



John Harmeling Western NC Annual Conference June 12, 2009



Myers Park United Methodist Church member John Harmeling delivered the laity sermon at the Annual Conference of the Western North Carolina Conference in Lake Junaluska. Here is the complete text of his message, entitled, "God's 911 Call To Laity."

A young boy awakened at midnight. He listened to the old grandfather clock strike out the melody of midnight – one, two, three, four...and so on. But something went wrong with the old clock and it kept on striking...13...14...15...16.

Startled, the boy ran into his father's bedroom and woke him up with these words, "Daddy, I just heard the old clock strike 16! It must be later than it's ever been before!"

There's likely some wisdom in that boy's words.

I think God's telling us it's later than it's ever been before. I think God's placing a 911 call to us – it's a call to discipleship, but it's a call that is perhaps more critical than ever for our United Methodist Church.

There are plenty of things that seem critical right now...the most challenging Conference budget situation since 1933...the ever-increasing age of our church members...controversial social issues on the horizon. Recently I read how not one county in the U.S. – not one – boasts more Christians today than it did 10 years ago. Not one, out of 3,140 counties!

But I think this is a vision thing...we see all these challenges, all these problems, all these headwinds. We see headwinds. But God sees the headroom. God sees the potential.

And for us to see the headroom, I think we need to listen to God's call to us. But the interesting thing about when God calls us is that, in Scripture, he usually gives us the most impossible tasks. And some of the tasks before us do seem impossible! But the good news on today is that, over and over again in Scripture, God gives the most ill-equipped people the most impossible tasks. And what do they do? They always get it done...with glory. And I think that's the fate that awaits us.

So God tells us – through Scripture, through stories and people of great faith, even through individuals and congregations right here in our Conference – how to right our path, how to answer His call, how to change our church.

God's call to change, his call to discipleship, starts with fostering a "sense of now."

Now I think we in the church sometimes feel like we've got eight days in a week. No, not so much time to do all the things we ought to be doing. Quite the opposite...we've got Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and then...Someday. I think we all suffer, to varying degrees, from "Someday Syndrome." I'll lead that Bible Study...someday. I'll go on that mission trip...someday. I'll begin to tithe...someday.

Are we waiting for the "right time" in our churches? For the economy to improve? For the finances to be just right? For a new senior minister to come? For a committee to be formed?

Or are we cultivating a sense of now?

God says, "At just the right time I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you." And in response, Paul says to the church in Corinth: "Indeed, that 'right time' is now. *Today* is the day of salvation."

Do we share Paul's sense of now? What are we changing to cultivate it?

Kevin Wright has a sense of now. Just last year you may recall how Haiti was stricken by a string of hurricanes and tropical storms. Kevin, the Minister of Missions at Myers Park United Methodist Church, received an e-mail from Myers Park's sister church in Bayonnais, Haiti, that spoke to devastation...bridges destroyed, crops ruined, no food, no electricity, no water, no livestock, no anything. Time was running out – women and children would be starving and sick if they didn't act fast – there was an urgency like no other.

So Kevin and others raised \$12,000 to rent a helicopter and food, and they airlifted two TONS of food to this area so remote they'd never even seen a helicopter before.

Kevin said: "There were about 1,000 people there to meet us: Elderly men, teenagers, women, children – all cheering, clapping and praising God. Some were crying. They thought they'd been forgotten and were resigned to give up."

But that's not even the best part: Today they are seeing a multiplication in conversions and people joining the church in Bayonnais. Why? When they were desperate and hungry, it was the Christians who showed up with food, who got creative, who had a sense of now and acted upon it. They showed love and compassion not "someday," not when they had some spare money to help fund this project, not when the weather cleared up and it was safe to travel, but *now*.

Right here in our Conference, people are making a difference, acting urgently, saving lives, astounding people with good deeds. Are we sharing that sense of urgency, that sense of now, in our churches? I'm not. If God's call to us is anything, it's urgent. It's now.

So God's calling us to be disciples by demonstrating a sense of now. He's also calling us to full investment – to full commitment – to experience "real grace."

When I was in New York recently, I saw an ad for a health club. The ad said: “Are you scared of commitment? Then join the New York Sports Club, the only fitness center in New York that has a non-commitment membership. You can get out of the commitment whenever you want to!”

I think that’s the type of society we’re living in today – one that demands as little commitment as possible, so much so that we advertise it! People like the idea of trying something out, even paying money for something, so long as they don’t have to be committed to coming back or staying with something. We live in a culture that is free – so free that we don’t want to be bound to anything.

Part of God’s emergency call to discipleship is that of our full investment and commitment to His church. I think he’s referring to what Deitrich Bonhoeffer called “real grace.”

Real grace, in Bonhoeffer's estimation, is a grace that will cost us our lives, our all. Are we demanding this type of discipleship that God’s calling for? Are our churches insisting on investment from our members?

Christ Church in Hickory, right here in our Conference, insists on investment from its members. Ten years ago, Christ Church had 150 members. At that time they instituted a “Six-Fold Covenant” that each new member has to sign. It’s essentially an up-front commitment to...

- Worship regularly and invite others to join you
- Pray for Christ Church
- Join a small group
- Serve others in a meaningful ministry
- Tithe, or work towards tithing

Invite, Serve, Learn, Tithe, Worship, and Pray.

Now get this...today, Christ Church averages 2,800 people worshipping there each week! From 150 members to 2,800 worshipers in the span of 10 years...and spurred on, at least in part, by an up-front commitment to join.

When I asked Dr. Charles Kyker, Christ Church’s lead pastor, about this, what struck me was how Dr. Kyker invoked, time and again, John Wesley. So I investigated Wesley’s writings, and one of the more poignant excerpts was from his *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, where he directly spoke of the criticality of commitment. He actually spoke of “the absolute impossibility of being *half a Christian*.”

He said: “I determined, through His grace, to be *all* devoted to God, to give Him all my soul, my body, my substance.”

So there’s precedent for this type of complete commitment from 275 years ago, and there’s precedent today.

This is a tricky one, I'd say, though, because we're called to welcome and love without conditions. And so we do. But I believe God's calling us to do more – to commit, to invest, to be more engaged, and in turn, to thrive. John Wesley says so, and here in our Conference today, we're proving it.

So God's summons to discipleship includes an urgent sense of now, and He insists on full investment. What does God say about splendid risk-taking within the Church?

From the book of Timothy...“Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” 2:13:12

Again, that's “EVERYONE who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

I think it's fair to say these terms are still completely foreign to us. I'd even venture to guess there is maybe, at best, a handful of people here today who can rightfully claim to have been persecuted by virtue of their faith in Jesus Christ.

I think we are called to take risks. Not seeking persecution, per se, but taking risks so that we're in a position to effect great change.

I firmly believe that if we conformed less, and I think we Methodists are great at conforming, we'd be more persecuted. And less conformity equals...more risk-taking.

Scripture is strewn with risk-takers...be it Noah's risks in building a 450-foot boat to save humanity and nature from a flood...to Esther's going before a king on behalf of her people, risking her life...to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego risking all for their faith, even to be put in a fiery furnace....to Jesus's disciples, who risked everything to follow Him... to Jesus himself, who risked his own life to save us sinners. There are countless others – you can blindly throw a dart against a Biblical dartboard and hit a risk-taker.

But you know what's curious about these risk-takers? They all were called by God...and they were all called by God with seemingly impossible tasks, with seemingly impossible headwinds. Is there a chance God's calling us with seemingly impossible tasks today?

GK Chesterton once lauded a long list of the Church's failures in trying to change the world. Splendid failures, he called them, born of splendid risks. He was measuring the Church by how grand its failures were.

Are our churches taking enough splendid risks? Of how many “splendid failures” can we boast? I'm not sure I can boast of one. We might just be playing it all way too safely.

I close with a story about the Millennium. I think then there were two camps of people – the one group that was freaking out about the world ending, all computers imploding, all clocks

malfunctioning...and the other group, one that was particularly concerned about how to celebrate, how to commemorate, how to mark this occasion of the calendar advancing by one day.

At the time I belonged to a church in New York City, and my church was in the latter camp – what to do to celebrate the Millennium.

After much deliberation and discussion and prayer, my church decided to celebrate by inviting the homeless to the church fellowship hall for a dinner. But it wasn't just any dinner – it was a five-star, five-course dinner – the best china, the most elaborate dishes, even the little sorbet between courses to cleanse your palette. The church staff served the meal, and the homeless ATE IT UP...literally and figuratively. It was a HUGE success.

And then, in addition to housing 10 homeless people a night inside the church, we permitted as many as possible to sleep right outside the church, on the church steps...on Fifth Avenue...which was a very controversial and public thing to do, and it generated huge publicity.

In the midst of it all, someone asked me where I went to church. When I answered, he said, “Isn't that the church that does all that stuff for the poor?”

“Isn't that the church that does all that stuff for the poor.” Now that's something to be known for – even more so that “that's the church with the great preaching” or “that's the church with the beautiful sanctuary.”

What are people saying about us – your church, our Conference? Worse yet, are they saying anything at all?

That church in New York City took splendid risks...it went all-out, invested completely...and it acted urgently. It was answering God's call to discipleship.

So when that call comes...the phone will be ringing...and ringing...and ringing. The machine won't pick it up. We know it's for us. And it's urgent.

Paul tells the Romans: “This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is. Time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is almost gone, the day of salvation will soon be here.” 13:11

It's later than it's ever been before!

When God's 911 call comes, will we answer?