

**THE FINAL EXAM
EPISCOPAL ADDRESS**

**Dakotas Annual Conference
June 4, 2015
Fargo, North Dakota**

INTRODUCTION

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Philemon, vs. 3)

Each year, I look forward to this privileged opportunity to address the lay and clergy leadership of the Dakotas Conference as we continue our shared journey toward God's vision for us as a conference in which each congregation is embracing Jesus' core missional imperatives and growing in its capacity to love God and neighbor, reach new people and heal a broken world – all to the glory of God and the fulfillment of our mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” This year my Episcopal Address to the Dakotas Conference will be this sermon, which I have titled, *The Final Exam*.

Let us pray.

Holy and gracious God, pour out your Spirit blessing on us as we gather for the 21st Session of the Dakotas Annual Conference. We pray that all our activities will be rooted and grounded in Christ's love, and all of our discussion and discernment will reflect our concern for one another and the common good for all your people. Grant, through your Holy Spirit, that all our learning, worship, and fellowship will

form us into the image, attitude and love of Christ who emptied himself – impoverished himself, humbled himself – for the sake of the world. Help us to be obedient to the Spirit’s leading, even to the point of dying to our selfish preferences and pre-conceived positions. In all that we do together here in Fargo, may the name of Jesus be lifted up and you, O God, be glorified. Amen.

OUR JOURNEY TOWARD VITALITY

We are on a journey together to increase the missional vitality of each of the congregations in the Dakotas Conference. Vital congregations are forming disciples of Jesus Christ who love God and neighbor, reach new people and heal a broken world.

This Journey Toward Vitality has been reflected in the themes for each of our annual conference sessions throughout this quadrennium. In 2013, under the theme of *Unleashing Bold Spirit-Leaders*, we focused on *Developing Missional Leaders* and the absolutely critical role lay and clergy leadership play in increasing the number of vital congregations. In 2014, under the banner of *Unleashing Fearless, Spirit-Led Churches*, we focused on *Equipping Missional Congregations* and explored how vital congregations are fearless and Spirit-led. This year, our theme of *God’s Vision, Our Mission – Unleashed*, reflects our commitment to *Extend the Missional Impact* of each of our congregations in their respective villages, neighborhoods, cities and the world. Throughout the entire quadrennium we have been individually and collectively praying for the Holy Spirit to break

through and renew and revive our churches, unleashing them to fulfill God's vision of a transformed world – the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Our Journey Toward Vitality is producing much kingdom fruit. There are many signs we are growing in our capacity to love God and neighbor, reach new people and heal a broken world. This fruitfulness will be reflected in the Missional Report you will receive later this morning and throughout the conference session.

I want to share just a few highlights of how Dakota United Methodism is being unleashed.

- The number of Dakota United Methodists in mission grew from 3,100 in 2013 to over 4,300 in 2014, a 39% increase.
- Over 3,600 persons were served in 2014 by community daycare or other education ministries offered by United Methodist churches in the Dakotas. This is a whopping increase of 64% from 2,200 in 2013.
- We also showed a 22% increase in the number of persons we served through community outreach, justice and mercy ministries, from 112,500 in 2013 to 137,000 in 2014.
- Our 2013 and 2014 Miracle Offerings have totaled over \$500,000 to fuel (no pun intended) our Bakken Oil Rush Ministries, and we continue

to save and transform lives through our Tree of Life, Spirit Lake and Haiti Solar Oven Missions.

We are clearly a vibrant connection of United Methodist congregations expanding our missional impact. I cannot wait to see what miracle God will perform through us as we receive our *Imagine No Malaria* Miracle Offering tomorrow morning.

- Did you bring your Miracle Offering?
- Are you ready to expand the missional impact of the UMC across the Dakotas and the world?
- Are you ready to be unleashed to make God's vision our everyday mission?

THE FINAL EXAM

Dear friends in Christ, I confess to you today that I am anxious about passing my final examination. And, I am worried that many congregations in The United Methodist Church may not pass their final exam. I have taken a lot of exams in my lifetime. I have answered many exam questions. But the question Jesus asks on the final exam – the question he taught would be put to us in the final judgment – is haunting:

“When was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not care for you?”

(Matthew 25:44)

What do we see when we encounter people living in poverty? What do we do when we encounter people existing on the margins? Jesus’ judgment falls hard on me. I have seen many hungry people, but felt no pain in my stomach. I have seen the sick and homeless on the streets of Port-au-Prince, but I slept in a comfortable bed. I have seen the children living on the city dump in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where they gather scraps of plastic and glass for recycling, but I enjoyed a delicious dinner. I have seen children dying from malaria in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, while I took my expensive anti-malaria medication. I have seen immigrants in downtown Minneapolis and Sioux Falls seeking freedom and safety, but I returned to the security of my suburban neighborhood. I have watched the unchecked expressions of racism on the streets of Baltimore and the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, but failed to proclaim that all lives matter: Black lives matter; Native American lives matter. I am anxious about passing the final exam!

The poor had a central place in the teachings and actions of Jesus. Jesus inherited from his Hebrew ancestors a strong sense of God’s solidarity with the poor and a strong commitment to both mercy and justice for those lacking in material goods and social position. This theme is sounded by the prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, among others, and echoed in the Psalms and other ancient Jewish literature. Proverbs 31 offers a stirring summary:

“Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

(Proverbs 31:8-9)

One in every 16 verses in scripture refers to the poor. And one in every ten in the gospels is about the poor, the impoverished, and the economically exploited.

The Hebrew scriptures are clear, the prophets are clear, Jesus is clear – the distress of every single human being is a priority for the living God. If we fail to comprehend this, we fail in all. If we fail to respond, we fail in all. If we fail to place the last, the least, the forgotten, the neglected, the hungry, the impoverished at the center of our attention, we fail in all. We are only truly the church when we exist for others. This is the final exam!

And who are these others – the people who are a priority for the living God?

- They are our neighbors nearby and far away.
- They may be the person you are seated next to or the person living just beyond this convention center.

- They are the 30,000 children under the age of five who die each day from malnutrition and the diseases of poverty, far removed from the scrutiny and conscience of the world, invisible in death.
- They are the 72 million children of primary age who are not in school due to poverty, when the expenditure of less than one percent of what is spent annually on weapons of war would put all children worldwide in school.
- They are the 1.1 billion people who have no access to clean water and the 2.6 billion people who lack basic sanitation.
- They are the one in eight United States citizens who go hungry every day.
- They are the millions of U.S. citizens who are unemployed and under-employed, or who have simply dropped out of the job market.
- They are the disproportionate number of African-Americans and Native Americans incarcerated in our prisons.
- They are the 80% of humanity who live on less than \$10 per day and the one billion who live on one dollar (\$1.00) per day.

- They are the people we see every day here in the Dakotas who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, addicted, abused or imprisoned.
- They are our neighbors nearby and far away.

The world is the Lord's and all that is in it! Do you believe it? If you do, say it with me: The world is the Lord's and all that is in it! Again, like you mean it: The world is the Lord's and all that is in it! We are all God's children sharing this world with all its resources. We are all loved by the same living God who revealed himself in this world through his son Jesus Christ. Jesus didn't own a house. He was marginalized, suffered and died. But through his extravagant, sacrificial love, he conquered all evil powers of this world, including the evil power of poverty. Jesus built the first bridge out of poverty with only three nails and two pieces of wood shaped into an old rugged cross.

I am not worried about God doing God's work. Believing that God is doing God's work in Christ is not the final exam. The final exam is whether you and I will fully, sacrificially, extravagantly engage in Christ's mission to transform the world. The final exam is our response to human need and suffering in our lifetime. The final exam is not professed beliefs. The final exam is our redemptive, life-giving, soul-liberating actions.

Jesus is brutally clear that in the end when the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the nations are gathered before him, the final exam question will not be about

what we professed but what we did when we saw the least of these hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick or in prison. The ethics of love and mercy are the standards by which you and I will be judged. God is doing God's work in Christ. This is God's vision. This is our mission. I want to join in this work! This is our mission. I don't want to be left behind! I want to be completely unleashed to go all out. How about you?

As United Methodists, we have a particular DNA that guides how we join in God's work in Christ. "We proclaim no personal gospel that fails to express itself in relevant social concerns. We proclaim no social gospel that does not include the personal transformation of sinners." (*2012 Book of Discipline*) This creative tension defines Methodism. This is our DNA. If it doesn't, we are not United Methodists.

Further, John Wesley understood and taught that there is a difference between acts of mercy and acts of justice. We should not only share gospel, food, water, health care, education and community with the poor; we are also called to address, advocate, even fight the demonic systems that create and sustain poverty. We dare not offer the saving power and promise of the gospel in Christ's name without offering bread in Christ's name. And we dare not offer bread in Christ's name without addressing the very political and economic systems that brutalize human beings beyond our imagination.

In the final decade of John Wesley's ministry, he warned against the increasing tendency of Methodists to retain wealth instead of sharing it with those in need

saying it correlated directly with a decline in their spiritual growth and the progress of the revival. Wesley was clear that there is a correlation between engagement with the poor and spiritual growth. That is why we engage in ministry with the poor and not in ministry to, or for, or over, or upon, or against the poor. “We are the ones who need to be evangelized by the poor.” (Bishop Gregory Palmer)

We are the ones who need to abandon our preoccupation with possessions, positions, entitlements and structures and become like the poor who are able to follow Jesus in a radical way because they have nothing to lose.

- It is a scandal for us, as United Methodists, to live out of a script of scarcity, rather than increase our capacity.
- It is a scandal, as United Methodists, to live out of a script of indulgence, rather than take up Christ’s cross and deny ourselves.
- It is a scandal, as United Methodists, to live out of a world view that holds God’s bountiful resources are in short supply, rather than tackle the real problem of distribution.

St. Augustine said it well: “We are the bread on the table.” The final exam is about becoming what we are – bread on the table. We are called to live in such a way that the world, at a minimum, would have to take the gospel seriously.

The prophetic Wesleyan movement cannot be renewed by dusting off our doctrines and realigning our tactics. As Colin Morris said in his book, *Include Me Out*: “If there is still time left for Methodism, it can only be stirred into action if the power is connected between the two poles: Christ’s love (on the first pole) and human suffering (on the second pole); if we feel the full strength of the first and the monstrosity of the other.” This is the bridge we are called to build as United Methodists. We are called to build the bridge between Christ’s love for the world and the suffering of God’s people. We are the only bridges God has to connect these two poles. God doesn’t let innocent children suffer the burden of poverty and die. God’s people do -- when we fail to be bridge builders.

- Are you ready to connect the poles of Christ’s love and the suffering of God’s people?
- Are you ready to expand our missional impact?
- Are you ready to put Christ’s love into action?

BRIDGES ARE BEING BUILT

One of the joys of serving as the episcopal leader of the Dakotas Conference is that a large number of our congregations already know the answer to the final exam.

- They know that when they reach out to the least of these who are members of God’s family they are ministering to Christ.
- They know that the love of God outlasts everything and overcomes anything.
- They know that their future is not found in preserving themselves behind locked doors.
- They know that people and relationships are more important than counting nickels and noses.
- They know “we should not serve the poor like they were Jesus; we should serve the poor because they are Jesus.” (Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *Alive Now*, May-June 2015, p. 3)
- They know that the continuous first step of evangelism is to practice the same radical hospitality Jesus demonstrated when leading persons into a relationship with the Living God.
- They know that nothing is going to stop the movement of the Holy Spirit.
- They know that the gospel is good news for the poor.

- They know that God has called and equipped them to give themselves for God's redemptive work in the world.
- They know they are to build bridges out of poverty for those who are oppressed.
- They know that such bridges begin by building relationships with the poor.
- They know that God's vision is our mission!

GO MAKE AN IMPACT

I recently heard someone say, "Hell means realizing later we should have said 'yes' when God called us." Friends, God is calling us in the Dakotas. We have in our midst the largest mission field in North America.

- God is calling us to connect the poles of Christ's love and human suffering.
- God is calling us to build bridges out of poverty.
- God is calling us to expand our missional impact.

- God is calling us to heal a broken world.

Mark Powell in a video blog titled *Toward a Missional Church* draws a contrast between the missional church and the institutional church. He says a “missional church comes into being when a local discipleship community recognizes that it is God who is on mission in the world and that God has, in grace, chosen to outsource this mission primarily, but not exclusively, through local congregations.” (Mark Powell video blog, March 31, 2008)

Church is a witness to God’s mission. Church is a witness to what God is doing. Church is the hands and feet of Christ. Church is here on behalf of those who are not here. Jesus was sent to get back what belongs to God – all of God’s people. He suffered and died on a cross and was raised from the dead to accomplish God’s mission. This Jesus, the living Christ, and Jesus alone, is the calling of the church. That is the reason we have been sent on mission.

Jesus was constantly encouraging the Pharisees and scribes to rethink “church,” often with intense bluntness. Luke’s gospel records the following rebuke by Jesus: “I’ve had it with you! You’re hopeless, you Pharisees! Frauds! You keep meticulous account books, tithing on every nickel and dime you bet, but manage to find loopholes for getting around basic matters of justice and God’s love.” (Luke 11:42, *The Message*) Jesus is screaming, “Rethink Church.” And with every parable, Jesus invited his own followers to hear and see a new way of being the “church.” But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame

and the blind. And you will be blessed...” (Luke 14:13-14a) Jesus is articulating a new vision of righteousness. Jesus is expanding the table of grace.

Several years ago, I met a young woman from Kansas who was part of a VIM team working at our Tree of Life Mission on the Rosebud Indian Reservation. She and her team members wore Rethink Church T-shirts. Inscribed on the back was the following statement:

The Church Has Left The Building: Gone Outreaching

The mission of every United Methodist Church in the Dakotas is to make and equip disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. There is no way to fulfill this mission without re-inventing church on a regular basis – at a minimum, every generation or two. The future of every congregation is dependent on the ability to maintain or recover its external and eternal focus. Unless we are constantly in the process of leaving the building, the church will die.

- It is time to hang up the “Gone Outreaching” sign.
- It is time to know our communities; love our communities; build relationships with our communities; evangelize our communities.
- It is time to build bridges between the poles of Christ’s love and human suffering.

- It is time to be in ministry with the poor because they are Jesus.
- It is time to leave our buildings and take to the streets to feed the hungry, aid the homeless, visit the lonely, provide clothes for the naked, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, engage the imprisoned, offer new life to the sin-sick.
- It is time to show the world that black and brown and red lives matter.
- It is time to take and pass the final exam.

Are you ready? If you are ready to take the final exam; if you are ready to do something; if you are ready to transform the world, I invite you to say “yes” – to respond – by coming forward to be commissioned – to be commissioned to go and be a person who is doing great things for God. I invite you to say “yes” – to respond by joining me in our Prayer for Unleashing New Life.

If the Holy Spirit is breaking through in your heart and calling you to expand your missional response; to live more fully into God’s kingdom vision; to claim your unique mission; to be unleashed to embrace your mission, I invite you to go to one of the prayer partners positioned around the room. He or she will pray with you.

The Lord be with you! (And, also with you.) Let us pray together.

Gracious and Holy God, send your Holy Spirit to:

- Break through and renew and revive our churches, unleashing your vision for our mission of making disciples and transforming the world.
- Empower our clergy and lay leadership to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with you, O God.
- Boldly use me, without limits, delays, or excuses, to defend the poor, offer abundant life, and heal a broken world.
- Create in me a clean heart and a joyful desire to follow your way of light, love, and truth.

I pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus.

Amen.



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