

*"He HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES."*

**Monday, December 4, 2000**

There are among us an ever-increasing number of faithful people who believe that the United Methodist Church's position on human sexuality is one which holds gay and lesbian people captive to legalistic biblical interpretation and to moral high grounding.

Last May, at the United Methodist General Conference in Cleveland, witnesses stood on the floor of Conference and proclaimed release to these captives. But as they sang and cried and prayed, they became captives themselves. At the direction of the presiding bishop, they were arrested and imprisoned in the Cleveland jail for "disrupting a lawful meeting."

During a speech on the floor of General Conference, Karen Olivetto, former chair of the Reconciling Congregations Program Board of Directors, said, "I ask that we understand that people are willing to put their bodies on the line and risk arrest because the church has already put them under arrest. They are already in jails of inhospitality. We have jailed calls, we have jailed lives and we have jailed love."

That night, as I received a number of phone calls from friends who had been arrested, a song by a local folk artist kept going through my mind.

*"I think that God is sleeping  
Or the angels have resigned  
I'm sure there's no one keeping  
A peaceful, watchful eye.*

*Are you listening are you knowing  
All the desperate, silent calls  
Of the ones who keep on hoping  
And that's the hardest thing of all.*

*Is there no one left in heaven  
Making sure we won't forget  
What we learned from painful lessons  
And must not repeat again.*

*I think that God is sleeping.  
I think that God is sleeping..."* Ann Reed from her album, "Life Gets Real"

There are times when I am filled with such anguish and despair for this beloved church of ours. As I listened to the pain of my friends and saw pictures of their arrest, I wondered too if God is sleeping, if there is no one keeping a peaceful, watchful eye.

What a mess. What a chaotic, noxious, hopeless mess.

I've longed for Advent and the reminder that, even in spite of evidence to the contrary, God is not sleeping, but is giving birth to embodied, flesh-and-bone, compassion. In this season we know God is coming and God will sit with us in the midst of the woundedness and the mess. AD

**PRAYER:** "Blessed be the God of Israel, who comes to set us free, who visits and redeems us, and grants us liberty. The prophets spoke of mercy, of freedom and release; God shall fulfill the promise to bring our people peace." (United Methodist Hymnal #209)

**Tuesday, December 5, 2000**

Today, as I was thinking about captivity and specifically about how fear can keep us captive I thought about the shepherds in Luke's birth narrative.

They were out doing what they do, tending sheep, watching stars...when suddenly "the angel of the Lord came before them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. (*Luke 2:9, KJV*)

Well, the angel of the Lord must have been a very wise angel because he knew that if the shepherds were going to listen, if they were going to be open to his good news, their fears needed to be addressed first. And so the angel said, "**Fear not:** for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."

We are like the shepherds a fearful people scared of the dangers which surround us, scared of the "wolves" who want to harm us; but, we're also afraid of the angels who come to bring us good news.

We're afraid of rejection and of commitment. We're afraid of others and of ourselves. We're afraid of failure and of our own potential. We're afraid of dying and of living.

Fear is such a powerful thing. It can take hold of us and keep us captive. Janet Wolf, a United Methodist pastor in Tennessee says, "Fear paralyzes us, it really does, it silences our souls, it distorts our vision, it cripples our ability to respond...In the Bible, beginning to end, folks can't recognize God's presence or the possibilities for new life, because they are so scared. And God seems to know so well that the good news has to begin 'Fear not!'" AD

**PRAYER:** "Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee." (United Methodist Hymnal #196)

## Wednesday, December 6, 2000

In April of this past year, I was approved for ordination as an Elder. However, given the devastating events of General Conference and the trend of the United Methodist Church toward theological narrowness and social rigidity, as the time of my ordination approached I was so consumed with trying to forgive the United Methodist Church that I could barely fathom taking vows to uphold and support it.

I felt like I would be colluding with a church that is no longer proclaiming release to the captives or recovery of sight to the blind or letting the oppressed go free. I felt like I would be conspiring with a people who are more concerned with making the church "pure" than with liberation and justice.

After much struggle and prayer and conversation, I finally made my decision and on June 10, I was ordained. One of the most poignant moments in the ordination service for me was when the newly ordained elders were given the opportunity to serve communion. My sponsors and I took our places as the Great Thanksgiving was being offered. We had agreed in advance that I would hold the chalice and one of my sponsors would hold the bread, which was wrapped in a clean, white, protective linen cloth. At the appropriate time, my mentor carefully removed the linen and we discovered a loaf of bread covered with mold!

Ah, what a beautiful moment the theological symbolism was not wasted on us. We laughed out loud.

"This is what happens," I said, "when we try to keep the Body of Christ tidy and pure. When we shelter it and enshroud it, and wrap it up tightly, the Church, just like this bread, will get moldy."

When I saw that mold, I literally felt like Jesus was rebelling against the sterilized packages into which we place him. Sometimes I think we just want to keep the Body of Christ wrapped in swaddling clothes forever. Maybe Jesus and his church are the captives who need to be released from *our* restricting, protective hold. AD

### PRAYER:

Alien

strange

distant

separated

you are the hope of community

rejected

abandoned

alone

in distress

you are the hope of love

come abandoned alien

God of hope

be born in us

(Sue Britton from *The Way of Peace*, compiled by Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild)

**Thursday, December 7, 2000**

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

When I read this liberation text from Luke's Gospel, I think about *disposable people* the poor, the captive, the oppressed, the blind...the old, the young, the abused, the mentally disabled, the physically challenged, the systemically impoverished. These are our "throw aways" discarded because we don't care, or because they scare us, or because their suffering makes us uncomfortable. The precariousness of *their* lives makes awkwardly conspicuous the security of *ours*. So we blind ourselves to these folks. They are invisible, disposable people.

I recently read Nora Gallagher's autobiographical book, "Things Seen and Unseen" in which she talks about her work in a church soup kitchen and the struggle to get enough of everything, enough of anything.

"We scrounged for a living. We begged bread from local bakeries; from butchers, we begged the chicken breast bones left after most of the breast is removed; from traveling executives, we accepted soaps and shampoos collected in hotels. On the bottom rungs, scrounging is a craft, a way of life. The men we served in the Kitchen sifted through wastebaskets at the end of the day, finding a box of gold hairpins, half-smoked cigarettes, two paper clips. Everything is useful, nothing is wasted. I came to believe that 'scrounge' is one of God's verbs. A pregnant, unmarried woman; tax collectors, blind beggars, a son conceived out of wedlock. God uses what is useless, what is discarded, 'things low and contemptible, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order.'"

Everything is useful, nothing is wasted...Christmas reminds us that God scrounges for all our throw-aways. Thanks be to God! AD

**PRAYER:** "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things." (The Magnificat of Mary, Luke 1:46-55, selected verses)

**Friday, December 8, 2000**

*"He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives."*

Last July I volunteered to work at Jurisdictional Conference and there had the opportunity to attend discussion forums with some episcopal candidates. The very first candidate I saw began his conversation by talking about unity. It was clear, that as bishop, keeping the church unified would be a top priority for him. During the question and answer time, someone asked him how he intended to achieve unity in a church that is deeply divided on a number of issues. He answered, "We need to lift up those things we agree on, and de-emphasize our differences."

For the first time in my life, "unity" made me uneasy. The United Methodist Church has never been known as a church which "de-emphasizes" differences. We have historically believed that our great richness comes from our diversity. Clearly it is right and good to celebrate our commonality--but it is also right and good to recognize that it is in our diversity that we are most blessed.

And it seems to me that when we "de-emphasize" our differences, we also de-emphasize people who are different. I believe we have lost our way when we start de-emphasizing *people* for the sake of *unity*.

We will never have unity until those who have been disenfranchised and ignored and oppressed and rejected have been brought into the Church with their differences intact. The fear of breaking apart, or of falling apart, should concern us less than the fear of leaving some of God's people behind.

We are so preoccupied with unity and right practice that sometimes our quest for unity looks more like a quest for conformity and orthodoxy. But, as civil rights leader Rev. James Lawson said recently, "We can be orthodox or we can be followers of Jesus...but we can't be both." We are not captives to conformity. We are disciples of the Great Dissident who gave life and breath to God's justice. AD

**PRAYER:** We pray in the spirit of Emmanuel, God-with-us. "O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel." (United Methodist Hymnal #211)

**Saturday, December 9, 2000**

*"He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives."*

I remember as a child singing, "O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie; above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by."

It wasn't, however, until many years later that the last stanza of the first verse really touched me..."the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." I don't know the hymn writer's intention, but it sounds like an acknowledgment that the incarnational in-breaking of God just might be an occasion for fearfulness that it might stir things up a bit and disrupt comfortable lives.

Jesus says that he is going to bring good news to the poor and proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free and while that is our eschatological hope, the possibility of these things actually occurring NOW brings alarm and anxiety to even the most receptive of us.

*"The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."*

Our hope is for justice and equality, for a leveling of power, and for inclusive love. But, with the coming of the Kingdom of God we wonder how things will change for us? If the poor are released from poverty, will I have to give up my luxuries? If we make room for the oppressed and the marginalized, will there still be room for me? Will I have to sit next to a homeless man at church? Will my children's Sunday School teacher be gay? Will an ex-con be stirring chili in the church kitchen at our next potluck dinner?

*"The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."*

With the coming of the Christ Child, we will cross the threshold from hope into fulfillment and that is downright terrifying. May the Christ who comes to change the world, give us the grace and the wisdom to welcome those changes. AD

**PRAYER:** "God did not wait till the world was ready, till...nations were at peace. God came when the Heavens were unsteady, and prisoners cried for release. God did not wait for the perfect time. God came when the need was deep and great. God dined with sinners in all their grime, turned water into wine...God came to a world that did not mesh to heal its tangles, shield its scorn. In the mystery of the Word made Flesh the Maker of the stars was born. We cannot wait till the world is sane to raise our songs with joyful voice, for to share our grief, to touch our pain, God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!" (Madeleine L'Engle in *Guide My Feet*, by Marian Wright Edelman)

**Sunday, December 10, 2000**

*"He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives."*

I am jumping ahead in our story a bit, but today I am thinking about the Inn and the Stable. Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem for the census only to be greeted by labor pains and "No Vacancy" signs. They were asked to go out back and give birth in a stable because there was no room for them in the inn.

During the weeks and days which lead up to Christmas, our lives become a lot like that inn so hectic and overcrowded that there is no room left from anything more. We, like the innkeeper, are often too preoccupied with the business of being busy to notice what God is doing in our own backyard.

How ironic it is that there was no room for this child who would come and make room for all people.

I read a story by a devotional writer who tells of the Christmas when her son was four years old and her daughter two. She says, "the part they liked best about the decorations was the nativity scene. It was a porcelain one, but the children were allowed to touch it carefully, to rearrange it. They took their time, putting the cow and the donkey and the sheep just so, looking toward the child. But then her son remembered a small stuffed pig that 'ought to see the baby.' And her daughter brought in the Fisher Price farm animals. They stood a dalmatian next to the sheep, and the Lion King behind the donkey and cow. A dinosaur looked on from the rear. And the wise men were joined by Superman and Batman.

"They had it right of course. There was room to invite everyone to the manger everyone gathering around in peace to see the Child born in the Little Town of Bethlehem!"

Jesus made room for everyone and now, in this wondrous season of anticipation and hope, it is time, in the stables of our hearts, to make room for him. AD

**PRAYER:**

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
    To find the lost,  
    To heal the broken,  
    To feed the hungry,  
    To release the prisoner,  
    To rebuild the nations,  
    To bring peace among brothers and sisters,  
    To make music in the heart.

From Howard Thurman's "The Work of Christmas," in *The Mood of Christmas*