

2015 LIFEWATCH SERMON: "LIFE IS LUMINOUS"

by Dr. Edgardo Colon-Emeric

Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I begin with a word of gratitude to my colleague in ministry, Paul Stallsworth, for inviting me to preach this morning. I have always admired Paul's faithfulness in calling Methodists to stand firm on our witness to life. Of course, this is bigger than Paul and bigger than Lifewatch. Christians have been witnessing to life for a long time.

OUR HEMISPHERE'S FIRST WITNESS TO LIFE

The first witness to life in this hemisphere did not occur in Washington, DC. It happened in Advent 1511, when Antonio de Montesinos (d. 1545) took to the pulpit of the first church in the Americas in Santo Domingo. Padre Antonio was known as a powerful preacher and his fellow Dominicans had spread word around town that he was preaching so as to have as large a crowd as possible in church that day. They were especially targeting the elite of the city. The text for the day was from The Gospel According to John. In the text he read, the Jewish authorities sent some priests and Levites to inquire into the identity of John the Baptist. His reply to their question was: *Ego vox clamantis in deserto* (I am the voice crying in the wilderness). Padre Antonio began by making some general remarks about the significance of Advent before turning to the theme for his sermon: the humanity of the indigenous.

Padre Antonio preached: "I have come here to tell you that I am the voice of Christ in the wilderness, and that therefore, it would behoove you to pay attention, not casually, but with your whole heart and being. You are about to hear the strangest news that you ever thought to hear. This voice declares that you are all in mortal sin. You are living and dying in sin on account of the cruelty with which you use these innocent peoples...Are these not human? Do they not have rational souls? Are you not required to love them as you love yourself? Do you not understand? Do you not feel? How is it that you are so soundly asleep?" (*Historia de las Indias*, editor Andre Saint-Lu [Caracas: Biblioteca, 1986], 3.4:13-14)

The sermon did not go over well. Some were angry, some puzzled, some troubled. None were won over. The message was too strange. According to one of the hearers, the novelty of the message consisted in affirming that killing

Indians was a greater sin than squashing bugs.

I am not the voice crying in the wilderness. I am not John the Baptist. I like Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274), but I am not Antonio the Dominican. I am Edgardo the Methodist, which means that I am uncomfortable with fire-and-brimstone sermons. I am programmed to preach the Gospel sweetly and gently. Nevertheless, Methodist niceness cannot prevent me from noting that the recognition of the full dignity of all human beings remains elusive. As in Santo Domingo, the failure to perceive the gift of life leads in quick succession to the destruction of its bearer and the rejection of its source.

LIGHT AND LIFE IN THE LESSONS

In the ancient world, people who hated images, and destroyed the stone or wood that bore them, were known as iconoclasts. In the United States, iconoclasts still practice their trade today, only they have switched to defacing images not made with human hands, namely the image of God in the human being. The splendor of the image of God in the unborn, the unchurched, and the undocumented is too easily dismissed as a mirage. Today's Scriptures present an alternative view. Life, all life, is luminous.

The Bible begins with a flash of light. In the poem that opens the first chapter of the Bible, we hear that God creates the heavens and the earth. The act of creation, which in the myths of the region was the result of an epic struggle, occurs here by divine decree: "Let there be." And at the end of each day, God surveys what has come to be and declares that "it was good." The act of creation is an act of affirmation. It is good that there is light. It is good that there are water and fish. It is good that there are air and birds. It is good that there are men and women made in the image of God, and it is good that they bear children and people the earth. And the sum of all these declarations is a supreme act of affirmation, "it is very good." It was good in Genesis. It is still good in John.

John picks up the Bible's opening poem and adapts it. Like the overture to a Broadway musical, the Prologue of John introduces the major themes of this gospel: the divinity of the Word, the ministry of John the Baptist, the incarnation, the diversity of responses to the ministry of Jesus. The evangelist introduces us to the key terms of this gospel, words like "truth," "glory," "grace," "witness." Why does John begin in this way? Other evangelists begin their gospels differently. Matthew begins with begats; Mark with the Baptist; Luke with an historical abstract. John begins

with a hymn because he wants to form in his readers a particular kind of sensitivity. The hymn is not placed at the beginning to tell an old story but to prepare the way for an encounter with the story's author. Paradoxically, music can help us see.

In the beginning of beginnings was the Word. The Word was God. It was also life. It was also light. In this Word there is no darkness at all, writes John the Elder. The light that was created on the first day of the universe is a reflection of the eternal light of the Word. All creatures are bathed in the light of this Word. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) sings of this perfecting Word as "the light of primordial daybreak over the spheres...whose circling never began and never slides to an end." The world is full of light and life, because the Word is the light of the cosmos. This luminous Word is for all. Dostoevsky's Father Zosima says it well: "All creation and all creatures, every leaf is striving to the Word, singing glory to God, weeping to Christ, unconsciously accomplishing this by the mystery of their sinless life."

Of course, there is sin in the world. The hour of darkness fell on the Garden of Eden and its effect are still evident among us and in us. Sour notes have sown dissonant chords into the symphony of creation. The cosmos and all creatures suffer from humanity's aversion to the light. Even so, at its core, John believes it is still good. Darkness does not overcome the light. Life is still luminous.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell of the Transfiguration of Jesus. The light that radiated from Jesus manifested his divine nature to his inner circle of disciples. Curiously, the Gospel of John makes no mention of this epiphany. John calls Jesus "the light of all people," "the true light which enlightens everyone," "the light of life," "the light of the world." And yet John has no account of the Transfiguration. There is possibly a veiled allusion to it (pun intended) in verse 14 of the Prologue, where John tells us that "we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son." But that is all. Why the omission? Perhaps John did not know the story. Or perhaps John does not want us to get stuck on the Mount of Transfiguration. The synoptic gospels record Peter telling Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here." For John, this can be said of every stage of the life of Jesus. He sanctifies both time and space. Every age becomes salvation history. Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306-373) sang of how, on the nativity, the Christ child made humanity young again. His presence illumines and transfigures all things. His light shines in mountains and valleys, high places and low. Every place touched by his radiance becomes holy land. In becoming flesh, the Word dwelled among us, literally pitched his tent among us, and we can behold his glory everywhere this portable tent of meeting goes. It is good for us to be here.

Please remember to pray and fast for the ministry of Lifewatch on the first Tuesday of every month.

The churches to which John is writing were vulnerable to the heresy of Docetism. This heresy rejected the full incarnation of the Word. To Docetists, Jesus only seems human. It is for this reason that the author of First John underscores the tangibility of the Word of Life. The Word of Life is one that they have seen, heard, and touched. The problem with docetic understandings of Jesus Christ is that they are false and, for this reason, corrosive of the moral life. If the light of life does not reach all the way down into the materiality of creation, then there are parts of the cosmos not illumined by the Word. There are gray zones of life and society untouched by the light. The freedom that such neglect opens is not real freedom but darkness. It is good for us to be here, only because in him was life and his life is the light of humanity.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US

The moral vision of the Gospel of John is often decried as too pietistic. There are no parables turning our understanding of ethics on its head. No Prodigal Son, no Good Samaritan, no lost sheep. No Sermon on the Mount raising the bar on the obedience that God expects of his children. Not even a Sermon on the Plain. The Gospel of John gives us symbolic actions followed by sermonic explanations. One might be excused for thinking that John's vision of engagement with the world is sectarian withdrawal. But this is not so. The hymnic overture to this gospel invites us to become a people whose social

principles are more firmly grounded on our doctrinal standards, our Social Creed on the Nicene Creed. Let me offer three ways in which the moral vision of John helps us witness to the luminosity of life.

First, John the evangelist invites us to read creation more deeply. The Gospel of John is a two-level drama with a surface meaning that is open to all eyewitnesses and a deeper interpretation that is only disclosed to believers. John's view of creation and history is sacramental. The world is a universe where water and wine serve as witnesses to the light. The cosmos in the gospel is not an obstacle to the glory of God but its sign. The Word becomes flesh and the flesh becomes bread. We are called to witness to the light, but one can only witness to what he or she has perceived. The first step in witnessing to the light requires learning to see with new eyes. The Church calls this special way of seeing contemplation. Contemplation is the loving gaze that sees things in their true light because it sees them in the light of God.

While there are many obstacles to contemplation, sin is the chief among them. But another one is the current state of our political discourse. The word that is bandied about is that we are a "polarized church" and "polarized society." By that phrase, people usually mean that there is a metaphorical magnetic field that aligns us with some and pushes us away from others. But the polarization has other effects. It also filters the light. Some colors of the spectrum are blocked. The binaries of conservative and liberal, Republican and

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Democrat, have become something like a second nature, what theologians call an habitus, a set of glasses through which we perceive the world around us. "Everything is received according to the mode of the receiver," says Thomas Aquinas. Instead of seeing things in their true light, we see them in light of our biases: red and blue.

Though he does not use the word contemplation, John Wesley associates true vision with purity of heart. The pure in heart see all things full of God. Purity of heart is what allowed Gregory Lopez (1542-1596), that exemplar of Christian perfection so beloved of Wesley, to contemplate the Word in the world. His testimony was simple, "I find God alike in little things and in great." Contemplation is an act that flows from the kind of life that renounces earthly attachments in order to be free to love. There is a long tradition of casting John the Baptist as a contemplative. He sees the light of Christ from the beginning. Luke dates the first witness to the meeting of their pregnant mothers. In the words of Karl Barth (1886-1968), "the light of Jesus shines in the womb of Mary." John the Baptist, by a special gift of the Holy Spirit, sees that shining life and testifies as any six-month-old baby could -- kicking and elbowing. We need pure hearts, hearts freed from ideological filters so that we can contemplate life, all life, as luminous.

Second, John the evangelist invites us to make our first witness to life an act of affirmation. Of course, John knows that the light of Christ exposes the evils of the world and that for this reason many reject the light. But, if I may quote Aquinas again, "the first thing that someone wants for a friend is that she exist and live." This affirmation is not limited to one's friends. All things are made through Christ and in the light of Christ all being is luminous. Yes, the real is true. Yes, the world is sound. Yes, life is beautiful. Yes, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, it is all good. Our first response to another creature should be delight. It is good that you exist! This does not mean that I approve of all that you do. But I am glad that you are alive! As the eyes of our heart are strengthened by the means of grace that is contemplation, the capacity to affirm life in its manifold manifestations is stretched. Saint Francis (1181/2-1226) kisses the leper and embraces brother wolf. He can even sing of sister death. Can all things be affirmed in this way? Is it good that they exist? Are all lives luminous? Many say No.

In preparation for today, I reread our statement on abortion in The Book of Discipline (Paragraph 161J). There are many things in this statement to which I said "Amen." "Our belief in the sanctity of unborn human life." Our "respect for the sacredness of the life and well being of the mother." Our rejection of abortion "as an acceptable means of birth control" and "gender selection." Our support for "the option of adoption." I could go on. I was particularly heartened to read of our commitment to offer "ministries to reduce unintended pregnancies" and "to provide nurturing

ministries to those who terminate a pregnancy, to those in the midst of a crisis pregnancy, and to those who give birth." These ministries belong to the mission of the church and are not to be exclusively delegated to non-profits and governmental agencies.

All things considered, it is not a bad statement. The problem is that, in conceding that there are "tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion," the statement undermines our doctrine of creation and muddies our witness to life. That there are tragic conflicts, no one can or should deny. But how far back does this tragic conflict go? To the beginning? How deep down does this tragic conflict go? All the way down? The Book of Discipline's statement suggests that life is trapped in a web of competition and struggle.

The Gospel of John sings a different song. The Prologue states that those who welcome the Word are "born not of blood, or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God." The phrase is difficult to interpret. Some see it as an allusion to the Virgin Birth. Others read it as an unnecessary editorial addition to the hymn. But there is another way of interpreting this statement -- as a rejection of a tragic world view. John lives in a world where children are conceived through violence. He knows of the power of sexual desires. He understands patriarchal conventions. But John imagines a world where the power of the trio of blood, flesh, and man to assign worth is relativized by the light of Christ.

In Spanish, when a woman gives birth to a child, she is said to "dar a luz." She "gives to light." She delivers a child from the darkness of the womb to the light of the world. The act of creation is the most powerful statement of the affirmation of life. Humans cannot imitate God in this way. God alone creates. God alone can say: "Let there be." But humans can join Mary in affirming life through hospitality: "Let it be." Ultimately, the affirmation of the light of life is the subject of hope. The darkness will not overcome the light. God can redeem any situation. Life is luminous.

Third, and very briefly, John the evangelist invites us to think creatively of how we witness to life. John witnesses by baptizing. Indeed, in the Gospel of John, baptizing is associated with illumination and the healing of blindness. The invitation is to "come and see." Montesinos witnessed by preaching a hard message of repentance. Today many are witnessing by marching. John the evangelist invites us to consider yet another way, singing a new song.

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz (1651-1695) was a poet, playwright, and theologian who lived in seventeenth century Mexico. Her fame and renown spread over the Southern Hemisphere. She is known by many names, "the tenth muse," "the phoenix of America," "the first Mexican theologian," "the first feminist theologian." But before she was any of these things, she was registered for baptism as a "daughter of the Church," which was another way of saying that she was a child born out of wedlock. She was

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abandoned by her father and raised by a single mother. The Church adopted her, and so she grew to write poetry for the the Church. In one of her many sonnets on the incarnation, she writes: "Divine Love this day became incarnate, a gift so precious as to give all other gifts their worth."

Perhaps our most significant Christian witness does not happen in legislation but in liturgy. Perhaps what is needed are not more sermons denouncing the culture of death but more poems celebrating that life is luminous. Of course, there are many gifts, and Christians may be called to witness in different ways. But I do know this. "Only the lover sings."

Dr. Colon-Emeric is an Assistant Professor of Christian Theology, and the founding director of the Hispanic House of Studies, at The Divinity School of Duke University. After the scriptural lessons (Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 27:1-14, John 1:1-18, and I John 1:1-4) were read, he preached "Life Is Luminous" during the 2015 Lifewatch Service of Worship. The service took place on January 22, 2015, at Simpson Memorial Chapel in The United Methodist Building in Washington, DC.♥

JESUS, LAW, AND LOVE

by Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker

Today it is not unusual for North American Christianity to assume that Jesus was all about love rather than law, and to assume that love is a matter of feelings. Since Christian doctrine is based on the story of Jesus' life as well as on the apostles' proclamation of his death and resurrection, such notions about Jesus' teaching can contribute to an antinomian [lawless] attitude toward Christian life -- that is, a view that the law of God has little to do with Christian living.

One of the most important books written about the "historical Jesus" (the portrait of Jesus which is based on scientific historical research) is John P. Meier's [A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus](#), Volume Four, Love and Law (Yale University Press, 2009). This book fills a gap that exists in many commentaries, namely, a direct discussion of Jesus' teaching on the law in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible.

Meier demonstrates that Jesus was engaged in *halaka*, the practice of making legal rulings on how to interpret the law in the Torah regarding how people should behave. Meier's mantra is, "The historical Jesus is the halakic Jesus." Jesus was not a teacher of general moral principles, but he was a Jew who claimed authority as the prophet of the kingdom of God to make rulings about how to interpret the law in the Torah. In his rulings on how to observe the Sabbath, he contested the strict rulings of the Essenes and some of those of the Pharisees; and he confirmed the commonsense approach of the peasants, who believed that it was necessary to take actions to care for their animals on the Sabbath and to rescue human beings who had accidents on the Sabbath which endangered their lives, such as falling into a cistern.

There are two instances in which Jesus issued pronouncements which breached the law. Jesus forbade divorce, which the law permitted; and he forbade the use of oaths, which the law required in certain judicial cases. His prohibition of divorce was grounded in God's will in creation that "God made them male and female," and "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Genesis 1:27 and 2:24; Mark 10:2-9). His prohibition of oaths was apparently for the sake of protecting the sacred name of God from being used by people to attest to the truthfulness of their testimony (Matthew 5:33-37). Even though Jesus claimed authority as the prophet of the kingdom of God to issue pronouncements which went beyond the law, this does not mean that he was opposed to the law but only that he was engaged in the Jewish debate about how the law given to ancient Israel should be interpreted and applied.

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Other Jews in Palestine were giving their own interpretations, and some of them actually rewrote provisions of the law without implying that their rewriting was a lack of reverence for the law as the will of God.

Meier thinks that the closest Jesus ever came to articulating a general principle for interpreting the law was in his teaching (Mark 12:28-34) that the first commandment is to love God (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) and the second commandment is to love one's neighbor (Leviticus 19:18b). Meier thinks the idea that on these two commandments "hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:40) is Matthew's interpretation. Jesus himself only emphasized that there is a first and a second commandment in the law. Jesus is the first person to ever link these two commandments in the law together. Jesus did not merely allude to these two commandments (the great Shema in Deuteronomy and another commandment buried in a series of laws in Leviticus), but he literally quoted them and named them first and second. In doing so, Jesus indicated that he was a student of the Hebrew Scriptures and that he was proficient in a technique of exegesis whereby a rabbi was allowed to bring together two different texts for mutual interpretation if both contained the same key word or phrase. The meaning of the key word "love" in these two commandments of the law is not that of "strong

emotions," but of "willing and then doing" so that love of God is primarily obedience to the one, true God, and love of neighbor is the commitment to will and do good toward a fellow Israelite even if one feels some personal enmity toward him. In this teaching, Jesus is not making the rest of the law irrelevant, for if there is a "first" commandment and a "second" commandment, then there is also a "third" commandment and so on.

Meier observes that "love" as a noun or a verb "occurs relatively rarely on the lips of Jesus," and when it does occur Jesus is often citing a text from the Scriptures or commenting on it. The notable exception is Jesus' command, "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44b; Luke 6:27b), which is not an interpretation of the Scriptures but a unique pronouncement of the prophet of the kingdom of God.

Meier does not think that Jesus made love "the hermeneutical key for interpreting the whole Law or the supreme principle from which all other commandments can be deduced or by which they can be judged." Yet what Jesus said about love is "startling and innovative enough." In the end, Jesus' reflection on the Torah as a whole "led to love -- specifically to love of God and love of neighbor as supreme. All you need is love? Hardly. For Jesus, you need the Torah as a whole. Nothing could be more foreign to this Palestinian Jew than a facile antithesis between Law and love. But love, as commanded by the Law, comes first and second."

In Meier's judgment, a portrait of a Jesus "who is not involved in the lively halakic debates of his fellow Jews in first century Palestine, who does not reason about the Law in typically Jewish fashion, and who does not display his charismatic authority as the eschatological prophet by issuing some startling legal pronouncements, is not the historical Jesus. He is instead a modern and largely American construct, favored by some Christians because he is appealing to the marketplace of popular religion in the United States today -- a religion that is highly emotional, mostly self-centered, predictably uninterested in stringent commandments, and woefully ignorant of history."

This "modern and largely American construct" of Jesus is not uncommon in our discourse in The United Methodist Church today, including our conversation about God's will concerning human sexuality. Too often Jesus is portrayed as an idealist or a teacher of a kind of love which is divorced from the law and whose name is evoked to support an antinomian agenda. It is ironic that this occurs in a church which derives from John Wesley. If there is one thing certain about Wesley's theology, it is that he integrated law and gospel. His three sermons on the moral law of God in his Standard Sermons clearly demonstrate Wesley's conviction that the gospel did not annul the law, but it "established" the law "through faith" for those who have been justified by God's grace through Jesus Christ and who are going on towards "perfection in love" by the energy of the Holy Spirit.

Bp. Whitaker, who served the Florida Area of The United Methodist Church, now resides, and ruminates, on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.♥

THE DIALOGUE CONTINUES

The North Carolina Conference's Unity Dialogue on the Church and homosexuality convened again on November 11, 2014 in The United Methodist Building in Garner, NC. Responses to Finding Our Way: Love and Law in The United Methodist Church (Abingdon Press, 2014) provided the starting point for the afternoon conversation. Below are your editor's remarks. Perhaps of particular interest is the claim that The United Methodist Church's Council of Bishops should function as our denomination's Pope. (PTS)

In Christ, greetings.

I have four (4) responses to Finding Our Way.

1. The Temptations We Face in This Dialogue

Pope Francis' recent Synod speech describes them.

"A temptation to hostile inflexibility, that is, wanting to close oneself within the written word... [I]t is the temptation of the zealous, of the scrupulous,...of the so-called... 'traditionalists'....

"The temptation to a destructive tendency to goodness, that in the name of a deceptive mercy...treats the symptoms and not the causes and roots. It is the temptation of the 'dogooders,' of the fearful, and also of the so-called 'progressives' and 'liberals'....

"The temptation to come down off the Cross, to please the people, and not stay there in order to fulfill the will of the Father: to bow down to a worldly spirit instead of purifying it and bending it to the Spirit of God.

"The temptation to neglect...[the deposit of the faith], thinking of [our]selves not as guardians but as owners or masters [of the deposit]; or...the temptation to neglect reality, making use of...a language of smoothing to say so many things and to say nothing!...."

We resist these temptations!

2. My Affirmation of Finding Our Way

This book contains fine essays by eight United Methodist bishops, active and retired. The Book of Discipline states: "[B]ishops are authorized to guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the Church." (Par. 403.1.) That requires bishops to have "a commitment to the teaching office" (Par. 403.1.b). In this book, bishops actually teach the church!

3. My Critique of Finding Our Way

I believe that this book reveals today's problem in our church. That problem is: United Methodists are simply believing and doing whatever is right in our own eyes. Though they have written articulate chapters, the bishops are just expressing their own opinions. Therefore, they are demonstrating and perpetuating disunity in the church. Also, in their book, these bishops studiously avoid church doctrine on human sexuality.

4. A Humble Proposal for Truly "Finding Our Way"

The Discipline's Par. 47. Article III. states, in part: "The [C]ouncil [of Bishops] shall...plan for the general oversight and promotion of the temporal and spiritual interests of the entire Church and for carrying into effect the rules, regulations, and responsibilities prescribed and enjoined by the General Conference...."

I believe that the Council is given by God to lead, in

one voice, the church. Though composed of bishops who have varied positions on most matters, the Council should teach the church on human sexuality, in one voice, from church doctrine. Impossible? Perhaps. But since the Holy Spirit is alive and well, be hopeful!

Another quotation from Francis. Where Francis uses the word Pope, I will use the word Council. "So, the duty of the [Council] is that of guaranteeing the unity of the Church; it is that of reminding the faithful of their duty to faithfully follow the Gospel of Christ; it is that of reminding the pastors that their first duty is to nourish the flock...and to seek to go out and find...lost sheep.

"[The Council's] duty is to remind everyone that authority in the Church is a service, as Pope Benedict XVI clearly explained: '... [The Church] exercises [authority] not in her own name, but in the name of Jesus Christ...[Jesus Christ]...guides, protects, and corrects.... But the Lord Jesus...has willed that the [Council] participate in His mission of taking care of God's People, of educating them in the faith and of guiding, inspiring and sustaining [them]....

"So, the Church is Christ's... and all the bishops, in communion with the [Council] have the task and the duty of guarding her and serving her, not as masters but as servants. The [Council]...is not the supreme lord but rather the supreme servant -- the 'servant of the servants of God;' the guarantor of the obedience and the conformity of the Church to the will of God, to the Gospel of Christ, and to the Tradition of the Church, putting aside every personal whim..."

Thank you.♥

LETTERS TO LIFEWATCH

[December 2014]

Dear Paul:

I am always challenged by your theological passion and competence, but especially by your writing. At times I feel I disagree with what you are saying, but often find it difficult to locate exactly where it is that I am in disagreement. Your fluency simply carries me over the bumps which I thought I had noticed in my first reading.

This is the case with my reading of your article, "Barmen and Abortion" (Lifewatch, June 1, 2011, pp. 1-2). In the last sentence of the article, you write: "To be sure, there are other ways to understand The Barmen Declaration applied to American Christianity today." My difficulty is that I do not quite see how you can move so seamlessly to the question of abortion from The Barmen Declaration.

The Declaration was addressing a theological faction within the German church that was destroying the unity of the church at the most basic point of its self-understanding -- namely, what it is that the church has to hear, trust, and obey in order to be a faithful and true church. Speaking generally, the problem has been designated as "political

theology" -- that is, a theology that presupposes a prior and basic political commitment, a particular viewpoint and commitment without which it is alleged, one cannot be committed to Christ and His Church or be a faithful and responsible theologian. Very simply stated, the German Christians said a proper theology, a responsible Christian theology, must first of all be German, and only then also Christian. A responsible theologian in Germany in 1934 must be a pure German with German blood and an enemy of any and all who would stand in the way of the fulfillment of Germany's destiny -- namely Jews, Jews dividing Germany from within and Jews conspiring internationally against Germany from without. The theologian must listen first and closely to what God is saying in history, i.e., in the present history of Nazi Germany through its "leader," Adolf Hitler. Theology must, from word one, be "coordinated" with the Third Reich and with this Fuhrer. Only then and as such can it also hear the word of God as it is addressed to the church in Jesus Christ.

Now it is difficult for me to see exactly how it is that the "pro-choice" people in America today are threatening the existence of the church and thus calling to mind The Barmen Declaration...

Nevertheless, it is not clear to me just how this social evil... abortion...can in itself be understood as a Nazi-like threat to the very being of the church, a

threat which should bring to mind the Nazi Holocaust and the need for a Barmen-like confession. Such a social ill should doubtless be addressed by the prophetic ministry of the church...

I want to take this occasion to thank you again...for arranging for my participation in the North Carolina Council of Churches gathering, and...for your thoughtful and challenging engagement of my paper. And last, and certainly not least, I would thank you for your patient and lasting friendship...

As ever, your friend,

Bob

The Reverend Dr. Robert T. Osborn -- a United Methodist elder and a former Duke University professor who persuasively taught the theology of Karl Barth -- writes from Durham, NC.

[January 2015] Bob, thank you for your thoughtful letter, even at this late date. Your letter eloquently states the conditions in Germany and in the German churches that compelled Karl Barth's writing of *The Barmen Declaration*. As you note, a "political theology," that leading German theologians placed between God's word and the German churches' preaching and teaching, was the problem of that time and place. With regard to *The United Methodist Church and abortion*, it appears that, for some, another political theology is at work. Through the ages, God's word has led the Church to preach, teach, and minister for life

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and against abortion. But the 1960s happened, with the Women's Movement and the Sexual Revolution, and suddenly United Methodism forgot or ignored the historic, ecumenical teaching of the Church on life and abortion. Again, a political theology -- an American version that is more cultural than partisan-political and that understands the person as a "sovereign self" who does whatever is desired -- had grown between God's word and The United Methodist Church's ministry with regard to life and abortion. That, it seems to me, is why The Barmen Declaration, which attempts to remove political theology from its powerful position, is relevant to United Methodism in America today. I hope this is a helpful response. Continue faithful to Christ and His Church, in all things, for the sake of the world.

In Christ,
Paul T. Stallsworth

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

- Lifewatch receives no support from The United Methodist Church. Therefore, we are especially thankful to you for remembering Lifewatch with your prayers and your gifts. A gift can be given in two ways. First, you can send a check to Lifewatch/P.O. Box 306/Cottleville, MO 63338. And second, you can give stocks by first contacting Mrs. Cindy Evans in the Lifewatch office. Know that Lifewatch is deeply grateful for your gifts.

- As you know, the 9/11 Memorial has been completed at Ground Zero in New York City. With the words "and her unborn child," the Memorial remembers not only the pregnant mothers who were killed in the terrorist attack, but also the children they carried who also perished. The words "and her unborn child" recognizes the truth of the matter.

(Uniting for Life: A Christian Pro-Life Newsletter [from NPRC], 2014, Issue 2, p. 3)

- Universities, churches, other institutions, their committees, and their employees can, unfortunately, at times make some mighty baffling decisions or statements that seem out of touch to those on the outside. Remember the Duke lacrosse case and the professors who prejudged the accused students? Or the recent controversy at Duke University over the proposal to issue a call to Islamic prayer from the Duke Chapel tower? Or the "I march for sandwiches" sign carried, during the 2015 March for Life in Washington, DC, by a General Board of Church and Society staffer? How do these incidents happen? One reason probably has to do with the lack of diversity, real diversity, including the diversity of ideas. Political correctness can lead to a silencing of serious debate in committee meetings and personal conversations, and the silencing of serious debate can lead to out-of-touch decisions and statements. All people need to be checked and balanced. That is the purpose of committees. The best committees are deeply diverse groups where vigorous debate routinely occurs. When there is no honest debate, committees and their members wind up doing things that are sometimes unwise and uncharitable.

- "I made a mistake." All of us make plenty of them. But when we say, "I made a mistake" on significant matters, we can use it as an excuse to evade difficult obedience to Christ in challenging situations. We can assume that saying "I made a mistake" is a way to get a do-over. In marriage, "I made a mistake" becomes a rationale for divorce. In human sexuality, "I made a mistake" can lead to abortion. We should never forget that "a mistake" can become an opportunity for the God of the Gospel to give us the grace to be faithful -- even when faithfulness is beyond our natural abilities or inclinations.

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Lifewatch
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United Methodists on
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03/01/15

* Lifewatch Sermon by
Dr. Edgardo Colon-Emeric:
"Life is Luminous"
* Annual Conference Resolutions

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• Several months ago this pastor was visiting a church member in a very attractive retirement home. Entering the facility, I discovered the church member in the dining room enjoying lunch with two friends. He invited me to have a seat and join the conversation. The very engaging woman at the table noticed my clerical collar and became quite talkative. She began telling us about her church, and how she favored a "positive" and "affirming" faith.

My church member brought up a church trial in which a United Methodist pastor had been found guilty of disobeying the discipline of the church for presiding at the same-sex service of his son and his son's partner.

Soon thereafter, the woman turned to me, lowered her voice, and asked with a serious tone, "If your son had approached you and asked you to preside at his same-sex service, surely you would have agreed; wouldn't you?"

After a brief pause, I answered in this fashion, "No, I would not have agreed to preside at their service. My duty as a pastor is not simply to do what people want me to do. And my responsibility as a father is not simply to make my son happy, in the ways that he defines happiness. My responsibility, as a pastor and as a father, is to be faithful to the Gospel, first and last." After catching her breath, she expressed amazement that I could say such a thing.

At its best, the ordained ministry of the Church is about more than providing religious services on demand. It is about acting on behalf of God in Christ, the Gospel, and Christ's Church. That is the greatest love, the greatest faithfulness.

And at its best, fatherhood is about more than doing what makes sons and daughters happy. Fatherly love acts in ways that are for the ultimate good of the children -- and for their happiness and flourishing in the long run.

The temptations of therapeutic (or feel-good) ministry and fatherhood can, with God's help, be resisted.

• In public arguments with New York's Governor Mario Cuomo in the 1980s, the late John Cardinal O'Connor of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York had this to say: "Are we to have a Church in which everyone's judgment is equal to everyone else's? That's not a Church, it's chaos." (George J. Marlin, "Cardinal O'Connor vs Governor Cuomo," The Human Life Review, Fall 2014, p. 19) Some of us United Methodists understand the Cardinal's comment quite well.

• *Magna est veritas, et prevalebit.* "Truth is most powerful, and will ultimately prevail." ♥

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Please see the insert in this issue for model resolutions you can submit to your Annual Conference.

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