing necessary. This is a journey that aligns our mission, vision, values, strategies, programs, and resources around Jesus’ First Commandment. It is the Jesus Way. It is the United Methodist Way. It is the Christian Way. It is the Way that brings us life. It is the Way that feeds the physically, mentally and spiritually hungry the Bread of Life. It is the Way that brings the Living Water to those who thirst for righteousness and wholeness. It is God’s irrigation system. It is the hope for the world.

When our conflicted, divided, broken world looks at the people called United Methodist practicing the three simple rules, they will exclaim, “Look at how they, in all their diversity, love Jesus, love one another and love us! They are a Love First church! There is hope for the world! There is hope for the world! May it be so! Amen!

### **PRAYER FOR LIVING DEEPLY**

Let us stand and pray together. The 2018 Breakthrough Prayer Cards are on your tables and the prayer is projected on the screen. Let us pray for living deeply.

Gracious and Holy God,

- Thank you for sending your Holy Spirit to woo me and bind me to Jesus, the true vine.

- Pour out your Spirit-Helper to enable our clergy and lay leadership to pursue you with all their hearts, make their home in Jesus and know you intimately, deeply, joyfully.
- Equip and empower our congregations to grow in our love of you, O God, and of our neighbors; boldly use us to bear kingdom fruit that is abundant, flavorful, transformative and lasting.
- Create in me a seeker's heart, eager to know the fullness of your grace, to abide in the fullness of your love, to express the fullness of your mission, and to discover the fullness of your joy.

In the name of Jesus, who calls us friends.

Amen.

**Bishop Bruce R. Ough**  
**Dakotas-Minnesota Area**  
**The United Methodist Church**

5/22/18