



Preaching to the Left Behind

Ideas for Preaching in the Wake of Disaffiliations
and as the Denomination Looks forward
to General Conference 2024

O. Wesley Allen, Jr.

Lois Craddock Perkins Professor of Homiletics

wesleya@smu.edu

and

Alyce M. McKenzie

Le Van Professor of Preaching and Worship
and Director of the Perkins Center for Preaching Excellence

alycemck@smu.edu

[Perkins Center for Preaching Excellence](#)

Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University



Introduction

The recent turmoil in the United Methodist family regarding issues of human sexuality has become top of mind among us. Various jurisdictional conferences, annual conferences, and congregations are experiencing the process of congregations disaffiliating from the denomination in different ways. Some conferences are experiencing little disruption while others are losing significant numbers of their congregations.

Moreover, many of the congregations that are disaffiliating barely reached the supermajority of two-thirds, leaving a third of the membership to decide whether to depart with the congregation or remain United Methodist by transferring their letter of membership to another congregation. Similarly, other congregations that are not disaffiliating still had a majority of members who were in favor of leaving the denomination, but not enough to reach the two-thirds supermajority required. Some of those who voted for disaffiliation will leave to find another congregation, and some will stay. But the conflict is far from over in these different congregations simply because a vote was taken.

We are a long way from having a final count of how many congregations and how many individuals are departing from the denomination, but it is clear that significant changes at all levels of church life are taking shape and will continue to evolve leading up to and extending beyond General Conference 2024. Mixed in with structural concerns are the existential, pastoral concerns of how individuals and communities are experiencing these shifts. We look forward to a day when there is less ugly strife in the United Methodist Church as the denomination works to define and fulfill its mission for the future, acknowledging that the process of getting there is painful and filled with loss. This is an eschatological moment. We *already* have experienced God's salvific grace and vision for an inclusive church that is grounded in Wesleyan theology and practice, but we are *not yet* there due to our internal strife and sense of loss. We are at a moment of hopeful grief or mournful expectation. The situation is so all-absorbing that we can have a difficult time thinking strategically about how to preach into and beyond this turmoil.

Wes Allen (an elder in the Indiana Annual Conference) and Alyce McKenzie (an elder in the North Texas Annual Conference) have worked together to offer some homiletical possibilities for preaching in this in-between time. To be clear, we recognize the moment calls for extensive work in the areas of pastoral care and denominational/congregational leadership. Preaching is a key part of this work, but is not presented here as a substitute for a multi-layered approach to the healing and missional tasks needed. Our suggestions are homiletical in nature because that is the gift we have to offer.

The collection of suggestions that follow is not intended to be useful to all, given the diversity of situations congregations are facing. Nor is the collection exhaustive. We offer a smorgasbord of homiletical strategies for preachers to choose from, adapt, and add to as they see fit, given their own theologies and understandings of their congregational contexts. Some strategies stand alone, but many overlap. *And please reach out to us if the Perkins Center for Preaching Excellence can be of any further help in this difficult but potential-filled time.*



Short-term and Long-term Strategies

As you read through and consider the following homiletical possibilities, it is important to think in terms of both short-term and long-term goals. Short-term: What word of comfort and encouragement does your congregation need to hear in the midst of disaffiliations? Long-term: what word of God's good news and calling does the United Methodist Church need to hear as it lives into its new reality?

An analogy might be drawn from pastoral care. Following a death or a loss experienced by a parishioner, the pastor offers short-term care in dealing with the pain of the situation. As time stretches on, the pastor offers help with coping emotionally, theologically, spiritually, and practically with new circumstances resulting from the crisis. Similarly, in the wake of disaffiliations, preachers need to offer care and assurance. The pain (as it is felt in your ministerial context and as you see it at the conference and denominational levels of the UMC) needs to be named explicitly and honestly. A word of good news needs to be offered, but in ways that avoid denial of the significance of what is occurring. This would be a good time to read and preach from lament.¹

Slowly, over time, the preacher will need to shift the primary focus to the question of "Now what?" without imagining the pain has just disappeared. This "Now what?" must be

a two-sided coin. On the one side, we must ask and answer from the pulpit, "What is God calling the church (congregation and denomination) to be?" But we must be careful not to offer only exhortation that puts the future all on our shoulders. The other side of the coin is that we must proclaim who God is and what God is doing as we move into this future.²

A Better Metaphor

One place where progressives, moderates, and conservatives seem to agree is how to label the possibility of the denomination splitting. The metaphors usually employed relate to divorce. This metaphor is appropriate in that it names the pain, grief, and animosity at play in the current conflict.

In pre-disaffiliation discussions, however, Allen has suggested using the metaphor of siblings to express the potentially positive implications of a split better than divorce.³ Siblings are raised in the same household, and children growing up, leaving home, and going their separate ways is a rite of passage to be celebrated. In spite of taking very different life paths and growing to hold significantly different values, grown-up siblings can still love and respect each other. They are and can still behave like family even when not living in the same house: distant family is still family.

¹ In dealing with lament, preachers may find the following useful: Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller, eds. *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square* (2005); Luke A. Powery's *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (2009).

² For congregations that are experiencing the disaffiliations in especially traumatic ways, there are some recent homiletical works that may be useful: Joni Sancken, *Words That Heal: Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls* (2019); Sarah Travis, *Unspeakable: Preaching and Trauma-Informed Theology* (2021).

³ <https://hackingchristianity.net/2019/03/guest-post-why-the-united-methodist-church-must-split.html>



Shifting the metaphor for a denominational split from divorce to siblings growing up and growing apart allows us to think of the denomination celebrating (even if the celebration has a melancholy tone to it) the potentiality of the futures of our different movements. It allows us to continue to be in conversation around our common heritage and look for ways to share resources and join forces in certain kinds of ministry (e.g., disaster relief) without demonizing each other.

Matthew's Eschatology

Having mentioned in the Introduction that this moment in the history of the UMC is an eschatological one, preachers should especially attend to eschatological elements of biblical texts when preaching during this time. Two millennia after Jesus' birth, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and promise to return, the mainline church has all but forgotten what it means to be an eschatological community. Whether your theology and hermeneutical approach to scripture interprets eschatology literally or metaphorically, it is important to revive the experiential element of an eschatological worldview. Christian existence is living, now and always, in-between the *already* of God's salvation wrought in Christ and the *not yet* of that salvation being experienced throughout creation in the form of equity, justice, inclusion, forgiveness, and mercy. We feel the love of God in our individual and ecclesial lives now, but when we watch stories about crime, war, and disease on the evening news, read of disaffiliation in the *UM News*, or ingest social media slander about different factions in the Methodist division (and such slander has come from all sides of the situation), we are aware that God's love

is not yet fully manifested or experienced throughout the world.

The Gospel of Matthew, which is the focal Gospel for this year in the Revised Common Lectionary, has a unique view of eschatology that might be especially helpful for preaching in this moment of the UMC. Scholars agree that one of the goals of the First Gospel is to reassert an apocalyptic worldview for its late first-century audience in light of the delay of the *parousia*. But it is important to notice *how* Matthew reinterprets eschatology.

In 24:36-42, Matthew has Jesus say,

³⁶But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. (NRSV)

Many commentators (historical and contemporary) interpret the image of one taken away and one left behind through the lens of other New Testament apocalyptic imagery related to what is commonly referred to as the "rapture" (like that found in 1 Thes, 4). This would mean that those taken from the field and the grinding mill are saved and the ones left behind are forsaken. But this reading ignores the analogy



Matthew presents Jesus as offering in the story of Noah. When Noah enters the ark, those who were not ready are “swept away” by the flood. Noah is the one left behind, the one who is saved. Consistently in eschatological judgment imagery (often in parables) in Matthew, those who are taken or thrown away are taken away to judgment and those left behind are the ones saved (e.g., 7:21-23; 13:24-30, 36-43; 13:47-50; 22:1-14; 24:45-51; 25:14-30; 25:31-46).

Indeed, the two parables in the eschatological discourse use this dualistic view to inform the behavior of those in the church—i.e., the parable of the faithful and unfaithful slave and the parable of the talents (25:1-30). Serving a paradigmatic function for Matthew, the author has Jesus assert not only that being saved is being left behind, but it means being given *more responsibility*. This idea is summed up near the end of the parable of the talents: “For to all those who have [faithfulness in responsibility], more [responsibility] will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (25:29).⁴

Any time Matthew lifts up an eschatological theme in a lection from which you are preaching in Year A, this understanding can be assumed: that our being “left behind” is not judgment or abandonment but being commissioned for new work and responsibility in a new day. This can be a reassuring and energizing theme for UMs after the disaffiliations. In this eschatological moment, God is giving us new work to do.

Historical Perspective

Similar to viewing the current situation in the denomination through an eschatological lens, it can be helpful to offer the congregation a historical view of the situation. Many preachers go light on historical teaching in sermons for fear of boring the congregation. This is a legitimate fear, but a time like this when emotions are running high presents an opportunity to harness the teaching function of the pulpit to offer a historical context in which to place the current conflict. Offering historical context that is concise and clearly related to the congregation’s current experiences can serve both to reassure and challenge them. Reassure them that major conflict in the Church does not mean the end of our Christian faith and can even lead to new opportunities for ministry. Challenge them to learn from, rather than repeat, the destructive dynamics that led to continued dysfunction after divisions. The history of the church could be told through the lens of various splits that have redefined its future. A few examples:

- 1054 — The Orthodox Churches in the Eastern part of the Empire separated from the Catholic Church in the West.
- 1517 — Martin Luther sparked the Protestant Reformation with his Ninety-five Theses.
- 1784 — John Wesley broke ranks with the Church of England by consecrating Thomas Coke for a position that would become bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church.
- 1787 — Richard Allen led African Americans out of St. George’s Methodist Church in Philadelphia to form what would become the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

⁴ On this reading of Matthew’s eschatology, see O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *Matthew* (2013).



- 1830s —An abolitionist movement in the Methodist Episcopal Church meant they would lose connection with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.
- 1991 — After the radical right contingent of the denomination took over the Southern Baptist Convention, moderates and progressives withdrew and formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.⁵

These and other divisions have led to conflict that challenges our creedal affirmation of belief in the universal church. However, they have also led to a diversity in the Body of Christ that can be celebrated. An ecumenical perspective does not require us to hope for a universal church in which all agree on every issue and practice and share the same theology. We can disagree and dialogue in love as siblings in the communion of saints without trying to reduce the faith to a lowest common denominator.

In terms of our current situation, then, we can name the pain of the division while at the same time, we can name the fact that God's work through us has been limited by our human division. We can celebrate the potential future the split allows (for both us and those who have left the UMC).

Preachers will also do well to recognize and name for a congregation that our denominational divide is related to the current level of cultural conflict in the United States. While there has always been divisiveness in society that harms (just ask those who are marginalized and oppressed based on race, ethnicity, religion, sex, age,

sexual orientation, physical capabilities, and so on and on and on), we seem to be at a uniquely partisan moment in our American political evolution. For congregations where there is great pain, division, and conflict remaining after a disaffiliation vote, preachers will do well to draw on homiletical methods that address these wider conflicts.⁶

Preach Centripetally

One approach that can be especially helpful in a divided congregation, but is also helpful in keeping one side from demonizing others in the wider denominational split, is to focus on beliefs and actions that can unify us in positive actions in the world despite our disagreements.

The Protestant Reformation, mentioned above, was not just a rejection of Church tradition and practices. It was also a recovery effort—to return to the biblical, apostolic, and patristic sources for the evangelical renewal of the Church as the Body of Christ. In that effort, Luther and others challenged ecclesial traditions they considered to be at odds with scripture (such as indulgences) and that excluded the common people from full participation in worship (Latin as the language of the Mass; inaccessibility of Scripture to masses).

While the Continental reformers sought to preserve and reclaim the unity of the church, they could not contain the splintering that followed, fueled by conflict over the authority and interpretation of scripture in relation to Church tradition. At

⁵ To this list could be added more recent divisions, specifically over the issue of inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in the church experienced by the Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Episcopal/Anglican churches.

⁶ See, e.g., William H. Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church* (1987); O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *Preaching in the Era of Trump* (2017); Leah D. Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red Blue Divide* (2019).



its best, the Reformation set in motion a centrifugal force in which differing theologies and polities could spin off and find expression. At its worst, the usual suspects of nationalism and political power struggles resulted in spinning out of violence across Europe and beyond.

The need exists now, as it did in the centuries following the Reformation, for a countering ecumenical, centripetal force, that focuses on beliefs and practices Christians have in common. This is worth remembering in preaching to congregations that are divided about disaffiliation. Balance the centrifugal (tendency to multiply and splinter from the center) with the centripetal (focusing on beliefs and actions that can unify us in positive actions in the world despite our disagreements).

John Wesley can be a model and resource for doing this. His reluctance to separate from the Church of England resulted in a painful, protracted process. Through it all, he privileged the mutual love of Christ over doctrinal differences. Today, one might draw on Wesley's sermon "The Catholic Spirit," based on 2 Kings 10:15 that begins with the quote from Jehu the ruler to Jehonadab the wise man, "Is your heart right as my heart is with your heart? Jehonadab answered, "It is." Jehu said, "If it is, give me your hand." In this sermon Wesley asserts that "take my hand," doesn't mean "be of my opinion," or "embrace my modes of worship," but love me, pray for me, and inspire me to works of love.⁷ That will preach in the early twenty-first century as surely as it did in the late 1700s! It is no wonder it became one of Wesley's "Standard Sermons."

⁷ <http://www.umaffirm.org/cornet/catholic.html>

Conflict in Scripture

We've seen how church history has been no stranger to major conflicts of belief and practice through the centuries. One might say that, in that regard, it took a page out of the New Testament's playbook. For, indeed, the New Testament points to divisions and conflicts from the beginning. Just read the Book of Acts!

Or, turn to the earlier writings of Paul. Every undisputed letter of Paul addresses some level of conflict in the churches he is addressing. At the top of this list is 1 Corinthians. Every year in the season after Epiphany (Ordinary Time), the Revised Common Lectionary offers semi-continuous readings from this letter. In Year A, we get the opening of the letter, where the conflicts among the house churches of Corinth are introduced. Preachers can use these lections to point to the seemingly inevitable nature of ecclesial conflict. Moreover, sermons on these texts can show that Paul has a theological and pastoral word for those in conflict.

After preaching on 1 Corinthians following Epiphany, it can be useful to return to semi-continuous readings in Romans in the season after Pentecost. Most scholars today assumed that behind Romans is a conflict created when Jewish Christians who had been exiled from Rome under Nero return to the Roman church where their absence was filled with leadership by gentile Christians.

Paul has no monopoly on conflict in the New Testament. Matthew, which has already been mentioned, is the anchor Gospel for Year A. Scholars think it was written, in part, in response to conflict



between the early church and the synagogue in the wake of the fall of the temple some ten years earlier. After the temple was destroyed in 70 CE, there were no more priests, Sadducees, Essenes, or zealots. There were only two groups left to vie for legitimacy as heirs of Israel's history, traditions, and theology: Pharisees and Christians. Preachers will do well to emphasize ways Matthew defines the ecclesial community of faith in the midst of the conflict. Matthew's hyperbolic approach of demonizing the Pharisees, however, has led to significant anti-Semitic preaching across church history and can serve as a warning against our demonizing those with whom we disagree in the current division.⁸

Congregations can also benefit from sermons dealing with the more subtle, behind-the-scenes examples of biblical conflict that show up in the wisdom literature of the First Testament. Looking at Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, we find substantive differences of opinion about a variety of topics: Can wisdom be found for the searching? Is God available and accessible or distant and somewhat capricious? Is wise living rewarded or not? Is there any remembrance of the wise or not? All are concerned with wisdom, which they all define as how to live in keeping with God's purposes for the community. Within that consensus, there are varieties of interpretation. Yet, all three reside, if somewhat uncomfortably, in the biblical canon.⁹

The old saying goes, "Misery loves company," but beyond that, hearing how biblical authors addressed conflict can be a source of reassurance and direction for UM congregations.

Wisdom

A key insight of the biblical wisdom tradition just mentioned is that our human wisdom is limited and that, therefore, we need one another. We need to pursue wisdom in community with others, others who do not always agree in every respect with us. As mentioned above, there are significant differences of perspectives among biblical wisdom books, and yet they are all included in the biblical canon.

The recognition of the limitations of our human understanding goes hand in hand with our need for dialogue in community and our ultimate reliance on God to direct and correct us. This biblical brand of humility is presented as the beginning of wisdom, the path of wisdom beneath our feet, and its destination (see Prov. 1:7; 4:18; 2:5).

In these conflictual days, a nutritious sermon series could be based on the four marks of wisdom gleaned from both testaments: faith, compassion, moral courage, and self-discipline.¹⁰ The wellspring of all four is the fear of the Lord, not cowering in the corner waiting for God to getcha, but realizing that the role of God is already taken and not by us. The series could emphasize the necessity of all four marks of

⁸ For backstory into Matthew's negative caricature of those with whom he disagreed and a more positive homiletical approach see Alyce M. McKenzie, *Parables for Today* (2007), 36-38.

⁹ On the differences between these three threads of wisdom literature and their homiletical potential, see Alyce M. McKenzie, *Hear and Be Wise: Becoming a Preacher and Teacher of Wisdom* (2004).

¹⁰ Key wisdom texts in Scripture include but are not limited to Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job and the sayings and parables of the synoptic Jesus.



wisdom for individual Christians and communities of faith.¹¹

Scripture Interpreting Scripture

Given that much of the division in the denomination has involved differences in scriptural interpretation and each side using prooftexts to bolster their positions, one helpful homiletical strategy would be to explore Martin Luther's understanding of *sola scriptura*, which for him did not translate into a doctrine of inerrancy as it did for some of his later interpreters. Luther's *Sola Scriptura* was guided by the motto "Scripture interprets Scripture," which recommended that interpreters allow the Bible to function as it was intended to, as an organic, interactive whole. This was the principle that Wesley would later adopt in his study of Scripture. We are called to read any passage of the Bible in light of the whole of Scripture, in light of a wider understanding of God's good news.

This principle, of course, applies to issues of sexuality at the heart of our denominational divisions. But instead of addressing this issue in isolation, preachers can show this principle at work in relation to a variety of issues. A sermon series highlighting this hermeneutical approach could include, for instance, biblical language about seeking retribution, both by God and humans read in light of teachings about forgiveness and non-retaliation. Or Genesis' statement that God made humankind male and female in God's image (Genesis 1:27) can be used to contextualize Paul's prohibition against women speaking in church (1 Cor 13:34). Showing the dynamic interaction of Scripture interpreting

Scripture at work in a broader way can pave the way for introducing it with regard to the most controversial biblical texts used in our denominational conflict.

Evangelicalism

UM preachers may want to spend some time teaching their congregations about the history of evangelicalism given that the current split is often cast as evangelicals vs. mainliners (or moderates and progressives). We can distinguish ourselves from current evangelical movements without bashing evangelicals and while appreciating our evangelical heritage.

Evangelicalism arose in the 18th century with an emphasis on individual experience in relation to one's salvation. We see this in Britain in John Wesley and in the United States in the Great Awakening. The gift of the Moravian pietists to Wesley was their emphasis on a warmed heart, confident in God's love and acceptance. By the Second Great Awakening of the 19th century U.S., this emphasis grew into the revivalism of frontier religion, including Methodism of the day. While tempered somewhat and expressed in diverse ways, today's Methodism still honors this emphasis on assurance of salvation at a personal, existential level.

In the second half of the 19th century, a subgroup of evangelicals arose. These "fundamentalists" argued for doctrinal "fundamentals" over against the Enlightenment worldview that was being exhibited in the likes of Charles Darwin, liberal theology (e.g., social gospel), and the rise of historical-critical biblical scholarship.

¹¹ See Alyce M. McKenzie, *Wise Up! Four Biblical Virtues for Navigating Life* (2018).



By the early 20th century, fundamentalists had grown in number and political power, so much that Harry Emerson Fosdick argued for a liberal, theological worldview against them in his famous 1922 sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?”¹² In 1925, the Scopes Monkey Trial was staged by the town of Dayton, Tennessee, to challenge a state law that made it illegal to teach evolution in state schools. The trial was highly publicized, partly because of its high-profile cast of characters: Clarence Darrow (representing the modernist defense of teacher John Scopes) and William Jennings Bryan (a popular fundamentalist politician representing the prosecution). The press was harsh on fundamentalism leading to a significant diminishment of their numbers and a withdrawal from public politics. Methodism chose the modernist route, as exhibited especially by Albert C. Outler’s coining (later in the 20th century) of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” to explain John Wesley’s evangelical fervor as distinct from doctrinal fundamentalism. Instead of Scripture taking precedence over all other forms of human knowledge, critical theological reflection exhibited by John Wesley involves Scripture alongside Tradition (later church doctrine and practice), reason (science and philosophy), and experience.

In the 1970s, however, fundamentalism found new political fervor in response to the sexual revolution, the women’s rights movement, Roe v. Wade, and the nuclear disarmament/peace movement. In the likes of Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority, the Christian Right formed and sought ways through elections and legislation to

influence policy to fit with their theological worldview. Part of this movement involves a return to a so-called literal reading of Scripture, with all human knowledge, including advances in both the hard and social sciences, being subject to accord with ancient Scripture.

The current ecclesial division over inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons is heir to this history, especially the last development, which is ongoing. UM preachers can name this history in ways that express both appreciation and disagreement to help congregants put the current division, and their own views, in cultural perspective. Progressives, moderates, and conservatives who remain in the UMC need to be able to celebrate Methodism’s evangelical elements while embracing the modernist approach that is core to the Quadrilateral.

Who Are We?

Mentioning the Wesleyan Quadrilateral above suggests another needed homiletical approach: reaffirming our Methodist heritage. Part of the problem behind the current divide is that the majority of people in the pews know only a little of what distinguishes the UMC from other theological traditions, while knowledge of evangelical emphases is widespread in culture. To heal and to move forward, people need to be invited to embrace our Wesleyan identity, even while recognizing that, based on the current conflict over the inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons, that identity is always evolving and needs to do so. It evolves, however, within certain limits—that

¹² <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5070/>; preachers may do well to revisit this sermon with their congregations.



is, our future is always dependent on the core of our historical, theological identity.

One of the reasons this homiletical approach is especially called for is that, in the heat of the debate over disaffiliation, persons and groups leaving the denomination have accused the UMC of abandoning orthodox theology even to the point of claiming the denomination will abandon historic doctrines such as of the resurrection of Christ and the Trinity.

Too few UMs are aware of our *Articles of Religion*, which have their basis in the Articles of Religion of the Church of England, which date back to the sixteenth century. Too few understand the role of the *ecumenical creeds* in our denomination. Laity need to be introduced to these and other doctrinal standards of the UMC (*the EUB Confession of faith*, *the General Rules of the United Societies*, *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, and *Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*). We can affirm these historic, and unchangeable foundations of our tradition while also recognizing that they require interpretation in that same way that Scripture does. As a body, we affirm these doctrinal standards, but through the lens of the Quadrilateral we may interpret them differently.

In addition to the ecumenical doctrinal concerns expressed in these standards, preachers will do well to spend time in the pulpit teaching about unique UM theology and practices, e.g., prevenient grace, sanctifying grace, our open Table, and individual and social holiness. And preachers should tell our story in terms of sharing Methodist history. This should certainly involve the Wesley brothers but not stop there as it often does. The stories of Methodism and the Evangelical United

Brethren in America and around the globe in the 19th and 20th century need to be heard, celebrating things done well and repenting of and learning from ways we went astray.

In this theological and historical context, laity can see how the United Methodist Church has grown to the point of including LGBTQ+ persons and taken various other social stances, why we do certain things in terms of liturgy and polity, and how we relate to the wider ecumenical world. Indeed, alongside bringing our doctrinal standards into the pulpit, we would do well to speak of our *Social Principles* and issues from the *Book of Resolutions* in our sermons.

Make a Scene

Rather than simply telling people about our history and theology, an effective homiletical strategy is to craft scenes that invite listeners to experience how our beliefs arose and why they matter in people's everyday lives. A highly effective strategy is to "make a scene in the pulpit." Don't just tell the congregation about Wesley's Aldersgate experience, or his crisis of faith amid a storm at sea, or his sorrow at the death of his brother Charles that led to his writing the hymn, "O Come Thou Traveler Unknown."

Rather, craft key moments in our history and key aspects of our theology/ecclesiology into scenes, that involve a setting (which involves sensory details), a plot (one that almost always involves conflict!), characters (use of dialogue is very effective), and a theme the preacher draws from it.

This is not a technique to dumb down our preaching. That is the last thing we need in these days hungry for accurate teaching. On the contrary, it is a vivid, memorable way of



imparting information by embedding it in brief narrative scenes. And the life of Wesley is by no means the only field for the gleanings. Church history, the circumstances surrounding the writing of familiar hymns, literature, and popular culture are all sources for making a scene in the pulpit. This approach is tailor-made for today's distractible, multi-tasking listeners and can be adapted to all the suggestions about sermon themes and series that follow.¹³

Ecclesiology

While most of the focus of the current division has been on the inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons, followed by various doctrinal issues, preaching should be clear that what is mainly at stake in this division is the nature, identity, and purpose of the church. Who are we to be and what is our mission? Therefore, our sermons often need to fall in the category of ecclesiology.

As mentioned earlier, we especially need to affirm our creedal belief in the catholic (in the sense of universal) church. While our denomination is splitting, we are still joined with our siblings (all our siblings) in the universal body of Christ. Use occasions like *Pentecost* and *World Communion Sunday* (but not only those) to celebrate this divine connection across human lines of division.

After all disaffiliations have been completed, budgets and personnel will have to be adjusted to right-size the denomination at all its various levels. Much of our general, jurisdictional, and annual conference bureaucracy will have to be reshaped and retooled. While painful, this is a gift to the UMC. It is an invitation to

reconsider what it means to be the body of Christ in a new day in a new way while holding to our historic, Wesleyan roots.

Reflections on the future scope and mission of the church begin at the local level and should begin long before General Conference 2024. One way of doing this is to spend time in the pulpit focusing on the four traditional "*marks*" of the church drawn from the Nicene Creed:

- one,
- holy,
- catholic, and
- apostolic church.

Or one could focus on the *tasks of the church* as classically defined by the following Greek terms:

- *kerygma* (proclamation/evangelism),
- *didache* (teaching/formation),
- *koinonia* (fellowship/community),
- *diakonia* (service/outreach), and
- *leiturgia* (liturgy/worship).

A sermon series on either of these lists could begin with defining the mark/practice biblically and historically and then move to what it means for the future of the UMC (at the local and/or broader levels).

Part of such a visioning of the future of the UMC requires honesty on the part of preachers. There is much about our future we do not know and elements of our future we cannot control. And, certainly, disaffiliations do not mean the removal of all conflict in the congregation or the denomination. There is much over which we must struggle. Hopefully, our future conflict will be healthier and focused on different views of trying to move together into our future, as opposed to fighting against any

¹³ Alyce M. McKenzie, *Making a Scene in the Pulpit: Vivid Preaching for Visual Listeners* (2018).



form of compromise. But it will still be stressful. We need to prepare our people to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the pain, to be open to innovation that may be messy, confused, and even wrongheaded at times. In the Creed, we profess faith in the church in the same way we profess faith in the Triune God. Seeing how the church acts at times, this can be a difficult belief to hold. But as Scripture is the Word of God without all the words of the Bible being equated with the words of God, so the church is the body of Christ without all its members or all its decisions and actions reflecting or issuing from the mind of Christ. We are a finite, flawed, even sinful, eschatological community striving, sometimes more successfully than others, to be faithful to the *missio Dei*.

Normalizing Nonheteronormativity

Preachers too often think that the only way to counter heteronormativity and homophobia in the pulpit is to preach against it. While this is certainly called for, in divided congregations one must, as Fred Craddock said, not simply preach the Gospel but get the good news heard. One must preach prophetically while being a pastor.¹⁴ One way to help a congregation dialogue about sexuality (in contrast to debating issues of sexuality) is to normalize talk concerning LGBTQ+ persons, communities and issues in sermons focused on other topics. This strategy can be dovetailed with all of those named above.

One of the simplest ways of doing this is explicitly to use gay and trans persons in sermon images where everyone is invited to identify with them: a lesbian who embodies stewardship, a transgender man who struggles with forgiving someone who wronged him, a same-sex couple exhibiting the foibles of parenthood.¹⁵

No One Is an Island

In the wake of congregational disaffiliations, individuals leaving churches and joining others, and what will likely be the redrawing of some annual conference boundaries, preachers desperately need to reaffirm and congregations need to experience anew the United Methodist connexion. We strongly suggest finding other UM preachers who are interested in preaching on the same lectionary texts or sermon series themes. Be in conversation in shaping the sermons and connect church members across congregations for conversation on social media, video conferencing, etc., related to the shared sermon texts/themes. Host regular pulpit swaps. Conversation is key to our moving forward *together*.¹⁶

¹⁴ A helpful resource is Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach*, 2010.

¹⁵ For more extensive homiletical strategies of this sort, see Emily Askew and O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *Beyond Heterosexism in the Pulpit* (2015).

¹⁶ A helpful resource for such conversation across the diverse ministries of the church is Ronald J. Allen, John S McClure, and O. Wesley Allen Jr., eds. *Under the Oak Tree: The Church as Community of Conversation in a Conflicted and Pluralistic World* (2013).