

Hard Travelin'

Michigan Annual Conference
Opening Sermon

June 1, 2023
Bishop David Alan Bard

Texts: Lamentations 3:22-23; Luke 24:13-28

Greetings in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the peace and power of the Holy Spirit.

*I've been havin' some hard travelin', I thought you knowed
I've been havin' some hard travelin', way down the road
I've been havin' some hard travelin', hard ramblin', hard gamblin'
I've been havin' some hard travelin', lord*

My goal is not to make annual conference bingo particularly easy, but isn't it nice to get one square cared for right away!

Hard travelin'. For those who don't know, "Hard Travelin'" is a Woody Guthrie song. I came to the music of Woody Guthrie through the music of Bob Dylan which I first encountered in a Christian youth group in high school. There are two original songs on Dylan's first album, recorded when he was 20 (he just turned 82), one of which is a touching tribute to Woody Guthrie. "Song to Woody" ends with this chorus:

*I'm a-leavin' tomorrow, but I could leave today
Somewhere down the road someday
The very last thing that I'd want to do
Is to say I've been hittin' some hard travelin' too.*

Hard travelin'

Friends, we've been hittin' some hard travelin'. We have been traversing some rugged roads, walking difficult paths. These have been difficult and challenging days. We are coming out of COVID and still gauging its impact on church life. This is the first year we have not required any COVID-related documentation or precautions at annual conference since before

the pandemic. I hope you will all be gracious toward one another as people make choices about masking and distancing. I know some of the weariness of pastors and church leaders in working with all the pandemic-related issues.

Later in our annual conference we will be voting on sixty churches who have fulfilled or are in the process of fulfilling the requirements to leave the Michigan Conference and The United Methodist Church through disaffiliation. At clergy session we voted to affirm the withdrawal of clergy leaving The United Methodist Church. There are a mixture of emotions involved, and again, I trust you will be kind and offer grace to one another at this annual conference. I have seen the weariness, the emotional and spiritual exhaustion, this work has brought to many. I have heard it in conversations with bishops across the United States. I see it in our district superintendents who have been there for town halls and church conferences. This work has had an impact on conference staff, pastors, church leaders and church members.

For as much time and energy as denominational disaffiliations have taken, we should be more concerned about the broad religious disaffiliation occurring in our country. Last fall, the Pew Research Center released their report, "Modeling the Future of Religion in America." The report projects rates of religious disaffiliation, one form of switching – where the religious identity in which one is raised changes in adulthood - and asserts that if current rates of switching away from Christianity continue, Christians will be less than 50% of the U.S. population by 2070. The reality is that the rate of switching away from Christianity has been accelerating since the 1990s.

These changes are having a direct impact on our conference budget and staffing. The budget proposal you will be considering later this annual conference represents significant

reductions, and as a result, we have had to restructure our conference staff, reducing the number of staff persons, and we are reducing the number of districts. There has been pain and hurt and disappointment along the way. Please take the opportunity at this annual conference to express your appreciation to those conference staff who will not be continuing in their positions.

Societal polarization affects our life together in our congregations, and we are already beginning another presidential election process which has the potential to increase that polarization, or, at the very least, stoke the current flames. Such societal polarization has a negative impact on our Christian conferencing and conversation. Part of growing as a disciple of Jesus Christ is grappling with what it means to live out God's love in our world. Moral issues need to be reflected upon and discussed, but moving too quickly into our familiar polarized positions short circuits needed conversations about discipleship and ethics.

We see this in the backlash to important work to build beloved community by overcoming historical inequities and acknowledging the way our history has contained unhealthy racialized thinking. Let me be clear. Not every question raised about a specific program to address racism and racialized thinking, to promote anti-bias and anti-racism work – not every question is a deflection or a backlash. It is ok to ask critical questions. **And, and** we need also to be honest that there are times when criticism becomes little more than resistance to any work being done to overcome historical inequities and historically-carried racialized thinking. There are parts of our history that are uncomfortable, yet need to be acknowledged, for their impact lingers. In my lifetime, The Methodist Church segregated African-American congregations into a separate Central Jurisdiction. In my lifetime, and while I am getting older I

am not all that old. Just this month, Glenn Schembechler, son of famous Michigan football coach Bo Schembechler, resigned his position with Michigan football due to his social media activity. Schembechler approved statements on Twitter suggesting slavery and Jim Crow laws had positive impact. Coming to terms with all that gets in the way of Beloved Community is difficult work. It is hard travelin' that we readily accept, the grace of discomfort. We do not need to add the difficulties and acrimony of our polarizing society.

On one final, and more personal note, if all this is not enough evidence of hard travelin', Google has now named their AI Chatbot "Bard." If I am not here next year...

Hard travelin'

Two men walking. Two men doing some hard travelin'. It had been a difficult few days. A beloved teacher and friend, one who taught them so well, one who healed so beautifully, one in whom they had placed so much hope, one whose very presence felt like the presence of God, dead. Brutally crucified. "We had hoped...". Their hope was gone. To their grief is added bewilderment and confusion. Some of the women of their group of Jesus' followers were reporting astonishing news. The dead body was gone, and angels were proclaiming that he was alive. What to make of it. Hard travelin' on the dry road from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

Of course, this is not the entire story. A companion joins the two disciples along the way. He teaches. He breaks bread and blesses. When the bread is blessed and broken they know their companion. It is Jesus, and then he is gone. "Were not our hearts burning within us?"

Hard travelin'. The road is long, with many a winding turn. We need an honest acknowledgement of our hard travelin', our grief, our weariness, our pain, our wounds, our

scars, our struggles. I also want to acknowledge the hard travelin' some of us have been doing in our personal lives – relationships that may have deteriorated, health concerns in our lives or the lives of loved ones, dealing with the death of parents, spouses, children. This opening worship service is always an interesting combination – the opening of annual conference, and our acknowledgement of the deaths of conference members. You who are here with us specially for this service, you've been doing some hard travelin', and we are with you in this.

Friends, it is o.k. sometimes, it is o.k. not to be quite able to put your best foot forward. Some days the best we can offer is putting one foot in front of the other. Might we hold one another in a measure of grace and kindness in these difficult days, assuring one another of our belovedness. This is not an excuse for not offering our best as leaders and as churches, but an acknowledgement that some days our best may be less than we might like, given our wounds and our weariness. We can offer each other an extra measure of grace.

Hard travelin'

And.... And.... We are on this road with Jesus. In the midst of our hard travelin' Jesus arrives and walks with us. I think of the Charles Wesley hymn, "Come O Thou Traveler Unknown." While based on the story of Jacob wrestling with God and not the Emmaus story, the words fit beautifully.

*Come, O thou Traveler unknown
whom still I hold, but cannot see!
My company before is gone,
and I am left alone with thee;
with thee all night I mean to stay
and wrestle till the break of day.*

*'Tis Love! 'Tis Love! thou diedst for me,
I hear thy whisper in my heart.
The morning breaks, the shadows flee,*

*pure Universal Love thou art:
to me, to all, thy mercies move –
thy nature, and thy name is Love.*

Jesus walks with us in our hard travelin'. Jesus does not shy away when we are weary, lonely, confused, grieving, hurting, wounded, disappointed, discouraged. Jesus joins us on the road. We hear his whisper in our heart. The morning breaks, the shadows flee. His nature and his name are Love. Pure, Universal love.

We are on the road with Jesus. We hear his whisper in our hearts, and don't our hearts burn within us? Doesn't the presence of Jesus with us re-ignite our passion for mission and ministry, for evangelism, for reaching out to feed the hungry, to provide shelter, to educate children? Doesn't the presence of Jesus with us re-ignite our passion to seek justice, to pursue beloved community? Doesn't the presence of Jesus with us re-ignite our passion for life itself, for love itself, for beauty itself. And on those days when it is about all we can do to put one foot in front of the other, don't you know that the presence of Jesus helps us do that while whispering "it's ok"? Then, after awhile, our tentative steps might get a little quicker, might take on a little swagger, might pick up a little rhythm, and while our hearts are burning our feet may just start dancing.

We are on this road with Jesus and his nature and his name are love, and... and... that love is new every morning. In a book that is filled with about as much hard travelin' as any in our Bible, we read these beautiful words: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."
(Lamentations 3:22-23). New every morning. New every morning. I love the morning prayer in

our United Methodist worship resources which begins: “New every morning is your love great God of light, and all day long you are working for good in the world.” New every morning.

I cannot help but recall how often the presence of Jesus as the Christ evokes the language of newness. Paul writes that “if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new” (II Corinthians 5:17). Centuries later, another Paul, the theologian Tillich, would preach: “Christianity is the message of the New Creation, the New Being, the New Reality, which has appeared with the appearance of Jesus” (The New Being, 15). I think of John Cobb’s Christology of creative transformation. New. New every morning is God’s love in Jesus Christ. God in Christ is making all things new, all day long working for good in the world.

Yes, we’ve been doing some hard travelin’ Lord. And Jesus already knows. Jesus has been walking with us, and new every morning is that love. Come O thou Traveler unknown – and he does. He is already there. He is already here. We hear his whisper in our hearts. Our hearts burn within us. The morning breaks, the shadows flee, and we know that his nature and his name are love. New every morning.

So despite the tension and struggles within The United Methodist Church, despite the fact that disaffiliation disappoints and drains, we trust that God is not yet done with The United Methodist Church, we trust that God is not done with the Michigan Conference, because new every morning is God’s love.

And even when we disappoint ourselves, even acknowledging our brokenness, and our complicity in our own brokenness, we trust that God is not yet done with us. We trust that nothing can finally separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ. We trust that Christ is still

working New Being and New Creation in us, and Creative Transformation through us. God still calls us to be the church. We get to be part of what God is doing, because new every morning is God's love.

And in our polarized world, where people are almost instantaneously pitted against one another because of geography or education or skin tone or accents or for countless other reasons, we trust that God is still about the work of building bridges, taking down walls, and building beloved community. This, too, is part of the good God is working in the world. This, too, is part of God's creative transformation. The work goes on in spite of the difficulties and challenges, because new every morning is God's love.

And in our tense and violent world where anger seems our default emotion, where it escalates quickly, where angry words too quickly become violent actions, where hurt turns too easily into violent revenge on the world, we trust that God is a God of shalom, calling us in Jesus to be peacemakers, to do justice and love mercy. The work goes on, and we get to join that work, because new every morning is God's love.

Come O thou Traveler unknown, whose nature and whose name is love. We've been doing some hard travelin' friends, some hard travelin' and Jesus continues to walk with us. Be assured, that Jesus walks with us and trust, in the depths of your hearts and minds and souls, trust that new every morning is God's love. Amen.