

A PEOPLE OF CONVICTION (Who Are We?)

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
May 20, 1984

We are having an identity crisis! As United Methodists we are having an identity crisis. Alfred T. Bamsey in an article in The Christian Century magazine wrote, "Perhaps the most distressing word to be uttered during American Methodism's bicentennial has already been spoken. In 1979 a panel of 220 United Methodists from across the nation concluded that the development of a clear sense of direction and purpose for the life and work of United Methodism was our paramount need." One of our bishops characterized us as a directionless denomination. In the last 25 years we have lost two million members. Alan K. Waltz, in his book, To Proclaim the Faith, states, "We have become preoccupied with our own institutional and personal concerns. We count our strengths in the wrong terms. We have focused on those things which preserve our lives, rather than on proclamation of our faith and service to others."

I'm afraid that those generalizations about our denomination also apply to us as a local church. The First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto has been floundering along with our denomination, but we are changing. This is an advantageous time to look at our identity. Who are we? At the beginning of a new pastorate, we have an opportunity to do some long-range planning and set directions. On May 29 at an expanded meeting of the Administrative Board, we will hear a report from a church consultant with some exciting proposals about our future. We are on the threshold of the future.

We are also celebrating the bicentennial this year. Two hundred years ago the Methodist Church was organized in these United States. Much is being written, a lot is being said, about our future as a denomination. I am preaching a series of four sermons, asking the question, "Just who are we?" Let's look at our heritage as it applies to our present and find some directions for the future. An understanding of history is absolutely essential if one is to know who he/she is and where he/she might be going. As I look at our history, the glorious heritage which is ours in the Methodist movement, I see some affirmations we can make about our identity. I see us as a people of conviction (today's sermon), a people with style (next week), a people with a mission (June 3), and a people with open arms (June 10).

We are a people of conviction. Alan Waltz writes, "When we begin to rely on the great power that is born of conviction and made known in witness and proclamation, our strength will be renewed." Conviction is an inner certainty, an inner witness that sustains a person through uncertainty. Conviction is an inner power that propels, motivates and directs, in spite of opposition, in spite of the cultural climate, in spite of pressure. The Methodists who revived England and who spread across this country converting people, building churches in every hamlet, fighting the slave trade, fighting liquor and gambling on the wild frontier, were people of conviction.

The Wesley brothers who founded the Methodist movement in the 18th century were organizational geniuses, but the secret of the movement was not in the organization but in the spirit of their music and their compassion for people. Their power was the result of the witness of the Holy Spirit, not an ecclesiastical authority. In fact, they were forbidden to preach in churches. Their power was not in their ordination, for ordination left John, in particular, frustrated and impotent. John's power was not in the force of his personality or position. For example, he was fired as minister to the settlers in Georgia. He was too severe for the colonists. His power lay in his personal experience of the living Christ and the warmth of his salvation.

John Wesley makes an interesting character study. He was very disciplined during college. He and his brother, Charles, were leaders of the Holy Club, rising early for prayers and Bible study, devoting the afternoons to visiting prisons, helping the poor. They were so methodical in their devotion that the name "Methodist" was given them, a nickname. But, the good works and even ordination as a priest in the Church of England (known as the Episcopal Church in our country) did not give him a personal sense of God's presence. He was frustrated, unfulfilled; something was missing. He was unsure of what he was to be doing, of his identity. Who was he? What did God want him to do?

On his return from his failure as a minister to Georgia, John met a group of Christians who called themselves Moravians, a sect of the Anabaptists. During a particularly bad storm when most of the travelers were frightened for their well-being, including John Wesley, the Moravians sang, trusted God for their future, and exhibited a quiet feeling of peace. John was impressed and agreed to accompany them to a meeting on Aldersgate Street when they returned to England.

It was a Bible study. The group was studying the book of Romans, and the leader was reading from Luther's commentary when a moving, spiritual, electrifying experience happened to John. John described it in his diary, "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans." (Some of Luther's words which were read that evening included: "Faith is an energy in the heart, so efficacious, lively and breathing as to be incapable of remaining inactive. Faith is a constant trust in the mercy of God toward us, by which we cast ourselves entirely on Christ and commit ourselves entirely to him.") Wesley continued: "It was a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

John now not only believed in his head, but in his heart as well. An assurance was given him, an inner conviction. This power, this conviction propelled him into the English countryside with a message of hope for miners, farmers, the poor, those who were unwelcome in the established churches. He preached to 30,000 and 40,000 persons on occasion. He was attacked some 60 times by mobs. He was only some five feet tall, and would walk unafraidly through the unfriendliest of mobs. His motto, which he taught his preachers: "Always look a mob in the face."

This is the kind of heritage we have. This is the kind of people the world again needs. This is the kind of Christian, the kind of Methodist, God is calling us to be.

Who are we? What are we? I see a church; I see the First United Methodist Church, a people of conviction. I see a people with surety, a people who know, who experience in their own lives the reality of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. I see a people grounded in the love of God in their own experience, not in someone's book or in someone's sermon. I see a people who know who they are in this turbulent world--in this world of violence, job insecurity, inflation, earthquakes, where homes are lost, families are broken. I see a people whose roots are deep, deep below the surface, so that when the rains come, the wind howls, the earth quakes, when deterioration and uncertainty are overwhelming others, I see a people who are secure, anchored, a people who claim their heritage, built on Jesus Christ. I see a church not built on organization, or on buildings which decay, or on doctrines which fluctuate, or on people who change, on ministers who come and go and who are frail human beings, but a church built on Jesus Christ on the assurance, the conviction that we are saved by Jesus Christ and called by God to be a church. I see such a people firmly imbedded in the soil, secure in their faith, with their hands out to their neighbors, ministering to their needs, healing their hurts, loving them, inviting them to church, inviting them to faith in Christ. I see a people of conviction.

Our strength as a church is in our people, our lay people, in you, not in institutions or buildings or programs or clergy. Too often we have acted as if the church is like a sport event where the congregation is in the stands and the staff, the ministers, are out on the playing field, doing the ministry. Some churches expect their ministers and their paid staff to do the ministry. They expect the minister to do the visiting, do the membership recruiting, teach the classes, administrate; and the congregation applauds or criticizes, one or the other. When a church depends on its clergy, it is already dead. The Methodist movement in these United States was at its best when the laity were strong. No, the ministers are not out on the playing field; the congregation is. You are the team; the world, the community, is in the stands. The success of this venture depends on you, not the staff. Where are the ministers in this analogy? The coach? No, the ministers, the staff are not the coaches. God is the coach. The traditions, the goals of the church, the Bible, are the coach, not the ministers. Where are the ministers?

I believe the ministers and the staff are the cheerleaders! Seriously, I see my role as primarily being the cheer leader. I see that my task in sermons, committees, in counseling, visiting in the hospitals, etc. is constantly to encourage and say to you, the church, "Come on, you can do it! Sure you can. We can all do it together. You can succeed in your life. Our church can succeed. You can make it. God loves you. Nothing can defeat you. There is victory." That is why my sermons get emotional sometimes. I'm not just lecturing. A four-year-old boy said to me after church one day, "Why do you holler?" I said, "Because I get excited!" I'm the cheerleader, and I get excited. I'm the cheerleader, shouting, urging, encouraging, and I'm sure we're going to win.

We're going to win because you are the people of conviction. When that conviction, that power, is in you as the result of the witness of the Holy Spirit, nothing can stop you. Nothing can stop our church.

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