

Sermon – May 15, 2022
“The Good Shepherd”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: John 10:22-30

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these word. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Amen

Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Easter is not over yet! We are still Easter People!

Monday, two weeks ago, May 1st there was a significant event that occurred in the life of the people who call themselves Methodists. The news media did not cover this event extensively and it was little noted on the social media that I see. That significant event on May 1, 2022 was the establishment of a new denomination, the Global Methodist Church (GMC). Let me share their intro video to give us some idea of what this new Methodist denomination is seeking to bring about among a people called Methodist.

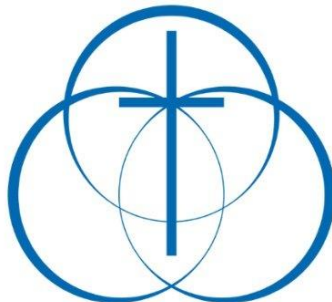
The introductory video can be accessed on the Global Methodist Church website using the following link: <https://globalmethodist.org/resources/>

Let me share this morning the Mission statement for the Global Methodist Church.

Our Mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ who worship passionately, love extravagantly, and witness boldly.

The Vision statement of the Global Methodist Church is “to join God in a journey of bringing new life, reconciliation, and the presence of Christ to all people, and to helping each person reflect the character of Christ.”

Let me also share with you the logo for the GMC and a few words about what the logo represents.



The Global Methodist Church's logo brings together in its three circles the one God – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – who alone we worship. The circles intersect at the center of the cross of Jesus Christ, the symbol of our deliverance from our slavery to sin and fear of death. The outer circumference of the rings represents the globe. As a whole, the logo communicates God's sending of the church into the world. The sky-blue color reminds us that even though Global Methodists live all around the world, they are all united together in God's great creation.

Now, as we hear these words, we may be thinking, "This all sounds good, but why do we need to have Pastor Wright take time to tell us about the GMC?" This week as I have prayed about how to begin to share what it means that there is a new denomination, the Global Methodist Church, in our midst and throughout the world, I have struggled to find a means to share this news in a manner that will help us each grasp the significance of what the beginning of this new expression of Methodism means. Last Saturday, one of the speakers at the Global Gathering event, a time of sharing from the Wesleyan Covenant Association, shared his own journey from the United Methodist Church to the GMC, and I found it helpful to me as he explained the why of this new denomination through his own experiences as a Methodist. I would encourage you to listen to his sharing as it becomes available, as he is a far more eloquent speaker than I am, but his story and approach to explaining why there is now a GMC helped me to realize one way for me to help us understand the crossroads at which we now stand. That is for me to share some of my own story and experiences as a Methodist, noting the blessings of the UMC and also some of the reasons I see for the emergence of the GMC. I also will caution you that I have found my story filled with emotion and so ask for your consideration as I share.

Let me start by sharing that the UMC and Methodism in general have been very good to me. My connection to Methodism goes back generations. My grandfather and his three brothers were all Methodist pastors. I became a Methodist when I was baptized as an infant in the First Methodist Church of Princeton, West Virginia during Sunday services on July 20th of 1958. That is a morning I don't remember, but do have an out of focus picture of me that day with long blonde hair sitting in a green chair wearing a long white gown. Notice that I did not join the United Methodist Church at my baptism as it did not form until 1968 when the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church united and formed the UMC. So, like many, I became a United Methodist in 1968 by the union of those two very large and similar denominations and not by any choice I made. Now I did not grow up in the UMC, as my father

took a job as a choir director at a Christian church in another town, and we attended there with him. When I was in high school and learned to drive, I began attending the First UMC of Princeton. I participated in their youth group and other activities such as playing hand bells, singing in the choir, and even preaching my first (and what I was sure was my last) sermon on a youth Sunday. Someone must have told the pastor at First UMC of Princeton, the Reverend Mendez, that I had never been confirmed in the church and during my senior year of high school, he invited me and a couple of other youth to attend a confirmation class. We completed the class and I was confirmed as a member of the UMC at the First UMC of Princeton, standing before the congregation and declaring Jesus as my Lord. Now during my college years, I did not have a great deal of interaction with the UMC. I may have attended a few services at Blacksburg UMC but did not connect with that congregation or with the Methodist campus ministry. There were too many other things that I wanted to engage with to be bothered with any church. Those are stories to be shared at another time.

When I moved to Dahlgren, Virginia after graduation from Virginia Tech to work at the Naval Research Lab, Kay and I began to attend the little UMC in Dahlgren and were warmly welcomed. We even received a card after our first Sunday addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Wright even though we were not yet engaged. I thought of that card as the prophetic voice of the UMC, and we were married in the UMC in 1982. It is in that same church many years later that my heart was stirred through the nurture of the people there and I came to faith in Jesus Christ. As I have said, the UMC has been very good to me, and the Holy Spirit was and is at work in the lives of the people of the UMC. I know that because it is in the UMC that the Holy Spirit changed my heart. I grew in Christ and participated in activities such as lay speaking, serving in places of need, youth group leader, Sunday school teacher, lay leader, and many other roles within the UMC including lay representative to Annual Conference. It is with the UMC's Volunteer in Mission (VIM) program that I found another pivotal place of growth in my faith journey, as I discovered a match between some skills I have been blessed with by God and needs across the globe, needs that I could not imagine, needs that again were used by the Holy Spirit to change my heart. As a VIM I begin to serve the church and God's people in a new capacity. It is also within the UMC that I was called into the ministry, led through that process, trained as a local licensed pastor, and then appointed to this Charge. The UMC has been a place of great blessings to me over the years.

I also have noticed over the years that there were some dynamics in the UMC that were in play that I was not comfortable with but were actually being discussed and argued about since my earliest memories. Around the dinner table in our home as a young child, there were frequently elephants in the room that were often not discussed. The question from my father to my grandfather: "How was Annual Conference?" would not be answered in words but with a look of knowing exchanged between them. These elephant-in-the-room topics have been points of discussion and disagreement within the UMC since the formation of the UMC in 1968, being brought to the floor for consideration at the very first General Conference of the UMC and at all of the General Conferences since. While I attended the little church in Dahlgren, I also noticed that many of the more Bible focused people who came to our little church over the years did not stay, but would leave in search of something more or different than what was offered in the UMC. There was a large focus within the UMC on social justice issues as defined by the culture, but there was not a lot of interest in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. The language of abortion in the UMC was another of these points of great disagreement. The language has been updated and changed at General Conference many times, with the latest proposed approach now being to simply remove any statement about abortion from the Discipline. Abortion is a topic that needs much forgiveness and grace, but also needs clear teaching and understanding of what the Bible contains that guides all involved.

Another unsettling aspect, or elephant in the room of the UMC came to light when a new pastor was appointed to our little church. As I got to know this new pastor, I became aware of his story of being removed from the UMC by the bishop, cabinet, and clergy by their vote at an Annual Conference. He was removed for not accepting a practicing homosexual into his congregation based on his assessment that this person was not repentant and was not ready for membership. Through his story, I was introduced to another of the challenges in the UMC where the culture and the authority of the Bible are in conflict. The bishop's ruling in his case was eventually overturned by the UMC Judicial Council, and he was reinstated with back pay, but not before the experience of personal turmoil to this pastor and his family had occurred. In his story, there is also the witness of great grace and love from some in the UMC extended to him in the conflict over this issue.

Over the years I have witnessed a growing selectivity by the UMC leadership as to what parts of the Discipline are enforced and what parts are ignored. Those being ignored typically are

the parts of the Discipline that could not be changed to meet the leaderships' views in the UMC. I have witnessed open demonstrations at General Conference where protesters disrupted General Conference with the bishops standing by doing nothing to stop the protests and seemingly endorsing the protesters' views. I have seen the Discipline disobeyed by pastors and bishops with no significant consequences to those who refused to abide by the Discipline of the UMC, while others who do abide by it are subjected to its full disciplinary effects. I have witnessed a growing tendency by many in the UMC to interrupt the Bible as a document that has parts that were never meant to apply to us today, parts that no longer apply, and parts that are acceptable. Who decides which parts are acceptable and unacceptable is not clear. Such an interruption stands in opposition to the idea of the whole Bible for the whole world. And I see a growing approach among the bishops for separating the church in the United States from the rest of the worldwide UMC in order to have a different polity.

As I grew in my encounters with these struggles, I also met other UMC clergy and laity who were seeking to revitalize the UMC from within by seeking to adhere to and call the greater UMC back to John Wesley's teaching, techniques and approach to the holiness found in the Word of God. I became a charter member of the Wesleyan Covenant Association when it formed in 2016 and sought to help bring renewal from within the UMC through a focus on Wesleyan traditions. When I was called into the ministry and looked for a seminary, I found I could not connect with one of the approved UMC seminaries because of their views and teaching, but found a place of nurture at Asbury Theological Seminary. I have watched with great interest for years as the UMC and the WCA have struggled with these issues, and finally those in leadership at both organizations concluded that we should separate and bless each other as we part. And with their agreement, it appeared that a path forward for those with a traditional view had been secured. In recent months, that has been proven to not be the case. And it appears the protocol for amicable separation will not be a path for traditional congregations.

More recently, I have been made aware of a worship service led by seminary students at Duke University who during their service prayed to the queer god. And when I looked for the reaction in the UMC, I found that the UMC news service did not condemn these students' actions but held them up as an example of honoring God and the LGBTQ+ community. My own idea of welcoming those in this community is to invite them from where they are into a life focused on Jesus Christ and his extravagant love and does not include the setting aside of 2000

plus years of the teaching of the church. That invitation is one of great love and welcome extended to all who seek to follow Jesus Christ and are open to the transformation of Jesus' love. Over the years I have attended listening sessions in the Virginia Conference to hear the concerns of those with LGBTQ family members, but never have I been invited to a listening session that was seeking to hear the voice of those with a traditional view. I have struggled with the United Methodist Women's leadership funding of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), an organization that encourages abortion. And I was relieved when legislation was passed that prevented UMW leaders from sending any more funds. I have watched in this conference as the leadership has claimed they send conservative pastors to conservative churches, but have witnessed a growing list of congregations who were once conservative but have received a very progressive pastor. The list of the challenges I see in the UMC is long and grows as does my questioning of what it means to continue to be a member of the UMC.

I have been richly blessed by the UMC and I am greatly perplexed and concerned by what I have witnessed and continue to witness as the challenges in the UMC. As I noted earlier, the voice of the traditional Wesleyan emerged again at the special called General Conference in 2019, but that voice has not been heeded and, if anything, has been silenced, seen in the refusal of the UMC leadership to go forth and put the separation protocol to a vote. It is in the midst of this turmoil and tensions we find the emergence on May 1, 2022 of the Global Methodist Church.

This morning's scripture text is a reference to Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The leadership of the temple in Jerusalem have surrounded Jesus. They well know the claim Jesus has made of being the Good Shepherd and that such a claim comes from a reference in the Old Testament that was well understood to be a reference to the coming Messiah. In response to Jesus' claim, the Jews have come to ask Jesus, in light of his statement, if he is the Messiah. They want to know if he is the Good Shepherd who will lay down his life for the sheep. They want Jesus to tell them plainly if he is the Messiah. Those gathered around Jesus know the words given through the prophecy of Ezekiel in chapter 34:11-12: "For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness." These leaders know that a reference to a good shepherd is a reference to God. And they also are aware of

additional references from Ezekiel in this chapter in verses 23-24 where Ezekiel prophesies, “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.” Jesus’ claim of being the Good Shepherd leads these temple leaders to the idea that Jesus might be claiming to be God, the Messiah, and they want Jesus to plainly tell them if that is the case. They are demanding Jesus tell them if he is the Messiah.

Notice that when Jesus responds to these leaders, he tells them that his sheep know his voice and follow him. Two of the roles of Jesus’ sheep are to know Jesus’ voice and to follow him. With the standup of the Global Methodist Church, the time has come for us as Jesus’ sheep to listen for his voice and then to follow him. Our journeys as Methodists, like my own journey, have been filled with blessings and challenges. With the creation of the GMC, the time has arrived for us as Jesus’ sheep to listen for his voice and to follow him. With the creation of this new denomination, we must stop and listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd. We have arrived at a T intersection in our journey with the Good Shepherd, an intersection where the UMC and the path they have been and intend still to follow is to the left, and to the right is the GMC and the path they have now outlined that they plan to take as they seek to follow Jesus. Each of us must stop and listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd and when we hear it, follow him as his sheep do. The time available for us to discern the voice of the Good Shepherd and to either leave and join with the GMC or to stay and to continue to be part of the UMC is in reality limited to a few months as the legislation passed in 2019 that allows churches to leave with property ends in 2023. Those few months are a time when, as your pastor, I am seeking to discern God’s will for my own next step, for direction on which road to follow Jesus. And I am asking each of us to join with me in times of fasting, prayer, sharing, discernment, learning, and seeking to hear the voice of Jesus the Good Shepherd and then to follow him. I plan to begin next Sunday by coming to one of the churches on Sunday evening for a time of prayer and discernment and will continue to rotate that time of prayer on Sunday evenings between the churches until I hear the voice of Jesus and discern which path I will follow and hopefully the congregations hear the voice of Jesus and decide the path they will follow. I can add other times of prayer as needed if Sunday evenings will not work for some of us. No matter which path we find ourselves on in the future, let us seek to bless each other and love each other as we seek to hear Jesus’ voice and move

forward following him. I want to give Kenneth Collins the closing word on this conflict between these two denominations because I think he speaks to the root of the conflict and challenges that I have experienced in the UMC. This is from his book, "The Next Methodism:" "In short, will the Methodist church itself be the master of the Bible, sitting in judgment on the Word of God, offering the pretense that Scripture is ever in need of a contemporary correction, or will the Methodist church instead be mastered by Scripture in which revelation will be received as the gracious and remarkable gift that it is." There are many challenges that I have encountered in my life in the UMC, but as Collins summarizes, the root issue is an approach to Scripture. Let me invite us to begin a time of seeking to join together and listening for the voice of the Good Shepherd and, as we hear it, lovingly, to follow Jesus.

Pray with me: Jesus, we know you are the Good Shepherd and we have followed you as best we can these many years of our journey with the UMC. Jesus, guide us at this time as we seek to hear your voice and follow you either to stay with the UMC or to move forward into the GMC. Help us, Lord, to love each other and to be willing to love even in disagreement. Amen