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Church of the Redeemer UMC

“The Heavens Are Opened!”

Today begins our new series, “The Great Invitation”. This after-Epiphany/ordinary time series will take us through Transfiguration Sunday at the end of February and prepare us for our Lenten journey—a journey in which we will be challenged to follow Jesus even to the cross. To prepare, we will spend the next eight weeks exploring what discipleship looked like to Jesus and challenging ourselves to not only follow, but also to lead others into discipleship through meaningful evangelism.

We begin with that moment in the Gospels when it is written that the heavens were indeed opened: at the baptism of Jesus. When John raised Jesus from the waters of the Jordan, in verses 16 and 17, “suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” If you remember my reference to theophany last week, this is the second time in Scripture, following the visitation of the wise men in Matthew 2, when Jesus’ identity as God’s Son and the prophesied Messiah is confirmed. From this moment, the 30-year-old Jesus embarks on his three-year earthly ministry and invites us to follow.

Let’s get back to the big E that this series is all about: evangelism. That word leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, and likely in many of yours as well. Evangelism conjures images of and street preachers with pamphlets exhorting you to be saved *right now* before you’re condemned to an eternity in fire and brimstone. It smacks of altar calls that continue for hours until enough people have come forward that the preacher is satisfied. It’s an evangelizer with the attitude of a door-to-door salesperson urging you to sign on the dotted line and buy whatever version of Christianity they are selling. It’s also wickedly uncomfortable for many of us to talk about Jesus with those we know, period; either we’re afraid they’ll think that we’ve become those same door-to-door salespeople, or we’re concerned about what the “Christian” label means to non-Christians. I’m fortunate in that

I get paid to talk about Jesus, but for many of you in various professional settings it could be a disciplinary issue for you to share your faith with the wrong person at the wrong time.

I'd like to challenge each of you to, right this second, take that definition of evangelism and toss it out the window. Do we want others to choose to follow Jesus, as we have? Absolutely! Should we talk to people about our faith and share the good news of Christ's salvation? Mais, bien sur! But we have to stop thinking about evangelism like a holy petition that we wave in other people's faces, trying to collect signatures. Let's reframe evangelism in a Wesleyan perspective.

On May 24, 1738, John Wesley was feeling defeated after his fellow Anglican priests rejected his gospel message. That evening he attended a society meeting at a Moravian chapel on Aldersgate Street in London. After the meeting, he wrote the following in his journal:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.¹

Wesley's Aldersgate experience is considered instrumental in his decision to leave the Moravians in 1739 and begin the society that would become the Methodist movement. More importantly, this is one of many moments in which, for Wesley, the heavens were opened and he had a personal conversion experience with God. Most importantly, in each of our own faith journeys we may find many such moments when we can perceive God speaking to us in the way in which we are most likely to hear it. In Methodism we believe that conversion moments, instances of heart-warming and heavens opening, occur continuously throughout our lives. I can tell you about four times right off the top of my head that I was saved, and one of those times was after I began my path to ministry! Those conversions are ongoing steps toward our sanctification as Christ's disciples, and they shape the stories that should form our evangelistic efforts.

So, why start this conversation at Jesus' baptism? In doing so, we recall our own baptisms—the acceptance of God's grace going before us in the life, ministry, and saving sacrifice of Christ on the cross. That

¹ Taylor Burton-Edwards, Dawn Chesser, and Jackson Henry, "After Epiphany: The Great Invitation," UMC Discipleship Ministries, 14.

act, and not any word or prayer we can say or action we can perform, is what has saved us from eternal darkness. Once we have accepted that gift, we are then called to share the gospel of God's grace with others—to tell our love story with Christ—to make disciples—to evangelize. Some of us made the baptismal covenant of our own accord: I was eleven years old when I first accepted God's grace and chose to be baptized. For most of you, however (and I know this because I was in the room when the adult Sunday school class discussed it before), the covenant was made on your behalf by your parents when you were an infant. That is why it's important for us to recall and reaffirm our baptism, as we will do when we share in the communion meal shortly. My prayer is that today's reaffirmation will be for each of us the latest in a lifetime of conversion moments, that the heavens will open here before us and that you will recognize the voice of God claiming you once again, and still, as beloved.

I have two challenges for each of you throughout this series, as we exercise our evangelism muscles. First, I want you to think about how you would talk about your journey of discipleship with someone new. Why did you first choose to follow Jesus, and why do you continue to make that choice? Write it down, and I'm not suggesting that offhand. Send them to me if you want—I promise that I will read them and that I will not share them. Practice giving your testimonies to one another and, if someone gives theirs to you, listen with an open heart. Pay attention to the moments that have shaped that story. Second, invite someone new to attend worship with you. I don't just mean post on Facebook that you'll be here either, though that can sometimes be effective. I mean extend a personal, individual invitation to someone who is seeking or struggling or who has expressed curiosity to come and see this Jesus, this Savior who calls us to fight for justice and to speak truth to power and to rejoice without ceasing at the grace poured out on us and for us. Invite them to discover their own love story with Christ.

Now another invitation lies before us: the invitation to come together once again to God's table to share the holy meal. As you turn to page 12 in the hymnal, hear what Richard Beck has to say about the Eucharist:

Participation in the Lord's Supper is an inherently moral act. In the first century church, and in our own time, people who would never have associated with each other in the larger society sit as equals around the Table of the Lord...The Eucharist, therefore, is not simply a symbolic expansion of the moral circle. The Lord's Supper becomes a profoundly subversive political event in the lives of the participants. The

sacrament brings real people—divided in the larger world—into a sweaty, intimate, flesh-and-blood embrace where ‘there shall be no difference between them and the rest.’²

There’s little I love more than being subversive, so let’s get to it!

[*A Service of Word and Table II*, UMH 12-15]

Reaffirmation of Baptism

“[J]ust as water carried Moses to his destiny down the Nile, so water carried another baby from a woman’s body into an expectant world. Wrapped now in flesh, the God who once hovered over the waters was plunged beneath them at the hands of a wild-eyed wilderness preacher. When God emerged, he spoke of living water that forever satisfies and of being born again. He went fishing and washed his friends’ feet. He touched the ceremonially unclean. He spit in the dirt, cast demons into the ocean, and strolled across an angry sea. He got thirsty and he wept.

After the government washed its hands of him, God hung on a cross where blood and water spewed from his side. Like Jonah, he got swallowed up for three days.

Then God beat death. God rose from the depths and breathed air once again. When he found his friends on the shoreline, he told them not to be afraid but to go out and baptize the whole world.

The Spirit that once hovered over the waters had inhabited them. Now every drop is holy.³

Remember your baptism and the covenant of grace to which it binds you. As you come forward to receive the bread and cup, touch your fingers to the water to recall and reaffirm that covenant.

² Richard Beck, *Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality, and Mortality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 114.

³ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015), 4.

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