

Anything Good?

Michigan Annual Conference
RCO Sermon

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Bishop David Alan Bard

Texts: Isaiah 41:6-10; I John 3:1-3; John 1:43-52

Good evening, friends in Christ in the Michigan Conference. Thank you again to the Rev. Lillian Daniel for being with us this evening. It is our joy to have you with us.

I again greet you in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the peace and power of the Holy Spirit.

I enjoy reading and among the things I read just for fun are crime fiction or mystery stories or detective fiction. A couple of years ago I read a book about crime fiction books called Scandinavian Noir. It was an enjoyable read and introduced me to a new group of writers, including the Swedish author, Henning Mankell who has a series of detective fiction novels with the protagonist, Kurt Wallander. I brought one with me to General Conference, and in that book a woman named Louise Akerblom has gone missing. Wallander and another detective named Björk are discussing the case. Wallander: “I think the Akerbloms were the happiest family in the whole of Sweden.” Björk: “Might she have gone over the top, from a religious point of view? We’re always reading about those crazy sects.” Wallander: “You can hardly call the Methodists a crazy sect.” [Mind you I am reading this in the evening during General Conference]. “You can hardly call the Methodists a crazy sect. It’s one of our oldest free churches. I have to admit, I’m not 100 percent clear just what they stand for.” Björk: “We’ll have to look into that.” (The White Lioness, 52).

“I’m not 100% clear just what they stand for.” Anything good? I must admit I was a little concerned about this title, “Anything Good?” Here we are at this beautiful and meaningful service of recognition, commissioning and ordination and there is this sermon – “anything good?” It is certainly not a commentary on anyone we are recognizing, commissioning or ordaining this evening. I trust you all knew that. I also hope it will not be your final assessment of the sermon itself – “anything good?”

Having heard the reading from John 1, you know from where the phrase comes. The story is about Jesus calling the disciples. Jesus goes to Galilee and finding Philip invites him, “follow me.” Philip finds Nathanael. “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” The story is short on details. We are not certain what in his encounter with Jesus inspired Philip’s exuberant speech to Nathanael, but regardless of Philip’s eloquence, Nathanael is skeptical. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Anything good? Many seem to be asking that question of the church, and many are answering – “maybe not.” Yesterday I noted the study released earlier this year by the Public Religion Research Institute which informs us that “unaffiliated” is the only major religious category experiencing growth. 26% of Americans identify as religiously unaffiliated, and nearly one in five left a religious tradition to become religiously unaffiliated. The PRRI study came just months after a Pew Research Center report on religious activity and affiliation in the United States which noted: “if recent trends in religious switching continue, Christians could make up less than half of the U.S. population within a few decades.” Switching refers to a shift in religious identity, and

demographically it is concentrated among young adults. Switching involving Christianity has accelerated since the 1990s, that is, in the past thirty years the rate of people whose religion in childhood was Christian and who in adulthood identify as something else, primarily as “nothing in particular” or “nones,” that rate of change has gone up.

Now it is important to acknowledge that not all those who are religiously unaffiliated are the same. I appreciate how our guest, Lillian Daniel, put it in her wonderfully titled book Tired of Apologizing For a Church I Don't Belong To: “The Nones are not homogeneous. Just like religious people, the Nones are also a mixed bag of nuts. And of the four categories – the No Longer, the No Way, the Never Have, and the Not Yet – it’s the first two, the No Longer and the No Way, who have had most of our attention in the mainline church” (60). Not all the Nones are answering a strong “no” when asked of the church – anything good? There are a growing number of people in our society for whom the biblical stories so familiar to us are unknown. Not all are saying a strong “no” when asked “anything good?” about the church.

But some are, and some are just plain skeptical, and not without good reason. We have often failed to listen well to the deep questions people are asking. We have often offered good news in such a way that it is difficult to find the good in it. We have not lived up to our own professed ideals, and then we’ve compounded the problem by not being willing to acknowledge that. We have not always been willing to join with others in seeking justice, promoting the common good, and fostering a culture of deep dialogue. We’ve engaged in intense debates about relatively small matters. Why is it the A-L always is asked to bring hot dishes to the potluck?

Beyond that, though, our entire culture seems bent on fostering a mistrust of institutions. In his book Countercultural, Gil Rendle writes: “our mistrust... goes beyond that which was earned by misdeed. Even at their best, institutions are diminished because they are now experienced as the enemy of individual fulfillment” (61)

We live in a time, then, when the question to the church of “anything good” is alive and well and active, and a time when there is some significant momentum moving people to say “no,” or to wonder whether it is worth finding out. And we, you who are being recognized, commissioned and ordained, together with all the rest of us, we need to figure out a significant response. Like Philip, we need to be able to respond, “come and see,” and then have something real and relevant to show.

And, friends, we have something real and relevant to show and something real and relevant to share. We trust that God is still at work in our lives and in our communities of faith. We trust that we are still able to share good news and be conduits of grace. We trust that God is not finished with us yet. To use Paul’s wonderful phrase in I Corinthians 4, we are “servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries” (4:1). And our response to the question of “anything good” will hold that phrase together with another from II Corinthians 4: “but we have this treasure in clay jars” (4:7). Yes ,there are some cracks in our plaster, some dustiness in our pews, some mustiness in our song books, some creaking in our bones, and we can also say, in the lovely lyric of Leonard Cohen, “there is a crack, a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in” (Anthem). It’s how the light gets in and how it gets out to be shared, and we still have light to share, and grace to give, and love to spread, and good news to proclaim and justice to engage in, and beloved community to build.

Anything good? Yes. And let me enumerate a bit more on some of the good gifts we have to share.

We have the gift of community to share. Last year Surgeon General Vivek Murthy released a report entitled “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.” Murthy cites research indicating that “social isolation and loneliness are significant predictors of premature death and poor health. “Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day” the report says. Among the remedies to the epidemic of loneliness offered in the report are strengthening social infrastructure and building a culture of connection, including “cultivating values of kindness, respect, service, and commitment to one another.” That’s us, at least when we are at our better, a place of connection that cultivates values of kindness, respect, service and commitment to one another.

I was struck by a recent essay in *The Atlantic* (April 3, 2024). The author, Derek Thompson, is a professed agnostic for whom “organized religion seemed, to me, beset by scandal and entangled in noxious politics.” Yet his essay charts a change in his thinking. “Maybe religion, for all its faults, works a bit like a retaining wall to hold back the destabilizing pressure of American hyper-individualism, which threatens to swell and spill over in its absence.” He bemoans that “many people having lost the scaffolding of organized religion, seem to have found no alternative method to build a sense of community.” But we haven’t gone away, and we still have the gift of community when we are at our better. Gil Rendle encourages us: “The need is greater than ever for the church to be a neighbor, a good neighbor – and speak clearly about what it sees, what it knows,

and what it believes. The church must speak publicly in its own neighborhoods with a conviction that what it says is important” (xiii). “The story that the congregation holds is its true treasure, primarily because it describes a world of love and interdependence” (67).

As already suggested, our communities of faith offer a larger purpose to our lives. This week I heard the author Sebastian Junger discuss his new book, In My Time of Dying, about his near death encounter. In two interviews (CBS, MSNBC), Junger discussed his new religious perspective, though he remains a “stone-cold atheist.” He says that for him, the most important thing is connection with others. “I don’t go to church but the worship that I conduct is of the present moment with the people that I love. It’s its own sort of church that you can attend on your own and it’s been very effective for me.”

Let me not make the typical church mistake of being hyper-critical of Sebastian Junger. I am glad he is alive and pleased that he has found a perspective that has helped him feel like a “whole human being.” I do wonder, for any of us, if church is only a solo exercise that we do by ourselves, where might we bump up against our own limitations and be encouraged to transcend them? In her book, Lillian writes, “We’re capable of being selfish and mean and losing our tempers. What mediates that if all we do is celebrate our every instinct? Religious traditions seek to temper that and suggest that folks have been thinking about these things for thousands of years.” (166)

I recently watched a documentary on the Kerner Commission. The Commission was formed by President Lyndon Johnson following riots in major cities across the United States in 1965-1967. The report remains hauntingly relevant, and if you are wanting to have some conversation about race in your congregation, this documentary is a great resource.

Anyway, one of the things that struck me about the work of the commission is that as the commissioners traveled to some of the cities and spoke with people there, their minds expanded. They could see somethings with fresh eyes. Community not only meets our needs for connection, but Christian community connects us with larger perspectives and purpose, the larger purpose of God’s transformative work – the work of healing, justice, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, beloved community, beauty and love.

At our better we offer a gift of thoughtfulness, of deep thinking. Sadly, this is an area where the church has not often enough been at its better, but we can rise to the occasion. The Czech priest and theologian Tomáš Halík, in his book Patience with God: “Faith without critical questions would turn into a tedious and lifeless ideology and infantile bigotry, or fundamentalism and dangerous fanaticism. But rationality without spiritual and ethical impulses, stemming from the world of faith, would likewise be one-sided and dangerous, and could develop into cynical pragmatism or rancorous skepticism.” (86). Rabbi Edwin Friedman in writing about leadership, “in the search for the solution to any problem, questions are always more important than answers” (A Failure of Nerve, 43). Gil Rendle offers this: “The simple, powerful, life-giving narrative of faith can never thrive if the simple is allowed to become simplistic.... The simple must be mined deeply for the full depth of truth that it holds.” (91-92). He goes on: “at the lived level, a life of intentional faith is a complex project” (93)

In a time when minds are fed with quick video sound bites, we can help people think more deeply. We proclaim a God who created a wonderfully complex and beautiful world, and we ourselves are wonderfully complicated creatures. Our faith should be thoughtful

enough to acknowledge what the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called “the multifariousness of the world” (Process and Reality, original, 513) and the poet Anthony Hecht called “the inexhaustible plenitude of the world.” How can we not be thoughtful and offer that gift to others? We can and should do so with convicted humility.

And as communities of faith we offer connection to God. We do not have a corner of God, but we offer a place where God in grace will meet others in ways that redeem, that save, that heal, that free. The heart of who we are and what we do is the good news of God’s wide and wild love for the world in Jesus Christ. It is the good news that God, through Jesus, still invites people into new life, transformed living. It is why we gather together in community. The transformative work of God’s love is the larger purpose to which we connect people. And “the simple, powerful, life-giving narrative of faith can never thrive if the simple is allowed to become simplistic.... The simple must be mined deeply for the full depth of truth that it holds. At the lived level, a life of intentional faith is a complex project” (Rendle, 91-2, 93)

You will help us respond to the question, “anything good?” as we share these gifts of community, larger purpose, thoughtfulness. I’ve used the phrase “at our better” to remind us that we offer these gifts in clay jars. We will not always be at our best but we can always strive to be at our better. And we will do this best as we nurture our relationship with Jesus Christ in ways that deepen four qualities in our hearts, minds, souls and lives.

Courage. In an annual conference with the theme of “fearless” I had to mention courage, and perhaps have already said enough about it, about fearlessness, about not being our fear because God is with us. Allow me only to add the words of a very wise guide,

Howard Thurman. “I seek the courage to see the true thing. It is a fearful admission that courage is required to see the true thing. So much of my vision is blurred by my fears, my anxieties, my narrow self-interest that I find difficulty sometimes in giving full range to a searching scrutiny.... I seek courage to do the true thing.... It may be that it takes a heightened form of courage to do the true thing.” (Meditations of the Heart, 166) In a world where so much religious speech has become tainted or unfamiliar, it will take courage to offer our gifts, and it will take courage to listen with open hearts and minds to others. The journey of faith is a journey of courage. The journey of leadership is a journey of courage. The journey of licensed and ordained ministry is a journey of courage. “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God” (Isaiah 41:10).

Honesty. Be genuine with people. People do expect of their clergy leaders decency and competence, but not perfection. We can be honest about ourselves. And let’s be honest with one another about the challenges of being church these days. There are those who have never heard the story for whom we need to find new and compelling ways to tell it. There are those who have heard the story, but in ways that created pain and did harm. Here is some honesty for us. Tomáš Halík: “If we want to talk about divine matters these days, we have to heal certain words and resurrect them, because they have become exhausted under the weight of the many different meanings that people have imposed on them over the centuries.” (11)

Humility. Allow me to again quote I Peter, “have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind” (I Peter 3:8). We need the courage of our convictions, and we need to know that we can get it wrong. We have gifts to give, and we

have sometimes wrapped them in ugly paper. We have wanted to answer questions no one is asking and have failed to listen intently to the questions they want to ask. Tomáš Halík encourages us to model St. Adalbert of Prague as our way in the world. Legend has it that as he was ascending the throne to become the bishop of Prague, Adalbert removed his shoes before entering the cathedral as a sign of humility (67). Halík invites us to approach a questioning world barefoot, with openness and humility.

Love. Here I will simply offer Eugene Peterson's rendering of part of Colossians 3. "So, chosen for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense.... And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic all-purpose garment. Never be without it."

When with courage, honesty, humility and love we offer the gifts we have to give in the grace of Jesus Christ, gifts of community, larger purpose, thoughtfulness and connection to God, when we do that, well, what we shall be will emerge. The beauty God intends for our lives and our churches will begin to sprout, to blossom, to bloom. The task belongs to all of us, and you who are being recognized, commissioned and ordained are taking on new leadership roles in this adventure. So maybe the Swiftiest of questions is appropriate here. Are you ready for it?

And when we are responding to the question about what we stand for as this "crazy sect" and whether it can be "anything good?" when you respond with "come and see" and we have genuine grace to share and love to give with courage, honesty, humility and love, we will say not only, "come and see" but also "this is only a beginning and you ain't

seen nothing yet.” The task belongs to all of us, and you who are being recognized, commissioned and ordained are taking on new leadership roles in this adventure. Are you ready for it? Amen.