

I want to take a moment to offer a sincere “mahalo” thank you to Pastor Sunny for inviting me to come and be with you this morning, and also, “aloha” to my friends from our Korea pilgrimage that I’ve been looking forward to seeing again and introducing my family to, as well as the rest of this wonderful congregation. I love our Connectional system! I am an ordained elder in the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church, and for the past five years have had the privilege of serving as Director of Evangelism for our denomination through my position at the General Board of Discipleship in Nashville. It is only because of the faithfulness and generosity of United Methodist congregations, including this one, that I am able to do my work. My position, as well as those of my colleagues at Discipleship Ministries are funded by the World Service portion of our apportionment dollars. No two days are the same in my work, as I have the opportunity to work with laity and clergy throughout our global connection, teach at our United Methodist seminaries, represent the UMC in ecumenical bodies, and relate to various evangelism bodies and organizations within the UMC and beyond. But my favorite part of my job is getting to spend some time back on the ground with local churches. I am constantly inspired by the passion and heart of our local churches to reach out and share the love of Jesus Christ with their neighbors, and from what I know of Kona UMC, you are no exception.

My family has had a great almost 2 weeks in Hawai’i, spending our time between Oahu and the Big Island. My father was stationed on Oahu in the early 80’s, but this was our first time back in 35 years. Things had changed just a bit. And as

someone who has spent the past 18 years living in the Southeastern US, I have to say that Southern hospitality has nothing on Hawaiian hospitality, as we've been warmly greeted and welcomed everywhere as part of the ohana, where everyone is treated as family, or at least a distant cousin.

We definitely tried to fit in as much culture, history, and time to enjoy and experience the diverse and stunning landscapes as possible, and I may or may not have been accused of trying to pack in too much several of the days. I just didn't want us to miss anything. During our first couple days on Oahu, we visited Pearl Harbor and toured the USS Missouri. One of the things that stuck with me the most is the quote from General McArthur the day the Japanese surrendered on the deck of the Missouri. Anticipating the worst, the Japanese boarded the vessel prepared to face whatever consequences awaited them. But the Americans surprised them, and McArthur's words still ring very true as a hope and prayer for us today:

"It is my earnest hope and indeed the hope of all mankind that from this solemn occasion a better world shall emerge out of the blood and carnage of the past—a world founded upon faith and understanding—a world dedicated to the dignity of man and the fulfillment of his most cherished wish—for freedom, tolerance and justice."

In today's polarized world and political climate, I find my prayers echoing the sentiment of McArthur's pronouncement. As I spend some time looking through the demographics from this area, I also found that is what people in this area are looking for from a church, a welcoming place that accepts people as they are. It seems to be too easy these days for people to label and write off entire groups of people, and

somehow see them less than human. As the daughter of a Marine, and in my current work, I have had the privilege of travelling around the country and the world, and these experiences have been eye-opening and humbling. Through hearing the stories, struggles, hopes and dreams of brothers and sisters around the globe, my mind has been opened and I have often found my worldview challenged. One can't be in the sacred space of hearing other's stories and not be changed in some way. Walls begin to come down and preconceived notions are challenged. People are people, all created in the image of God.

As mentioned, I have the privilege of serving as Director of Evangelism for the United Methodist Church. That title and just the word, "evangelism" elicits a wide range of responses and emotions, and probably if I polled this congregation, I would get as many definitions as people here today, some positive and some negative, based on past experiences. In working with seminary students, I often have to spend some time unpacking the negative baggage related to their current understanding of evangelism in order for them to reimagine evangelism as truly good and holistic. If this is where you find yourself, I hope today's workshop will be helpful.

I have found that in the evangelism world, and many Christian churches a false dichotomy has been created that separates faith and works, right beliefs and acts of justice and mercy. Being a Christian is either about asserting to a certain set of beliefs with your head and heart, or loving and serving your neighbor. I would say that both of those understandings of who God is and what God is doing in the world is too small. Yet, if we look at how Jesus consistently engages in ministry, we see that Jesus' model

of evangelism isn't an either/or. We only need to look at chapter 6 of John to see how Jesus held the needs of the whole person together, while expanding their understanding of who God is and the life that God desires for each of us.

Chapter 6 begins with Jesus feeding the 5000. It's getting late, the crowd has been following him for a while, and he knows they are probably hungry. So, he satisfies their physical hunger by multiplying a boy's lunch and creates a feast that not only feeds everyone, but produces leftovers. The crowd recognizes that Jesus has something that they need, and ask, "Sir, give us this bread always." They really have no idea what they are asking for at this point which is why Jesus continues the dialogue and interpreting the sign. They have made the connection to what they already know about miraculous feedings -- the stories their ancestors told of the wanderings in the wilderness being fed by manna from heaven and understand Jesus to be a prophet. This exchange is demonstrative of what our faith tends to be. We fall back on what we know, what we've learned, the tales we've been told. But for the crowd once seated in the grass, Jesus needs them to see that in the Word made flesh God is up to something new. For us, Jesus needs us to see that this was no "ordinary" miracle, as if a miracle can ever be ordinary. Yet, when it comes to Jesus, we tend to make the miracles rather commonplace, even predictable. "Oh yeah, feeding the 5000, walking on water, water into wine, whatever. Regular Jesus stuff. That's why I believe." But in John, that is not why we believe. The signs are not the reason for believing but the beginning of believing. The signs always point to who God is and the nature of

God's kingdom. Again, this is a way the crowd was making their conception of who Jesus was too small.

We often don't realize it, but God still offers signs today. Len Sweet describes evangelism as the practice of paying attention. Paying attention and pointing to what God is doing in our lives, in others, and our world. I wonder how good we are at paying attention and expecting to see signs, and if there are times we make God too small? Do we ask and seek things that only satisfy us for the moment, but eventually leave us needing or wanting more? What is your heart's deep desire? What are the things that keep you up at night? How about your neighbors and co-workers? What are the life-diminishing forces that prevent us from fully being who God created us to be, and how is God seeking to meet us in our need?

I saw Sunny's Facebook post yesterday about the early morning prayer service and the recommendation to PUSH (pray until something happens). I'm sure that you've heard all about the Pilgrimage to Korea by this point, but that was one of the remarkable experiences of our trip. Each morning we gathered at 5am in the sanctuary with hundreds of Korean Methodists, praying hard, sometimes with their entire bodies, centering themselves in the presence of God. There was a sense of expectation that God would answer these prayers and that God was truly up to something in both the lives of the individuals, as well as the community.

I hope you'll join us after the fellowship time as we process these signs, expectations, and stories a little more, but for now we have the opportunity to come to the table with expectation and the promise that we are receiving more than a small

morsel of bread. For each time we come to the Table, we are promised nothing less than forgiveness, acceptance, and wholeness: in a word, life, both now and forever. And the thing about all this – about forgiveness and acceptance and the like – is that they just can't be gained or earned, coerced or accomplished. Like love, they can only be given as a gift by one person to another.

This, you see, is the sacraments. Communion and baptism are God's external and objective words of love and forgiveness, given in a form which we can receive, for the sacraments are God's physical, visible words for God's physical, visible people. The thing is, just as with Jesus' words to the crowd, such a promise is as frightening as it is comforting. So John reports that the people naturally ask, "what miracle will you perform so that we may see it and believe you?" In other words, "Prove yourself, Jesus." And my, but doesn't that sound familiar, for how much easier faith would be if God would just do what God's supposed to do and give us a miracle.

But God, you see, our God, rarely does what God is supposed to do. For our God is a God of surprises, of upheavals, of reversals. And so rather than do what God is supposed to do, God does the unexpected: instead of pronouncing judgment in the face of our sin and selfishness, God offers mercy; instead of justice, love; instead of condemnation, forgiveness; instead of coming in power, God came in weakness; and instead of giving us a miracle, God gives us God's own self. The Gospel is life-giving good news, not so-so news. I was at a meeting in Atlanta recently, and one of the guys around the table said, "I'm so tired of pastors presenting the Gospel as so-so news."

It's good news. It's the best news. Do we believe that and live it? And it's a message that despite how everything may seem, God wins and is making all things new.

This is the heart of the faith. This is the faith we are privileged to proclaim: that the Eternal Word who was with God and is God from the beginning and participated in the creation of the heavens and the earth is the same Lord who cares so desperately for us that he gave his life for ours on the cross and gives himself still in the bread and juice. We are invited to come with expectation, and receive Jesus' promise. For those who comes to Christ will never be hungry, and those who believe in Christ will not thirst. What an awesome promise! Thanks be to God.