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Ezra 3:11-13

Reformation in the United Methodist Church

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Ezra 3:11-13 New Revised Standard Version

And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.  But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

Children are amazing. There is a reason why Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). Children help us have hope, they help us look at the world with fresh eyes, children help us have wonder at the glory of God. As a parent it has been interesting for me how I can feel great joy with my children and also great frustration. I can feel so proud of them as they grow up and also sad that they are growing up. I want them to hurry up and get older so they can do more on their own, and at the same time I want them to slow down because they are getting older too fast. Last weekend my husband Lee and I went to Trinity University in San Antonio for our 20th college reunion and as we were there we realized that in five short years we will be somewhere with our oldest child celebrating Parents Weekend at college. That realization made me excited and alarmed. It feels so weird to feel emotions that seem to be on opposite ends of the spectrum. Joy, frustration, pride, sadness, excitement, fear.

And kids, I want you to know that it isn’t just parents that feel this struggle with our emotions. You love your parents so much right? But have there been times when you are so mad at your parents? When I was six years old it was time to go to ballet and I didn’t want to go and I was so mad at my mom that I called her a word that I have never called her since. I was so mad at her, but I love my mom so much. And guess what? I still had to go to ballet that day, even though I didn’t want to go. We feel these strong feelings on opposite ends of the spectrum. I feel those strong feelings, joy and frustration, when I think about how our United Methodist Church is growing and changing and struggling.

This week I was at clergy retreat with the 300 other United Methodist clergy in North Texas and our speaker shared this scripture in Ezra. I had never read it before. The foundation of the Second Temple is being laid. 70 years before the First Temple was destroyed by the army of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, and now it is being rebuilt. There were folks crying and we don’t know why. Maybe they were crying because they wouldn’t see the temple finished or the second temple didn’t look as good as the first one, or maybe they were tears of joy? We don’t know. But other people shouted loudly with joy. You couldn’t tell who rejoiced apart from those who cried. People with strong feelings on opposite ends of the spectrum.

This month we are remembering the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Five hundred years ago on October 31, 1517 a 33-year-old monk and professor was worried about the Catholic Church. He posted a list of 95 ideas for how the church could be better on the town bulletin board. He had no idea that a Reformation would result from his act. Martin Luther hoped that if he opened his heart and shared his frustration with the Church, that there would be debate and that the Church would change, and be better.

Our United Methodist Church is in the midst of change as well. Every four years we have these worldwide meetings called General Conference, the latest one was in Portland, Oregon in May 2016. There were 850 delegates, 58% from the United States, 30% from Africa, 6% from the Philippines, 5% from Europe, and 1% from other areas around the world. Everyone’s vote has equal weight. General Conference in 2016 lasted for 10 days and the first three days were spent talking about the rules of the gathering. I am serious. Instead of voting yes or no, there was a proposal to have a group-discernment process to deal with complicated and contentious legislation such as human sexuality. Right now in the United Methodist Church pastors can’t officiate at same gender weddings, we can’t have same gender weddings in our churches, and LGBTQ folks can’t officially be pastors. There was hope that a new process would enable folks to have meaningful Christian debate about human sexuality and could foster trust but just like our U.S. political system, people lack trust, even in the church. The new process lost by a margin of 120 votes.

I love the United Methodist Church. I love John Wesley’s understanding of grace and salvation. I love that the United Methodist Church wants us to think critically about our faith and to care about the world outside the church building. I love that everyone is welcome at the Communion table, we serve Welch’s grape juice so recovering alcoholics, alcoholics and children can come to the table. The United Methodist Church loves children so much that the children’s sermon is usually better than the sermon sermon. In the United Methodist Church, we are called to “Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can.”

At the General Conference in May 2016 the Bishops said there was so much disagreement the church had a broken heart and we needed the Holy Spirit to mend it. Prayers were offered asking us to to be open to God’s spirit, to be open to God’s nudging so that we would see the good around us and in one another. People with strong feelings on opposite ends of the spectrum.

Did you know that the United Methodist Church was the first denomination to adopt resolutions advocating for equal civil rights for LGBT people in 1972? We are a church that believes in the Gospel’s teachings of grace, love, justice and inclusion for all of God’s children, but we have lost our way. Here at Greenland Hills we want the United Methodist Church to change and embrace all people, especially LGBTQ pastors and LGBTQ folks that want to get married in the church where they worship God. Just like Martin Luther with his 95 ideas of how the Catholic Church could be better, I have great hope that the United Methodist Church will change and be better. But there are others who want to see the United Methodist Church stay the same and continue to exclude LGBTQ folks. It’s like our scripture from Ezra, some are weeping with a loud voice when the church begins to change and others are shouting for joy.

Right now we are in a time of waiting. The Bishops appointed a 32-member Commission on a Way Forward to assist the bishops in their charge from the 2016 General Conference to lead the church forward in the present impasse related to human sexuality and the resulting questions about the unity of the church. There will be a special called session of the General Conference February 23-26, 2019 in St. Louis, Missouri. The United Methodist Church might split then, we are the only Protestant Church in the United States that has not split about human sexuality. Or some new way of being United Methodist in the world might be created. I don’t know what will happen, but I pray about it every day. And it does give me peace to know that change, and splits and mergers are a part of our United Methodist history.

The Church is a gift of God’s transforming grace but it is human and broken. We at Greenland Hills are descendants of the Protestant Reformation. God isn’t done with us yet. God isn’t done with the United Methodist Church. If we can listen to God and continue to reform, then we will continue to be open to change.

Today is a day when we celebrate the children in our church family. We must celebrate our children and we must learn from them. People often say that children are the future of the church, but they are the present. Children aren’t born with hatred and bigotry. We teach them that. Children aren’t born thinking that you are bad if you are a different color or if you have a different sexuality. We teach them that. Children are sacred gifts of the Divine and today is a day for us to remember what children teach us and for us to renew and live out our moral responsibility to care, protect, and advocate for all children.

We must celebrate our children and we must take care of all God’s children. 1 in 4 children in America now lives in poverty. In the United States children are nearly 25% of our population but only 8% of our national budget is spent on kids. Dallas has the worst childhood poverty rate of the country's 10 biggest cities. 38 % of Dallas children live in poverty, which means a family of four that makes less than $24,000 annually. 50,000 children in Dallas live in extreme poverty, defined as a family of four living off half the poverty line, $12,000 annually. This is the story of the working poor because more than 27,300 Dallas residents with full-time jobs live in poverty.

John Wesley, the first wanna be Methodist, wanted to reform the nation, particularly the church, and spread scriptural holiness through the land. Today our United Methodist Church again needs to make changes. Just as I feel great joy and sometimes great frustration as a parent, I also feel joy and frustration as a Methodist. And I feel great joy and great frustration as an American. We must seek God’s renewal; we must listen to God’s voice to see how we can make a difference in the world today. Our world is filled with violence, fear, and death and we need to remember that God wants our world to be a world of peace, where there is no poverty, and where all children learn and grow. Thanks be to God, Amen.