



From Extinguished to Distinguished

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September 25, 2019

Statue of John Wesley – Photograph Source: Ebyabe – [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)

In 1973, at age 46, my character was assassinated and I was forcibly retired by The United Methodist Church's then Southern New England Conference after performing the marriage of two male members of Boston's Old West Church, where I had been minister for eight years. On September 18, 2019, forty-six years later, at almost 93 years of age, Boston University School of Theology, a major institution in New England United Methodism, honored me as one of its three 2019 Distinguished Alumni/ae. Upon learning that I was being so honored, my wife, Eva, who was beside me all those years, said, "From extinguished to distinguished" – then added, "But you were never extinguished." At BU School of Theology's 2019 Alumni Celebration, we three Distinguished Alumni/ie were invited to form a panel and speak on the topic, "The Three Greatest Challenges Facing Us in the Next Decade." Being a panelist offered me the opportunity to provide the following commentary on United Methodism and other Christian denominations.

The first challenge facing us involves reexamining The United Methodist Church's own mission statement, which declares, "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." The statement continues: "The United Methodist Church affirms that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, and the Lord of all." Then these words: "As we make disciples, we respect persons of all religious faiths and we defend religious freedom for all persons." (["Book of Discipline Section 1: The Churches?"](#))

Here, with an ecumenical tip of the hat, the Church tries to have it both ways. How can you believe that Jesus "is the Savior of the world" and "Lord of all" and "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world," while still "respect[ing] persons of all faiths?" "If you really "respect persons of all faiths," why do you need to make disciples of them?

This contradiction is similar to another in which the Church wants it both ways. Methodism's Book of Discipline states, "We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God . . . and need the ministry and guidance of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment." Then these words: "The United

Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”

Rejection with a “straight” face, which was evidenced by so-called “Traditionalists” at last February’s special General Conference on “human sexuality,” when a [smaller] majority ruled again that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” But more and more United Methodists recognize that “the ministry and guidance of the Church” has been the greatest obstacle to LGBTQ persons “in their struggles for human fulfillment.”

Sadly the seeds of imperialism are embedded in Christianity. A reported resurrected Jesus gave his disciples “The Great Commission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28: 18-20)

That assumed “Great Commission” has been used to rationalize “discovering new worlds” and invading and plundering all kinds of people. A “Commission” that, I believe, leads many evangelical-believing Christians especially to unconsciously rationalize and accommodate America’s imperialistic pursuit of world domination – masked as a “global war on terror.”

An example is the reported finding that “87 percent of white evangelical Christians in the U.S. supported” President George W. Bush’s illegal, falsely-based criminal invasion of Iraq.” Certain evangelistic leaders were reported as “claiming that the American invasion of Iraq would create exciting new prospects for proselytizing Muslims.” (“Wayward Christian Soldiers,” By Charles Marsh, The New York Times, Jan. 20, 2006) These Christians were responding to Bush’s own imperialistic faith: In preparing to invade Iraq, he said, “We do not know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them.” (“A War Became a Crusade,” by Jackson Lears, The New York Times, March 11, 2003) “The ways of Providence” led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians, triggered a vicious sectarian civil war in Iraq, gave rise to ISIS, and created chaos in the Middle East.

Many people of faith opposed the invasion of Iraq in the beginning, some strongly. But American boots on the ground had a muting, normalizing effect.

Which brings me to the second challenge facing us: the militarization of empathy, that serves to normalize and perpetuate America’s so-called “global war on terror.” The militarizing of empathy is especially seen in national newscasts that end with military families reunited – briefly – in surprise homecomings. Service men and women return to surprise their children at school, at home, at Christmas, and their families in a variety of settings. These emotionally charged reunions lead viewers to tearfully identify strongly with military families – and by extension with our government’s global warring. Or, lead viewers not to think about America’s endless warring. The result is the reinforcement of patriotic allegiance and amnesia. There is also the constantly televised presence and

honoring of military personnel at sporting events, with military flyovers on special occasions.

Who benefits from America's "global war on terror?" Obviously the military/industrial/intelligence complex profits from unending war. A golden goose that keeps on giving. Why do we need nearly 800 U.S. military bases in some 70 countries around the world? ("Why We Should Close America's Overseas Military Bases." By John Glaser, Cato Institute, Oct. 7, 2016)

Certainly the "war on terror" is not to protect Americans. Some 7,000 Americans have been sacrificed on the altar of our bipartisan government's imperialistic pursuits, with hundreds of thousands more wounded. If our government were really about protecting Americans, it would bring our military personnel home to their families and invest in education, employment opportunities, and health care for all Americans, and use diplomacy, rather than threats and sanctions and warmongering, to resolve problems with other nations.

Morally outraging to people of faith should be the militarizing of empathy: the hijacking and weaponizing of the universal religious ethic of The Golden Rule that is intended to inspire people to transcend sectarianism and nationalism and identify with each other. The third challenge: our moral frame of reference should be the common humanity we share with all other human beings, not an evangelizing religion. Morality guided by human rights, not partisan politics or sectarian religion. Faith leaders speaking reality and moral truth to political – and ecclesiastical — power, not merely providing the Invocations and Benedictions for those in power.

The 2020 General Conference awaits United Methodists, offering the Church the opportunity to actualize its slogan of "Open hearts, Open minds, Open doors" by embracing all people as compatible. The militarization of America continues. The historic white-controlled hierarchy of access to economic, political and legal power still dominates America's status quo. And an authoritarian, psychopathic president is now at the helm, denying climate change, threatening war against Iran, and exploiting the plight of migrant families at the Mexican border, to whip up his white nationalistic base for the 2020 election.

These and other issues reveal that the common humanity everyone shares should be the epicenter of the moral universe, not an evangelizing religion. Our religious founders and saints have different beginnings and histories, but all of us share similar birth stories, and at the moment of birth we are most alike. We have different faith traditions, but the same universal need to be loved and to love. We speak different languages, but laugh alike. We don't look alike, but our facial expressions tell the same story – of surprise and pleasure, frustration and anger, joy and sadness. We sing different anthems — with the same pride. We may regard each other as foreigners, yet we love and grieve the same. Anywhere in the world, when people are oppressed, their innate human response is to struggle for liberation. Thus the common humanity all people share should be the frame of reference of the moral universe. And our common humanity is powerfully expressed in most

religions' shared belief in The Golden Rule: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 7: 12) I believe life is about finding one's own place and making room for others. My steeple has become the aspirations of all people, my altar the common ground on which everyone walks, my cross the oppression from which any individual or group is seeking to liberate himself or herself or itself.

The challenge we face is not that of transforming everyone into our likeness, but transforming ourselves by recognizing the likeness we share with all other human beings.