

Thank You, Francis

I was delighted when Pope Francis was elected. At the time, I felt his election held great promise for the Roman Catholic Church and for all who seek to follow the way of Christ. My early hopes for his papacy and for his “catholic” leadership have been reinforced several times since.

Pope Francis’ alignment of his own humble lifestyle with his commitment to the poor is truly “good news.” His more inclusive posture toward all persons, including women and homosexuals, incarnates the charity of his namesake, St. Francis of Assisi. His attention to young people reveals an evangelical heart and his focus on a hopeful future. His constant and consistent refrain of keeping the main thing the main thing demonstrates both clarity of purpose and resolve—two essential characteristics of transformational leadership. His bone-deep, grace-infused spirituality anchors and informs his theology and ecclesiology. If his Jesuit credentials were not so pronounced and impeccable, I’d argue that he had been formed in the Wesleyan way.

I recently read the extensive and exclusive interview Pope Francis granted the *Italian Jesuit Journal*, which was also printed in the September 30 issue of *America: The National Catholic Review*. The editors of *America* appropriately titled the article, “A Big Heart Open to God.” Although I found nearly every sentence of Pope Francis’ interview insightful, several comments in particular encourage me in my pursuit of the Wesleyan way of Christian discipleship.

When asked if the Roman Catholic Church needs reforms and what kind of church he dreams of, Pope Francis went to the heart of the matter:

The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you . . . This is pure Gospel. God is greater than sin. The structural and organizational reforms are secondary—that is, they come afterward. The first reform must be attitude. The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them...

John Wesley was a reformer and an organizational genius. So much so that his methodical way of walking with people through their darkness is credited with saving England from the violent revolutions that swept across Europe in the 18th century. But the Methodist movement was first and foremost a reformation of the heart, a reformation of grace, a reformation of attitude. The first proclamation—Jesus has saved you—is what led to Wesley’s own heart-warming experience, motivated him to go to those mired in darkness (in ways he found most vile and antithetical to his own preferences), and ultimately, fueled one of the greatest evangelical movements the world has known.

It disturbs me when we find ourselves locked up in our own small-minded rules, our obsessive propensity for committees and meetings, or our utilization of the *Discipline* as a tool for

obstruction or harm. Our cynicism is fueled by the loss of memory and passion for the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. Our methods, structure, and *Discipline* were always intended to serve this purpose. But the first reform must be attitude—the recovery of our evangelistic purpose and passion; our first love; our first proclamation.

Pope Francis continues:

The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds [social holiness] and to warm the hearts of the faithful [personal holiness]; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds.

John Wesley went to the mines and wharfs and fields and proclaimed Jesus Christ to heal the wounds. He created the Foundry to heal the wounds. He organized the bands, classes, and societies to train “Methodist” disciples to heal the wounds. This is the Methodist way.

Thank you, Francis, for reminding this United Methodist of the main thing!

Pope Francis also reminded me that “ours is not a ‘lab faith,’ but a ‘journey faith,’ a historical faith.” God reveals God’s self in history, in real-life contexts and circumstances, not as a compendium of abstract truth. Pope Francis states:

I am afraid of laboratories because in the laboratory you take the problems and then you bring them home to tame them, to paint them artificially, out of their context. You cannot bring home the frontier, but you have to live on the border and be audacious.

The Methodist movement has always gone to the frontier. It is in our DNA to stand in the crossroads of ideologies, to enter the social trenches, to engage in the most difficult issues, to seek the connections between the deepest desires of human beings and the perennial message of the Gospel, to explore the edges of innovation, to go to where the people are.

All too often, I encounter United Methodists and United Methodist congregations that have settled into a “laboratory faith.” They have isolated themselves from their neighborhoods, difficult issues, and the world. They are content to focus on their personal spiritual and relational preferences, rather than expect, invite, and pray for God to encounter, surprise, transform, and lead them.

John Wesley, Francis Asbury, and the early Methodists practiced and promoted a “journey faith”—a faith born of the spiritual, geographical, social, and economic frontiers they encountered. This is the Methodist way.

Thank you, Francis, for reminding this United Methodist that we are a journey faith, that we are a faith that boldly goes to and lives on the frontier.

I believe the most critical adaptive challenge confronting the Dakotas Conference is offering Jesus Christ in an attractive, respectful, and authentic Wesleyan way in our ever-changing 21st century context. Any chance of success will depend on the recovery of the first proclamation as our main thing and a willingness to live on the frontier of difficult issues and shifting demographic, social, and economic realities.

Thank you, Francis.

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