

Does United Methodism Have a Future?

Introduction: Session #1 *Rooted and Grounded in Love*

It is my honor to be with you. I'm always glad to come to Texas. My father grew up in the Texas Panhandle during the Great Depression. He graduated from Texas Tech in the Dust Bowl years. As a child, I often passed through north Texas with my family on our way west. Proud of his Texas roots, papa quoted John Gunther: "*If a man's from Texas, he'll tell you. If he's not, why embarrass him by asking?*"

Introduction:

The seed is in the ground.

Now may we rest in hope

While darkness does its work.ⁱ

--Wendell Berry

Prayer:

Recently, a friend on an early morning walk, asked if I believed United Methodism had a future? I have heard this question often over my ministry, especially recently.ⁱⁱ This time, however, I heard the question with surprising urgency.

For over fifty years, United Methodist membership and attendance in the U.S. has been ebbing. What's gone wrong? What shall we do? I admit that I have no easy solutions. I bring you no programs, formulas or catchy initiatives for a quick remedy to our dilemma. Currently, our situation is complicated by the pandemic, the divisions in our denomination, and the national challenges around truth-telling and low institutional trust.

Does United Methodism have a future...or in *highfalutin* language, "*Can United Methodism be Sustainable and Regenerative?*" I don't have a crystal ball. Still, I came all this way, so I am obliged to offer some perspective, some lessons from history and signs of hope. Mostly, I invite us to remember the invitation Jesus makes to the disciples in every age, simply this, "follow me." Let's walk together a bit, and consider the question of United Methodism's future.

Here is an overview: Today we consider what it means to be *Rooted and Grounded in Love* – our core identity as United Methodists. Tomorrow morning we will consider being: “*Connected to Bear Good Fruit*” and “*Communities of Restoration and Joy*.” Our scripture focus will be on Ephesians 3 and John 15.

I. Our Context and Its Complications

As we consider our context, let me begin by sharing with you my answer to my friend. **Yes, I have no doubt that United Methodism has a future.** As to what our mission, witness or structure will be, here is a word of hope – we can choose the pathway forward.ⁱⁱⁱ I believe our work is **100-year work**. Or, as my friend Wes Jackson puts it, “*If your life’s work can be accomplished in your lifetime, you’re not thinking big enough.*”

Researcher David W. Scott notes what is happening in the UMC is part of a larger cultural trend, shared by other denominations; a trend that cuts across race, class and theology.^{iv} He writes: “*U. S. Methodists (and U. S. Christians generally) are fooling themselves if they think that they can solve a cultural problem with organizational solutions.*”^v Scott concludes, “*I don’t know what the adaptive solution to the cultural problem of U. S. religious decline is. I wish I did. But I am sure that understanding the nature of the problem is the first step in finding the solution.*”^{vi}

Let me propose that our most hopeful options involve stepping away from long held assumptions about power and influence within the dominant culture. Douglass John Hall speaking about Ecumenical Protestantism in North America,^{vii} wrote: “*Christianity has arrived at the end of its sojourn as the official, or established, religion in the Western world... The end of Christendom could be the beginning of something more nearly like the church – the disciple community described by the Scriptures and treasured throughout the ages by prophetic minorities.*”^{viii} By stepping away from the easy assumptions and practiced patterns of the dominant culture, a new beginning for Christianity and Methodism is possible. It can surprise, and perhaps, even delight us.

Czech statesman and poet Vaclav Havel captured our situation, “It is as if something were crumbling, decaying, and exhausting itself, while something else, still indistinct, were arising from the rubble.”^{ix}

Philosopher Charles Taylor calls our complicated age *axial time*^x and Walter Brueggemann speaks of an age of *Disorientation*.^{xi} Cultural mores, norms and religious beliefs appear fluid or are abandoned entirely.^{xii} Many speak of this as an era of extinction, when perhaps a million animal and plant species are at risk.^{xiii} Major institutions also appear to be at risk in the wake of a tsunami of disease, disruption and disinformation.^{xiv} Fortunately, some research scientists are already at work to head off future pandemics^{xv}

What of the church? As the pandemic began, United Methodists were distracted.^{xvi} There was splintering around theological, ideological and cultural differences that diverted our energy and best use of resources. Unity was confused with uniformity. This is a moment for United Methodists to reclaim the motto, *Forever Beginning*, from our bicentennial in 1966.^{xvii} Instead of a return to normal, this is a time to step away from the languishing assumptions of the old order of Christendom and to begin anew.

II. United Methodism in Axial Time

Deuteronomy 6 reminds that *we drink from wells we did not dig and eat the fruit of vineyards we did not plant*. These months of quarantine provided space to think about our legacy. Some remarkable folks provided guidance in the past. Did you know, for example, it was Rev. Charles Albert Tindley, Philadelphia Methodist pastor, son of a slave, hymnwriter and scholar who offered the inspiration for the hymn “*We Shall Overcome*”? Or consider Bishop Rueben Job who summarized the Wesleyan *General Rule of Discipleship*: “*Do no harm, Do Good, Stay in Love with God*”^{xviii} Georgia Harkness, first woman in the U.S. to hold a full professorship in theology, wrote: *It is the Christian’s rightful faith that, however dark the night, God’s love surrounds us.*^{xix}

Let’s go back to another axial time when Methodism was just beginning. It is maritime Bristol, England, 1742. Methodism is in its infancy. The New Room, is a worship center, dispensary and

school. John Wesley asks how the debt on the building would be paid? And a Captain Thomas Foy responded, “Let everyone in the society give a penny a week, and it will easily be done.” **Someone interrupted**, “But many have not a penny to give.”^{xx} Captain Foy’s response was, “Let each one give what they can weekly, and I will supply what is wanting.”^{xxi} Others made the same offer, concerned nothing should “prevent the poorest Methodists from being involved.”^{xxii} What was envisioned as a financial building campaign morphed into the fundamental essential ecology of early Methodism – a *watching over one another in love*. The society was divided into small groups with assigned leaders.

This early organic Methodist polity is what researchers would call an *adaptive change*. Spreading out from Bristol to London and New Castle regular class meetings began. Societies became more like “second families” than a sect or church in formation.^{xxiii} *Watching over one another in love* became habitual.^{xxiv} Note three distinctives: Early Methodists included the poor in significant numbers. No need to set up an outreach ministry, over there, with or for the poor. The poor were already included. 1739, the year the New Room was built, was the “severest winter in memory” and the economic depression lingered on for years.^{xxv}

1. Weekly gatherings for prayer and a *watching over one another in love* were essential. The primary goal was a mutual accountability shared by all.^{xxvi}
2. Someone interrupted. The person, or persons, who interrupted is not known. However, this was a critical shift in direction, a reimagining, a move from scarcity to sustenance.

Today, do you know any *Righteous Interrupters* acting out of love for the “least of these” and for the benefit of all? I’m not talking about grumblers, the curmudgeons or chronically unhappy critics. Rather I speak of those who see the Gospel as having relevance in our time and place.^{xxvii}

Methodist history is complex. Not everything is remembered with pride. Even so, Methodists like Branch Ricky and Jackie Robinson challenged racial segregation in major-league baseball.^{xxviii} About the same time, the Rev. W. Sherman Burgoyne, pastor of Asbury Methodist Church in Hood River, Oregon faced ostracism and censure from civic and church leaders; even so he confronted discrimination against Japanese Americans.^{xxix}

There have been thousands of smaller, little known, examples. I think of a fellow we will call “Chris” who asked a simple question that changed the sentiment of a trustees meeting. He simply asked, “So, let me get this straight,” he said, “The church’s kitchen shouldn’t be used to feed hungry people, right?”^{xxx} There are dozens of other righteous interrupters who acted in small ways that made a big difference.^{xxxi}

In their book “*Being Interrupted: Reimagining the Church’s Mission from the Outside, In*” Al Barrett and Ruth Harley call for a *counterflow in the way church is understood*. Rather than being a place for the spiritually thirsty to find a weekly “refueling,” they speak of a shift in circulation coming from the outside in. Worship overflows “*with stories... from encounters outside the sanctuary with neighbors.*”^{xxxii}

Barrett, rector of Hodge Hill Church in the Diocese of Birmingham, England writes worship begins with two interruptive questions: *1) What do you bring with you, from your week in the world, that you want to say thank you to God for? And 2) What do you come with, that weighs heavily on you, that you want to bring to God in prayer and concern?* Barrett, writes, more attention goes to gathering than sending. The worship benediction is “*Let us go in peace to meet and love Christ in our neighbors.*”^{xxxiii}

Anglican Sam Wells puts it thusly, “*Prophetic ministry is not about condescendingly making welcome alienated strangers. It means seeking out the rejected because they are the energy and life force that will change us all... The challenge for the church is to see Jesus in the face of the ones we have rejected. And to let the Jesus we discover in them become our cornerstone.*”^{xxxiv}

III. The First Century Church and Axial Time

The first century church emerged in an axial time. Paul, a righteous interrupter, faced persecution and finally prison. *Ephesians* was a circular letter, likely written by an apprentice, secretary or close colleague of Paul, and sent to believers in emerging churches across Asia Minor, challenging systems of polytheism, exclusion, shame and honor, with a focus on neighbor love.^{xxxv}

The prayer in 3:14-20 is a summons to be “*rooted and grounded in love.*”^{xxxvi} *Agape*, a specific word for sacrificial love is used seventeen (17) times in Ephesians. Unlike *phileo*, meaning brotherly love. Throughout the New Testament this focus is on “*faith made evident in agape love.*”^{xxxvii} Georgia Harkness notes: “*Agape love means ... an uncalculating, outgoing spirit of loving concern which finds expression in deeds of service without limit.*”

What does it mean to be rooted and grounded in love? It’s the nurse who pulls a second shift to hold the hand of one who is dying of COVID when the family can’t be present. It’s the underpaid day care worker or teacher who takes from her meager salary so poor children have books or supplies. It is those offering healthcare or food to refugees in Syria or Gaza. It is the spouse, the child or friend who sacrifices to stay near as a loved one moves through the darkness of dementia. These and multitudes of others show us the way.^{xxxviii}

Robert Jewett’s “small” 1,140-page *Commentary on Romans* shows the early church faced plague, descension, and unrest.^{xxxix} For Bob, the heart of it all is this: “*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*”^{xl} (Rom. 15:7) It’s not a surprise John Wesley chose Ephesians 3 as text for his *The Catholic Spirit* sermon. Methodists, are to “*Keep an even pace, rooted in the faith once delivered to the saints, and grounded in love, in true catholic love, till thou art swallowed up in love for ever and ever!*”^{xli}

III. Conversions

Charles Taylor closes *A Secular Age* with a chapter simply entitled “Conversions.”^{xlii} He writes the Gospel establishes new “*links across boundaries... not based on kinship but on the kind of love which God has for us, agape.*”^{xliii} Unlike early Christians,^{xliv} he writes moderns have given up on the possibility of human transformation.^{xlv}

Have contemporary United Methodists given up on transformation? Are we too shaped by a *crises theology* where being “born again,” is a singular, one-time event with no more conversions necessary? Faith is a verb that has too often been misunderstood as a noun – a stopping place. A neuroscientist friend teaches that transformation requires a place of lowered anxiety where

thinking about beginning anew can occur. New consciousness coming from slowing down is possible. As Wesley put it, living at “*an even pace... faith grounded in love.*”

Georgia Harkness reminds us: *The Christian gospel is not that we save ourselves by finding God. It is that God finds us and saves us when we let him... When we are assured that God ceases not to love us, we can watch in patience through the night and wait for dawn.*^{xlvi} I believe this is possible in all of our local ministry settings, places like Bristol in 1742.^{xlvi} It is a regenerative cycle – interruption, stepping away, finding a calm, beginning anew, interruption, stepping away.

When I read stories from the North Texas Conference, I see such imagination in the work like the collaboration of South Dallas churches, the *Innovation Hub*, *Reservoirs of Resilience* initiatives, congregations sharing in a *Journey Toward Racial Justice*, and more.

Conversion alters where we look and what we see.^{xlvi} Dr. Willie James Jennings of Yale Divinity School tells of being a consultant with a school facing financial hardship. Students and faculty were able to calm down, step away from old patterns and think anew. Jennings writes: “The school was strapped for cash, but there was unused gospel lying all around.”^{xlvi} I perceive United Methodists, as God’s people, have a whole lot of “unused gospel lying all around.” Like our ancestors in Bristol, perhaps it requires a conversion in our seeing?

Methodism is not easily classified historically or sociologically.¹ We are only one instrument in the great faith symphony;^{li} but a critically important voice, sharing harmonies that unite personal and social holiness.^{lii} The temptation is to think there is an easy solution to our current situation. Why can’t General Conference, or the bishops, or Annual Conference help our disorientation?

Dr. Harkness would say, “We need a great deal more theology, not less.” I join Joerg Rieger and earlier theologians John Vincent and Ted Jennings who point to a way beyond our current denominational impasse. It is to remember and reclaim the ministry of Jesus, the Wesleys and early Methodism with “the least of these.” It is here we discover that this is where Jesus continues to be found today.^{liii} I do not only mean the economically impoverished– but they must be included, for they are central to following Jesus.

Let me close by telling you of Tony. He would slip in worship, sit on the back row. After worship he would greet me, “Good morning, Chappy.” A veteran who lived in his car, to Tony I was the chaplain or “chappy.” We welcomed new members each month. There were membership classes where the ritual was well rehearsed. Come forward, answer questions, then share one of your mission commitments. Out of the corner of my eye, one membership Sunday, I see Tony coming down a side aisle. He hadn’t attended a new member class! Vows were made. The microphone passed down the row. Folks might say, “I plan to sing in the choir,” or work at a shelter, or cook meals for the youth. Now the mic is in Tony’s hands – our unplanned righteous interrupter -- I held my breath. He looked at all well-dressed folks in the pews and said, “I plan to just love people and share my drawings. That’s it.”

Tony was an artist. We offered to help him find better shelter, but he preferred his car. It was there he was found a few months later, one cold winter morning, having died in the night. The chapel was full for his funeral. We thought we were the only ones to bring the gospel into world but it was Tony who helped us discover a whole lot of unused Gospel, we had been missing. He taught us about being rooted and grounded in *Agape* love! Today, partly due to Tony’s interrupting our routines, a shelter and resource center offers food, places to live and health care for hundreds in that community every week.

Our three takeaways, or trail markers, today:

- 1. Followers of Jesus are to be *Forever-Beginning-Disciples* acting with agape love.**
- 2. Rethinking mission from the “outside in” will need *Righteous Interrupters*.**
- 3. As fear is calmed, we may be converted to welcome others as Christ welcomes us.**

Tomorrow we continue as we explore the questions of being “*Connected to Bear Good Fruit*” and gathered in “*Communities of Restoration and Joy*.”

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Berry, Wendell, in *A Timbered Choir, Sabbath Poems*, Counterpoint, Washington, DC, 1998, p. 131.

ⁱⁱ One parishioner years ago asked if Methodists were like Luddites - a 19th century group that refused to accept new technologies -- I was polite, disagreed -- we remained friends. That was 25 years ago.

ⁱⁱⁱ Among the many helpful views about the future of United Methodism, one helpful perspective comes from David N. Field who writes from a European perspective and suggest six models church, often competing and currently operating, within the denomination. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/46581260/Models_of_Methodism_and_the_Unity_of_the_Church_A_European_Reflecti_on_on_the_Conflict_in_The_United_Methodist_Church_over_LGBTQ_inclusion_and_affirmation?fbclid=IwAR1ISvQgHflTqrXOcHnWljl-AkyW0_06JL9xUrwW5raWnDsMESLe3qAy3gI

^{iv} Bailey, Sarah Pulliam, “Church membership in the U.S. has fallen below the majority for the first time in nearly century,” Washington Post, March 30, 2021.

^v Scott, David W., United Methodist Insight, April 15, 2021. Available at: <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-future/organizational-vs-cultural-explanations-for-us-membership-de/>

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} I am helped by conversations with Dr. Chuck Foster who suggests that rather than “Mainline” or “Oldline” denominations, a better descriptor of who we are is “Ecumenical Protestants.”

^{viii} Hall, Douglass John, “The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity,” Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997, p. 51.

^{ix} Havel, Vaclav, “The Need for Transcendence in the Modern World,” from speech in Independence Hall, July 4, 1994, available at: <http://www.worldtrans.org/whole/havelspeech.html>. In addition he said, “I think there are good reasons for suggesting that the modern age has ended. Today, many things indicate that we are going through a transitional period, when it seems that something is on the way out and something else is painfully being born.”

^x Taylor, Charles (2007) *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, p. 146 ff.

^{xi} What Charles Taylor speaks of as an axial time and Walter Brueggemann speaks of as disorientation, Richard Rohr identifies as the move from order to disorder – with the next step – a move to a reordering.

^{xii} Smietana, Bob, “Gallup: Fewer Than Half of Americans Belong to a Church,” Christianity Today, March 30, 2021. Available at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/march/gallup-church-membership-decline-minority-nones-us.html>. In late March the Pew Foundation reported American membership in church, mosque or synagogue dropped below 50 percent. Down from 73 percent in 1937 to 47 percent today. The number who said religion was very important in their lives was down to 48 percent.

^{xiii} Attenborough, David, “*Extinction: The Facts*,” Public Broadcast System, 2021. Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/show/extinction-facts/>.

^{xiv} Early on, some epidemiologists cautioned the pandemic could last a while. We thought a few weeks; they meant months, or years. As we sheltered-in-place, our family joke became that Christmas 2020 was much like Thanksgiving, which was much like Labor Day, or Fourth of July, or Memorial Day... We were actually living the movie *Groundhog Day*. For others, providers of health care, public safety, essential services, for example, instead of boredom, they faced overwhelmed challenges. The death toll mounted a year later, if the caskets of the COVID

dead were end to end would reach from Dallas to Des Moines or New York City to Indianapolis. At the congregation level, a new, big question was, first, “Shall we do online worship?” Followed soon by “What kind of online worship shall we do? For the larger church might it be that a deeper transition has been made more visible? Businesses closed. Online worship and school quickly became necessary. Murders shocked our nation’s soul. A national reckoning on racism emerged. Sports seasons limped along with empty stands and canned cheers over loudspeakers. National elections came and on Epiphany day, January 6, 2021, there was insurrection at the Capitol.

^{xv} Lewis, Michael, *The Premonition: A Pandemic Story*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2021. Lewis tells the story of a group of researchers who took risks to address the crisis of the pandemic as it was emerging and who provide an example of the way future pandemics may need to be addressed.

^{xvi} The coronavirus attacked and we were not prepared. Our medical, political, cultural and religious systems were not ready. Should we save lives or livelihoods? Writer Anne Lamott summarized it, “*Our poor nation has been torn asunder. I await the rain of frogs.*”^{xvi} When new imagination and cooperation were most needed, many instead blamed and shamed others.

^{xvii} Editorial, “Methodists: Forever Beginning,” *Time Magazine* (May 6, 1966). Available at: <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,901869-1,00.html>.

^{xviii} Job, Rueben, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*, (Nashville: Abingdon) 2007.

^{xix} Georgia Harkness, “The Ministry as a Vocation for Women,” *The Methodist Experience in America Sourcebook*, ed. Richey et al. (Abingdon, 2000), 221. Harkness was the first woman to hold a full professorship of theology in the U.S. She was author of dozens of books, and early advocate for the ordination of women

^{xx} Wesley, John, *Armenian Magazine*, 1787, and Wesley Works, vii, 315-17) found in “Selections from the Writings of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.”, (compiled by Herbert Welch, New York: Eaton and Mains, 1901, p. 127-131). In this piece there is also the description of the early worship at the Foundery in London in 1738. Services were held at “five in the morning and seven in the evening, “that the people’s labour might not be hindered.” An illustration of the egalitarian design comes in the statement about worship. “From the beginning the men and women sat apart, as they always did in the primitive church; and none were suffered to call any place their own, but the first comers sat down first. They had no pews; and all the benches for rich and poor were of the same construction.”

^{xxi} Ibid

^{xxii} Watson, Kevin, “The Early Methodists Watched Over One Another in Love,” *Seedbed*, (March 22, 2016). Available at <https://www.seedbed.com/the-early-methodists-watched-over-one-another-in-love>.

^{xxiii} Dreyer, Frederick. "A "Religious Society under Heaven": John Wesley and the Identity of Methodism." *Journal of British Studies* 25, no. 1 (1986): p.65. Accessed May 31, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/175611>.

^{xxiv} Ibid. See also Kevin Watson’s *Blueprint for Discipleship* and Elaine Heath and Scott Kinsker’s *Longing for Spring: A New Vision for Wesleyan Community*.

^{xxv} See London Online: <https://www.londononline.co.uk/history/thames/5/>. Economic depression lingered, hunger was widespread, the unemployed marched city streets begging for food and work. Methodists, decided the poor would not to be excluded from fellowship.

^{xxvi} I do not choose to read early class meetings through a paternalistic lens, or as an attempt to turn the poor into clients. Everyone shared – all were rich in some ways and poor in others. The notion of class meetings serving as second families has much to offer. Think of Mark 3 where Jesus widens the understanding of his family.

^{xxvii} I think of Righteous Interrupters in recent decades, many of them Wesleyans. Women like Nazarene Mildred Bangs Wynkoop who wrote the classic “*A Theology of Love*” and Nelle Morton’s essays “*Journey is Home*” interrupting easy assumptions about a male-dominated church, or the preaching of Bishop Leontine Kelly, or the Philip Amerson *Regenerative Imagination #1* North Texas Conference UMC, 6/14/21 p. 10

writings of Georgia Harkness or Marjorie Suchocki. I think of political leaders like Barbara Jordan from Texas. I think of the remarkable women who served as bishops in recent decades. I give thanks for such righteous interrupters!

^{xxviii} This was 1945, three-and-a-half years before the desegregation of U.S. military, seven years before *Brown vs. Board of Education* and eighteen (18) years before the passage of *Civil Rights Act*.

^{xxix} Article on *Sherman Burgoyne* in Densho Encyclopedia at: https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Sherman_Burgoyne/. Burgoyne formed a *League for Liberty and Justice* and was later honored for his courage and leadership. Burgoyne faced ostracism and censure from civic and church leaders. Even so, he spoke forcefully against the removal of the names of Japanese American soldiers from public monuments and lead in assisting Japanese Americans returning from internment camps.

^{xxx} At a trustees meeting, a request came from an outside group to use the church's kitchen to prepare meals from a group preparing meals for persons in poverty. Their kitchen was under repair. Trustees discussed liabilities and extra costs for this request that could last several months. A motion to say "NO" was made. Only then, Chris spoke. There it was. A righteous interruption. Sentiment shifted. The vote was a unanimous, "Yes!" The kitchen was available, no charge. And those trustees would help with the remodeling of the other group's home kitchen.

^{xxxi} When Jasper prayed one knew he was truly leading us in seeking the heart of God. As I preached, he would encourage me. "Help him Lord," and I knew I needed to do better. Or "Thank you Jesus" or "Make it plain" and I knew I was on the right track. On a good Sunday Jasper would encourage, "Bring it home preacher." What were at first only interruptions to my ears, became blessed words of assurance. It was Jasper who one Sunday stopped us in the middle of the second offering to say the son of a neighbor was in jail and needed help with bail money and an attorney. Who could help? Jasper offered us a wider vision of our place as a congregation. In another church where the town's elite would gather, Louise had a way of standing out. As we sang a grand processional hymn, something like "Lift High the Cross" or "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," Louise, a retired gym teacher, would let the choir and other worship leaders pass, then walk beside me all the way down the aisle! It became a routine. Louise would peel off at the chancel and take a set in a front pew. As we processed, she might ask, "How do you like that car you are driving?" or "Did you see Lawrence Welk last night?" The ushers offered to stop her. I told them not to intervene; it would end soon enough, I thought. It took a righteous interrupter, Ann to understand, "Louise is lonely." I had overlooked the obvious. Ann said, "Let's start a weekly exercise group for seniors and put Louise in charge." It worked! There was a whole lot of unused gospel lying around that I was missing.

^{xxxii} Barrett, Al and Ruth Harley (2020) *Being Interrupted: Reimagining the Church's Mission From the Outside, In*, SCM Press, p. 155.

^{xxxiii} Ibid. Barrett, rector of Hodge Hill Church in the Diocese of Birmingham, England writes worship begins with two interruptive questions: 1) *What do you bring with you, from your week in the world, that you want to say thank you to God for?* And 2) *What do you come with, that weighs heavily on you, that you want to bring to God in prayer and concern?* Then, when worship ends, rather than the traditional "Go in peace to love God and serve the Lord," the benediction is "Let us go in peace to meet and love Christ in our neighbors."

^{xxxiv} Ibid, p 164

^{xxxv} Snyder, Howard (2014) *The Radical Wesley*, Franklin, Tennessee: Seedbed, p. xiv. Howard Snyder offers that Ephesians 3 is a "Quest to understand God's plan through the church."

^{xxxvi} Scholars tell us *The Letter to the Ephesians* was a circular to emerging churches across Asia Minor. Some early manuscripts don't specify this as addressed to Ephesus. Whether written by Paul and/or an apprentice, this love letter is addressed to the saints in *fill-in-the-blank* location. It is a First Century social media blast stretching across the centuries to us, today.

^{xxxvii} Encyclopedia Britannica, available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Letter-of-Paul-to-the-Ephesians>. From this article we read, "Of the 155 verses in Ephesians, 73 have verbal parallels with Colossians, and, when parallels to genuine Pauline epistles are added, 85 percent of Ephesians is duplicated elsewhere. It is thus most reasonable to consider it as "deutero-Pauline"—i.e., in the tradition of Paul but not written by him.

^{xxxviii} What does it mean to be rooted and grounded in love? It's the nurse who pulls a second shift to hold the hand of one who is dying of COVID when the family can't be present. It is the rancher who leaves water in the desert for immigrants even though he disagrees with immigration policies. The underpaid day care worker or teacher who takes from her meager salary so poor children have books or supplies. The judge who works to offer restorative justice. The economics professor who leaves her class early to befriend persons struggling with addiction. It's the young consultant who takes a leave from work to direct a homeless shelter. It's the Christians in *Le Chambon* in the Second World War who harbored thousands of Jewish children from the holocaust. Or, today, the ones offering healthcare or food to refugees in Syria or Gaza. It is the spouse, the child or friend who sacrifices to stay near as a loved one moves through the darkness of dementia. These and multitudes of others show us the way.

^{xxxix} Jewett, Robert, *Romans: Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, Fortress, 2006. There is no small irony that Jewett, *Professor Emeritus* of Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, died of complications from COVID-19 on December 4, 2020. Instead of the wealthy retreating to country villas, Christians in urban centers practiced simple hospitality, offering a cup of cold water to neighbors. Reviewing the census rolls during the plagues in Roman cities, Jewett argued that simple habits of gospel living, like offering a cup of cold water, lowered mortality rates among early Christians.

^{xl} Green, Gene L., "Welcome One Another," GoodNews Florida, Trinity International University, Available at: <https://www.goodnewsfl.org/welcome-one-another/>

^{xli} Wesley, John, (1872 edition), sermon *The Catholic Spirit*, Available at: <http://www.umaffirm.org/cornet/catholic.html>.

^{xlii} Taylor, Charles, op. cit., p. 728.

^{xliii} *Ibid*, p. 738-739.

^{xliv} Rowe, C. Kavin, *Christianity's Surprise: A Sure and Certain Hope*, Abingdon Press, 2020.

^{xlv} Taylor, Charles, op cit, pp 430-437.

^{xlvi} Georgia Harkness, "The Ministry as a Vocation for Women," *The Methodist Experience in America Sourcebook*, ed. Richey et al. (Abingdon, 2000), 221. "The Christian gospel is not that we save ourselves by finding God. It is that God finds us and saves us when we let him... When we are assured that God ceases not to love us, we can watch in patience through the night and wait for dawn."

^{xlvii} Just as in many of our schools in recent years, students have been trained in "violence interruption" the righteous interrupters act out of a concern to do no harm.

^{xlviii} The great Southern Baptist preacher, Carlyle Marney, taught that Christian experience can be best understood as continuing conversions. Our faith is a call to keep journeying ahead – or perhaps better put, to keep "faithing forward." Marney writes of the *Grammar of Faith*, and says, "In the Christian way, the word faith is always a verb! When we make faith into a noun, we freeze it into a creed! It is really a verb!" (*Priests to Each Other*, Judson Press, 1974, p. 36)

^{xlix} Jennings, Willie James (2020) *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, p. 133.

^l Dreyer, Frederick. "A "Religious Society under Heaven": John Wesley and the Identity of Methodism." *Journal of British Studies* 25, no. 1 (1986): 62-83. Accessed May 31, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/175611>.

^{li} I don't think of Methodism as the oboe, timpani, trumpet or piccolo. I place us in the string section, perhaps among the cellos or the violins. Even there, different instruments have different voices. Or, if you prefer country music or western swing, we are like the fiddle or steel guitar. Our musical contributions enhance and strengthen the beauty of the whole symphony.

^{lii} Oord, Thomas, “*Thomas J. Oord on the Mystery and Definition of Love*,” *The Table* podcast, 11/15/2018. Available at: <https://cct.biola.edu/love-thomas-oord-podcast/>. Thomas Jay Oord offers *agape love* is “*an intentional act, in relationship with others, that promotes the overall well-being*.”

^{liii} Reiger, Joerg, “The Ill-fated Impasse of United Methodist Theology,” *United Methodist Insight*, March 1, 2021. Available at: Rieger: <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-future/the-ill-fated-impasse-of-united-methodist-theology/>. He writes: *What is needed, instead of the tunnel vision of the culture wars that U. S. United Methodism has regrettably exported to so many other Methodists around the world, is a more constructive approach that is grounded in the lives of the people called Methodist, as they encounter the work of God in the midst of the life-and-death struggles of our time. In the ministry of Jesus and in the ministry of Wesley and the early Methodists, it all begins with the “least of these” and the pressures they are forced to endure as they encounter the liberating grace of God: this is where Jesus continues to be found at work today, and this is where the Wesleyan spirit and The United Methodist Church might eventually find revitalization as well.*