

2018 Lenten Message from the Council of Bishops

Monday, February 12, 2018



Dear Friends,

On behalf of the entire Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, I greet you as we enter the Lenten Season – a season of reflection and preparation for the celebration of Jesus' triumphant resurrection on Easter.

The pattern of our Lenten journey was set by Jesus during his 40 days of solitude, fasting, prayer and testing in the Judean desert. This was an essential period of preparation for Jesus' public ministry.

But, the goal of our Lenten journey was revealed by Jesus when he first foretold his disciples of his death and resurrection. Mark's Gospel has Jesus saying: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (Mark 8:34-35)

What does it mean to lose one's life for the sake of the gospel? It means to live the same purposeful life Jesus lived. It means to deny our preferences for the sake of Jesus' kingdom purposes. It means to set aside our self-interest so that others may have a more abundant life. It means we are saved in order to participate in the salvation of others. It means our hearts will break for the very situations that break the heart of God.

Our beloved United Methodist Church is in a season of Lent. We are in an intense season of prayer, discernment and exploring what it means to lose one's life for the sake of the gospel. The Commission on a Way Forward and the Council of Bishops have entered a critical time of reflection, prayer and fasting as we seek to listen deeply and expectantly to the Holy Spirit. We are confident God's Spirit will guide the Commission and the Council in discerning where God is leading our church and how, through Christ's grace, we will continue to do ministry and make disciples throughout the world.

We invite all United Methodists to join us in this Lenten reflection by focusing on the mission that Jesus Christ gave us at the end of his earthly ministry after he triumphantly overcame sin, hatred and death to give birth to a church grounded in the new covenant of love. Please join us in these Lenten disciplines of surrendering our lives to the way of the cross.

Take at least 30 minutes every day in Lent to pray, offering God your requests, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving. Pray for the members of the Commission on a Way Forward. Pray for your bishops. Pray for the church and pray for the whole world. 1 John 5:14-15 reminds that we should have bold confidence that "if we ask anything according to God's will, God hears us. And if we know that God hears us - whatever we ask - we know that we have what we asked of God."

Take time to fast, whether it is from food or from some activity. Take the example of Jesus who withdrew to the desert to fast from food and pray for 40 days before starting his public ministry. Our fasting brings us closer to God and enhances our prayers. In whatever we decide to do, we must remember as Romans 14:17 tells us: "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Take time to reflect on your spiritual gifts and resources that God has blessed you with and share them with others. Donate your time or money saved by fasting to your local church for missions and ministries that benefit your local community directly. Offer your service for acts of compassion and advocacy. Take the example of the first Christians who "were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." (Acts 2:44-45)

During this Lenten season, let us continue to live out our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Together, let us lose our lives for the sake of the Gospel. By doing so, we will honor the Lord's Prayer that the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven and thereby glorify God.

Bishop Bruce R. Ough, President
Council of Bishops
The United Methodist Church

Act Now to End Racism

April 4, 2018 will mark the 50th anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This anniversary is a clarion call for all people of faith to remember that while tremendous progress has been made in realizing the civil rights of all people, there is still much work to be done.



In the beginning of *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 8672*, we affirm that “God’s love for the world is an active and engaged love, a love seeking justice and liberty. We cannot just be observers. So we care enough about people’s lives to risk interpreting God’s love, to take a stand, to call each of us into a response, no matter how controversial or complex.” We can and must be agents of God’s transformation by actively “resist[ing] evil and injustice in whatever forms they present themselves” (from our “Baptismal Covenant,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 34).

During the month of April, we have two opportunities to learn more and to unite with other people of faith to resist the persisting evil and injustice of systemic racism:

The National Council of Churches has organized a rally and a call to action which will take place on April 4 at the National Mall in Washington, DC. For \$75, you can ride a bus provided by the Ohio Council of Churches from Cleveland to Washington, DC (leaving during the night on April 3 and returning during the early morning on April 5).

Various groups within our East Ohio Conference are sponsoring a workshop titled, “Resisting Racism,” on Saturday, April 28 at Family of Faith UMC in Akron. The workshop leader will be the Rev. Michelle Ledder, Director of Programs Ministry for our General Commission on Religion and Race. The workshop will provide opportunities for all of us to deepen our knowledge (mindset), motivation (heart-set), and capabilities (skill-set) for actively resisting racism.

For more information about either of these opportunities and to register, please contact Pastor Nathan (nhowe@umcb.org) by April 15.