

## 2018 LIFEWATCH SERMON: “WHAT ARE HUMAN BEINGS?”

*Here is part of the introduction of this year's preacher: “The Lifewatch community is grateful that Reverend Dr. David F. Watson will serve the word of God this morning in our midst. As today's bulletin indicates, Dr. Watson is Professor of New Testament, Vice President for Academic Affairs, and Academic Dean—all at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, OH. He earned degrees at Texas Tech University, Perkins School of Theology, and Southern Methodist University. Dr. Watson is the author of books; his most recent is Scripture and the Life of God: Why the Bible Matters Today More Than Ever (Seedbed, 2017). Also, words flow from his mind, heart, and finger tips that take the shape of countless articles and blogs.*

*“I believe Reverend Dr. David Watson's ministry is distinguished in The United Methodist Church today for four (4) reasons. First, he is an academic who willingly gets dirty in the trenches of The United Methodist Church. Second, he is always a “peaceful presence,” as they say, in our church. Third, he routinely points to the light of revelation, and offers the lesser but essential light of reason, on the topics he addresses. And fourth, he mentors many students attracted by his ministry to be faithful servants of Christ and His Church.*

*“Dr. Watson, we will gladly hear God's word and the Church's faith through you!” (PTS)*

I once wrote on my blog that I felt that secularism is dangerous. A former student of mine from many years ago wrote back incredulously, “*Secularism is dangerous?*” Her meaning, I think, is that religious people have done more than their share of harm in the world. In that, I agree with her. But I maintain that, for all the liabilities that attend religious belief, the Christian faith has the capacity to lead us into an ethic of life, while secularism will lead us into an ethic of death. Our Scripture teaches us that each man and woman is fearfully and wonderfully made, bearing the divine image, standing as the pinnacle of God's creation. A secular worldview, however, tends to assess the value of people based on such criteria as cost utility, and convenience.

In the early church there emerged what we now call “two ways” theology. We see this at the beginning of that ancient document called the *Didache*, which begins, “There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways” (1.1).

Secularism is both dangerous and deadly. But equally dangerous, equally deadly, is a religious tradition that has adopted the values of secularism, dressed them up in pious language, and called them Christian. And when so many believe themselves to live within a Christian nation, it is natural that we would begin to believe that the values widely held in this nation are Christian values. But such is not necessarily so. In fact, I would say, most often it is not.

The human mind, said Calvin, is a factory for the making of idols. The human mind, regardless of the nation in which one happens to live, is disordered by sin. God's ways are not our ways. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. We cannot see the world in the right way apart from the atoning work of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. On our own we do not know who we are. We do not know whose we are. We do not know the origins of human life, nor do we know its intended *telos*.

Historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto puts the matter cogently: “Humanity is in peril: not from the familiar menace of ‘mass destruction’ and ecological overkill—but from a conceptual threat” (*So You Think You're Human? A Brief History of Humankind* [Oxford, 2004], p. 1).

By ourselves, we are incapable of knowing who and what we really are. It is only through the divine revelation given to us in Scripture that we can begin to comprehend our identity and worth as human beings.

## WHO ARE WE?

Consider the words of Psalm 8:4-5: “[W]hat are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor” (NRSV, here and following).

It would be easy for us to think about this psalm as being about the greatness of humanity. After all, we like to ponder our own greatness. That is what the story of the Tower of Babel is about. We marvel at that which we have done, what we have achieved, what we have built. But the words of Christ echo in the background: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” (Mark 13:2). The God who called the universe into being out of nothing, who brought order out of chaos and breathed life into his creatures, is probably not especially impressed with the *iWatch*.

The main topic of Psalm 8 is not the greatness of humanity, but the majesty of God. Human beings figure into this psalm because we stand within the context of God's

creation. We are part of a larger universe, which displays the glorious and majestic nature of God. As part of this creation, however, we are led to ask, “What is so special about us? With all the beauty of the creation around us, why would God care so much about us?”

Now notice that the psalm does not answer these questions by saying, “because human beings are so smart,” or “because we can use tools,” or “because we are artistic.” In fact, the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 tells us that human ingenuity can become a source of arrogance, distancing us from God and bringing upon us divine retribution.

Rather, when the psalmist gives the reason that God cares about humans, it is not because of anything humans have done at all. It is entirely a gift on the part of God. “*You* have made them a little lower than God. *You* have crowned them with glory and honor. *You* have given them dominion over the works of your hands. *You* have put all things under their feet.”

You, O God, have made us what we are.

We are a little lower than God—or another translation might be, “a little lower than the heavenly beings.” Either way, consider the significance of that statement. What could we possibly do to deserve this honor? Nothing. We have done nothing to deserve it. In fact, we have done much not to deserve it. It is a gift born of God’s love. And so the attitude of the psalm is one of gratitude.

God has gifted us with this special relationship, and it is our unique relationship to God that defines us as human.

If this is the case, then there is no circumstance that can for one moment diminish the inherent value of any human life. God has determined the value of human life.

### THE DIVINE IMAGE

We are created, says Scripture, in God’s image: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27).

When Jesus is asked about paying taxes, he basically responds, “Sure, pay the tax. Give back to Caesar the coin that bears his image.” The coin is just a means to an end, a way of getting by. But the whole person, who bears God’s image, belongs to God. So render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, but render unto God what is God’s.

All of creation belongs to God, but we human beings belong to God in a particular way. We are created in God’s image. All of creation is good, but only human beings bear the divine image. What does this mean, that we bear the image of God? It is a difficult question to answer.

Augustine and Aquinas identify intellect and rationality as the markers of the divine image. To bear the image of God is to have intellect and reason. Now were this to be a gathering of Roman Catholics, I would be loathe to disagree with either of these revered teachers. But since we are a gathering of (I assume) more orthodox United Methodists, the only sacrosanct thinkers are likely John Wesley and Billy Abraham. And Professor Abraham, in my experience, has never backed away from an intellectual barroom brawl with Roman Catholic teaching.

In that tradition, then, please indulge me for a moment, while I disagree with both Augustine and Aquinas—though I feel a bit like a mouse dressing down two large elephants. Nevertheless, we simply cannot identify the divine image with intellect and rationality. There is a simple reason for this. To do so would mean that, were we to lose our capacities of intellect and rationality, we would lose the divine image. We would have to think of people with dementia as gradually losing the image of God. We would have to think of people with profound intellectual disabilities as beings who may look human and be born of human parents, but lack the true image of God.

The equating of humanity and intellect, however, seems to have permeated Western thinking very deeply. Perhaps that is one reason that 80-90% of pregnancies in which Down syndrome is detected are terminated, often at the urging of medical practitioners. In fact, in Iceland, people with Down syndrome have been almost entirely eliminated as a people group by means of prenatal testing and abortion. Why is this allowed? Why are we not calling this what it is: eugenics? Perhaps the reason is that people with diminished intellectual capacities are somehow seen as “less than”—less than the rest of us, less than human.

If I might channel my inner Stanley Hauerwas for a moment, let me suggest that people with diminished intellectual capacities challenge the most cherished value of a liberal society: individual freedom. You see, if we can think, then we can do. We can achieve. We have freedom, and freedom—choice—has become a value above all other values. We want freedom to do what we want, to shape our identity and destiny. Today we have the freedom even to defy our biology, to reshape with the scalpel our appearance, even our gender. People with diminished intellectual capacities do not fit the template of human beings as entirely free and rational subjects, and therefore they are viewed as aberrations.

Theologian Hans Reinders summarizes this nicely: “The culture of modernity, according to Hauerwas, seeks to get rid of people whose very existence makes a mockery of its most cherished ideal, namely, that individual freedom defines the moral meaning of being human” (*Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* [Eerdmans, 2008], p. 192).

And once again we pile stone upon stone, rebuilding the Tower of Babel ever skyward, celebrating what we can do rather than living into what God has already done.

As an academic, I like reason. I am all for it. In fact, I often wish there were more of it in this world. But to equate humanity with intellect is an erroneous notion that has had tragic consequences.

To return to Hans Reinders for a moment, he argues for a different understanding of the divine image, one that is specifically beholden to the Christian understanding of God as the holy Trinity. To be created in the image of God, he says, has nothing to do with our capacities. It means that we are created to be drawn into loving relationship with God and one another. Consider the nature of the Christian God: God is three persons existing in a unity of love. God is love, and love is necessarily relational. Thus to be created in the

image of God means that we are created to be in relationship with God and one another. It is not good that we should be alone. We are created for togetherness. (Again, see his *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*.)

Some people think much better than others. I am reminded of that every time I go onto Facebook. Some people are impaired in their ability to think. Some people have more freedom than others. Some have no freedom at all. And many will take this to mean that some people are more human than others. But such a sentiment is inhumane, and more than that, it is cruel. Not all human beings can think. But all human beings can be in relationship to God and other people. Not all people can love, but all people can be loved—loved uniquely by God, and loved by one another.

### **REBELLION AGAINST OUR CREATED NATURE**

If only we knew this. If only we could see the divine image in ourselves and in others. If only we knew that we were made a little lower than God. How much sadness and death we could avoid!

The serpent in the garden has continued to speak to us through the ages: “Did God really say...?” No, surely that cannot be. The world around us is telling us something different, that we make ourselves into who we will become. We are self-made people. We are our own masters, and we bear those images we choose, images that convey attractiveness and sophistication and wealth and style. We stamp ourselves with clothing and tattoos, and surgically alter our bodies, in vain attempts to define ourselves apart from God. Did God really say that you and I bear the divine image?

Did God really say that those other people, the ones who are inconvenient for us, the ones not like us, the ones we really do not like, are created a little lower than God, and are crowned with glory and honor? Through the years we have found myriad ways to answer this question with a resounding No! Human beings have achieved feats of genius in our attempts to dehumanize the other, to make ourselves more and others less, and most often with tragic and lethal consequences. History is rife with examples of how we make our tribe, our race, our people, our nation somehow more human than those unlike us. We hear that the fetus is not human, as if the image of God only appears after a certain point in pregnancy. We call people with severe brain injuries “vegetables.” We call people of other cultures “savages.” We all know the tragic history of the dehumanization of European Jews. Our history in this nation is rife with examples of the dehumanization of people of color. We should not be so naive as to think that the genocide against people with Down syndrome will not eventually extend to people with other disabilities.

We are in rebellion, not simply against our Creator, but against the way in which we are created. There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways. And if the Church will not rise up and proclaim loudly the value of human life, the divine image within each and every person, then there is literally no hope. There is no hope for a people who do not know who they are. There is no hope for a church that will not live into its calling.

So, O God, revive us. Remind us of who we are. Come, Holy Spirit, and be our teacher. Teach us to see ourselves as you see us.

### **REFLECTIONS ON OUR SON**

Four hours after our son Sean was born, we learned that he has Down syndrome. That was eleven years ago. Life with Sean has not always been easy, but Christ does not call us to a life of ease. My wife and I sat with him in the NICU for ten days after he was born. We handed him over to a doctor for open-heart surgery at four months of age. We held him and nursed him back to health. There have been more than a few trips to the hospital since then, not to mention speech therapists, occupational therapists, and early intervention specialists. At times, he has pushed us to our limit. Life with Sean has often been quite difficult, but any difficulty in raising him is utterly surpassed by the great blessing that he is in our lives every day. When I think of him, there is a clarity of love that I know in few other places in my life.

I have no ambiguity about his value as a human being. He is created a little lower than God, crowned with glory and honor. He bears the divine image. He is fearfully and wonderfully made. And he is a baptized Christian. I know who he is, and I know whose he is. Much of the world does not. Much of the world would suggest that it would be better had he never been born. But they are wrong.

There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways.♥

### **SOME RANDOM THEOLOGICAL CLAIMS ON THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH'S WAY FORWARD**

Below are some theological claims on The United Methodist Church's way forward. Curse at them, disagree with them, agree with them, cheer them, amend them, or ignore them. These claims are proposed in the hope of thickening the theological conversation on issues raised by the Council of Bishops, the Commission on a Way Forward, and the 2019 General Conference.

#### **It is up to the bishops.**

Bishops are all over the process surrounding the Commission on a Way Forward. Bishops asked General Conference 2016 to support the creation of the Commission. Bishops appointed the members of the Commission. Bishops are sitting on the Commission. Bishops are moderating the work of the Commission. Bishops are communicating the ongoing work of the Commission to The United Methodist Church and to the world (or at least to those, beyond the church, who are interested). Bishops will receive the proposal(s) of the Commission and prepare the proposal(s) for proper presentation to the 2019 General Conference. Bishops will preside over the legislative, plenary sessions at the special 2019 General Conference. Bishops will be charged to implement, or execute, the decisions made by the called General Conference.

All of this starkly reveals that the Council of Bishops, resident bishops, and retired bishops bear great responsibility for guiding The United Methodist Church into the future.

The question is: Will the bishops be guided by the doctrine and discipline of The United Methodist Church (which attempt to reflect the faith of the Church catholic, which is based on Scriptural witness, which is the word of God written, which reveals Christ's Headship over the Church), or will the bishops be led by their own personal opinions (which are often thinly disguised as statements of "conscience," apart from the word of God, or as "prophecy," as in prophetic)? Again, it is up to the bishops of the church. They will lead The United Methodist Church toward increasing faithfulness to the faith of the Church catholic or toward increasing accommodation to the elite culture of the West. They must decide.

**Division of the Church is, from a theological perspective, worse than departures from the Church.**

It appears that the Council of Bishops and the Commission on a Way Forward are fundamentally committed to maintaining the unity of The United Methodist Church. That is good and laudable. Indeed, both the Council and the Commission exist to serve the unity of the church; therefore, they should not, in any way, participate in a formal division of the church.

Lifewatch continues to think that the 2019 General Conference should decide to maintain (and strengthen) current United Methodist doctrine and discipline on human sexuality. That is consistent with historic Christianity. That is consistent with what the Church catholic has taught and practiced through the ages. That is consistent with the word of God, as the Church has understood the word of God since the Christian community's establishment by Jesus Christ and His Spirit nearly 2,000 years ago.

If General Conference votes to maintain Biblical-traditional doctrine and discipline on human sexuality, some United Methodists—laity, clergy, even congregations and annual conferences—will not be able to abide by the will of General Conference. They will not be able to remain in the church. The church should allow them to depart from the denomination without punishment, in peace, and in quiet. Their departure would be a great sadness for everyone concerned. However, those who would so depart from the church would leave because of their own decision. Their departure could not and should not be blamed on General Conference, which would have been simply attempting to be faithful to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church catholic. Their departure would be their decision: they insist on holding onto false teaching (which is what the Church through the ages has called "heresy") to the extent that it leads them to break church fellowship and leave their church. Again, their departure would be reason for great sadness—but if the 2019 General Conference decides to divide The United Methodist Church into two churches, or into two or three groups within one church, that would be reason for scandal. The Church, the Body of Christ, does not decide through its official conferences to divide itself. So division of the church should be unacceptable to United Methodists.

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As noted above, departure from the church should be sadly acceptable to United Methodists. However, division of the church, by the church, should be considered a far worse option than the departure of some, and therefore it should be avoided at all costs by General Conference 2019.

**Both separation within The United Methodist Church and separation of/from the church are contrary to the church's unity.**

Separation of/from The United Methodist Church—presumably dividing one church into two churches that go their own ways—obviously goes against Christian unity.

In addition, what is being called separation within the church—by creating space for the exercise of choices (or "local options" by clergy, congregations, and/or annual conferences) on doctrine and discipline pertaining to human sexuality or by creating different "branches" within the same denomination—also would destroy the unity of The United Methodist Church. Understanding separation within the church as maintaining unity seems like a poor public-relations ploy. Such so-called unity is unity in name only.

That is a strong claim, to be sure. However, it is true. Remember how The United Methodist Church's foundational doctrines define "church." The Articles of Religion state in Article XIII ("Of the Church"): "The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men [sic] in which the pure Word of God is preached [*not different, conflicting interpretations of the word of God*], and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same [*so church order or discipline structures, supports, and sustains the church as a Word-and-Sacrament community*]." (Underline for emphasis, [*italics*] for commentary.)

The Confession of Faith doctrinally declares in Article V ("The Church"): "We believe the Christian Church is the community [*not various sub-communities*] of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ [*not under the lordship of their own choices*]. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic and catholic [*so the church's unity requires singular doctrine and singular discipline that promote holiness, maintain apostolic witness, and advance the catholic or universal; church unity is not enhanced by making doctrine and discipline matters of individual choice and voluntary*]

association]. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God [not different, conflicting versions of the Word] is preached by men [sic] divinely called, and the sacraments duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit [that is, the Spirit forms and guides the community according to God's Word] the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world." It is obvious that The United Methodist Church has foundational doctrine on the Church that challenges the mistaken visions of a church of choices (or local options) and a church of branches.

Furthermore, and perhaps most devastatingly, any plan that would establish separation within The United Methodist Church would actually create a religious organization that could not, in truth, be dignified with the Biblical-traditional term church. Here is the plain English: a denomination that maintains internal separation of any kind is not, according to United Methodist doctrine, a church. So, starting with a troubled church and corrupting it into a religious organization (that is not, doctrinally speaking, a church) would involve scandalous decision-making by United Methodist leaders at the 2019 General Conference.

### **Unity means covenantal unity.**

The unity of The United Methodist Church is a God-given, covenantal unity. Dividing this one church into two, different churches clearly breaks covenantal unity and demonstrates schism to the world. Creating doctrinal and disciplinary options within this one church also breaks covenantal unity and internalizes (and foolishly attempts to hide from the world) schism. Establishing three branches within this one church, to offer three doctrinal-and-disciplinary options, breaks covenantal unity and shows a soft schism to the world.

Covenantal unity is an imperfect unity. Often it is not very pretty in practice. It makes room for dissent. But The Baptismal Covenant, The Book of Discipline, and the Holy Spirit hold The United Methodist Church in covenantal unity so that the church can work through and resolve its challenges and conflicts—especially when the church is threatened by the corruption of its doctrine, the chaos of its discipline, and/or resulting division.

### **Through the ages the Church has opposed heresy and schism.**

For 2,000 years the Church catholic has, however imperfectly, defended the Church's faith when that faith has been threatened by heresy (or false teaching). Likewise, for 2,000 years the Church catholic has resisted schism, more (Catholicism and Orthodoxy) or less (Protestantism), when the Church was tempted to divide.

What in the world leads some United Methodists today to think they can give either false teaching in the church, and/or division of the church, a pass? Even more astoundingly, what in the world leads some United Methodists today to think they should institutionalize a schism in the church so that heresy (to put it frankly) might be taught without challenge? Perhaps the prideful, false

notion that we United Methodists, going along and alone, arbitrarily make up what it means to be church and to do church. That is one destructive notion.

Committing to be faithful to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, The United Methodist Church should recommit to defending church doctrine (and opposing false teaching) and defending church unity (and opposing divisions, separations, options, and branches that promise what they cannot deliver).

### **The Council of Bishops and the Commission should search for a way forward based on trusting and obeying Christ—not on decision analysis.**

Decision analysis is an academic subject that predicts and compares the probable outcomes of various resolutions an institution (or an individual) might attempt in response to a pressing challenge or problem. It emerges from a modern, scientific mindset, and it can be used by decision-makers in various venues—business, politics, education, religion, family, and so on—to try to avoid the worst possible outcomes and to achieve the best. Decision analysis is taught in business schools and public-policy schools across American higher education. While apparently practical and sometimes helpful, this problem-solving methodology assumes that, in the case of The United Methodist Church, the church (through its leaders) is basically in control of its own destiny.

However, the Church is not just another human organization or institution, choosing and navigating its own way into the future. The Church does not control itself or its own destiny. For the Church is a result of the activity of the Holy Spirit, who helps to gather the visible Body of Christ and helps to lead that Body through history, always under the Headship of Jesus Christ. In other words, the Church is not its own. The Church does not engage in institutional self-analysis, calculate the probable outcomes of various ways forward, and then select the most beneficial (or least damaging) way forward for itself. That is not how the Church of Jesus Christ lives and moves into the future.

Therefore, The United Methodist Church's permanent task is simply to trust and obey Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, as Christ makes His will known. That means The United Methodist Church seeks faithfully to follow Christ and offers the results of its following up to His providence and judgment.

### **“Fighting” is required in the life of the Church.**

In the U.S. today, there is a lot of political, cultural, and moral fighting going on. Much of it is not very pretty. Therefore, not surprisingly, in The United Methodist Church today, disagreements over the Church's teaching on human sexuality are labeled as “fighting.” But notice: here the word fighting is used as a perjorative, a put-down, term. What is called “fighting” in The United Methodist Church today is, in reality, “contend[ing] for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3, NRSV). Contending for the Church's faith will always—always!—be required by God and by the apostolic faith in the life of the Church, until Christ returns in glory.

## At General Conference 2019, The United Methodist Church will indeed change.

The United Methodist Church will soon change in one of two ways. Either, at General Conference 2019, the Council of Bishops and the bishops will change and recommit themselves faithfully to teach church doctrine and uphold church discipline. Or, at General Conference 2019, the church will change its doctrine and discipline (perhaps including governmental structure) to accommodate today's post-modern, sexual ideology. It is that simple: the church's bishops will change, or the church's doctrine and discipline will change.

Hope, pray, and strive for the bishops to change. If they change, The United Methodist Church will continue to grow up as the Church of Jesus Christ. If the bishops do not change, they will bring disaster onto an already troubled church. (PTS)♥

## YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT . . .

- Your continuing support for the witness of Lifewatch—that is, your prayers, your emails and letters and calls, and your financial gifts—really does maintain and extend our witness for the Gospel of Life in The United Methodist Church and beyond. You can give a gift to Lifewatch in three ways. First, you can send a check to Lifewatch/P.O. Box 306/Cottleville, MO 63338. Second, you can give stocks by first contacting Mrs. Cindy Evans in the Lifewatch office. And third, if you are over the age of 70-1/2, you may give a gift from your IRA as a tax-free distribution. (This means a gift [up to \$100,000...!] can be transferred from your IRA directly to Lifewatch and can count toward your minimum required distribution without being considered as taxable income.) If you are considering an IRA gift, please first communicate with Mrs. Evans in the Lifewatch office. And know that Mrs. Evans and I are deeply grateful for your support of all kinds. (PTS)

- At a time like this in The United Methodist Church, remember The Barmen Declaration. As National Socialism was nazifying the preaching of the Gospel and the churches in Germany during the 1930s, confessional Protestants restated the faith of the Church catholic through The Barmen Declaration. “[F]ortified by strong coffee and one or two Brazilian cigars,” Karl Barth (1888-1968, the great Reformed theologian of the 20th century) drafted this stirring, powerful, “theological declaration” for the Confessing Church and against the churches that took the Nazi way. In May 1934, The Barmen Declaration was accepted by the first Confessing Synod.

The third article of The Barmen Declaration, on the Church, is especially relevant to United Methodists today. It declares: “‘Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body [is] joined and knit together’ (Ephesians 4:15, 16).

“The Christian Church is the congregation of the brethren in which Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord in

Word and sacrament through the Holy Spirit. As the Church of pardoned sinners, it has to testify in the midst of a sinful world, with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order, that it is solely his property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction in the expectation of his appearance.

“We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.”

Jesus Christ. Head of the Church. Lord of the Church. Lord who acts in the Church through Word and Sacrament. This Lord owns the Church. This Lord sustains, comforts, and directs the Church. This Lord does not welcome substitutes, however popular they might be, for His Church's given doctrine and discipline.

In the 1930s and 1940s, German National Socialism tempted, and often conquered, the Church. In our time, the Sexual Revolution tempts the Church to change. The Barmen Declaration says Yes! to Jesus Christ and No! to that which tempts. The United Methodist Church at General Conference 2019, the Lifewatch community hopes and prays, will say Yes! to Jesus Christ and No! to that which tempts.

- Our friend Monsignor John J. Williams writes of the reception of *Humanae Vitae* (1968, the Roman Catholic encyclical on human life): “As watchful bishops and theologians of those years had been for the ‘signs of the times,’ they missed developments obvious in the culture: that standards in sexual ethics had shifted radically and degenerated; that censorship was disappearing and pornography was being legitimized and even given some respectability; and that contraception—besides serving the interests of advocates of ‘responsible parenthood’ and the social engineers concerned with overpopulation—had come to serve as an accomplice in the undermining of chastity.” (“Bishops’ Conferences in the Wake of *Humanae Vitae*: Commentaries that Missed the Mark,” The Catholic Social Science Review, Volume XXII [2017], p. 184)

Methodists think The United Methodist Church also has some bishops and theologians who have not been carefully watching and examining our culture.

- In 1930, Pope Pius XI released *Casti Connubii*, an encyclical on Christian marriage. Dan Hitchens, of the Catholic Herald, reflects: “In *Casti Connubii*, for instance, Pius gave some moving reflections on marriage before turning to a question which he knew had to be addressed: Is all this moral teaching actually realistic? Are there not circumstances where upholding the laws of sexual ethics becomes counterproductive? And if so, shouldn't the Church reconcile itself to the fact that not everybody is a hero and people need to get on with their lives, even if that means softening the rules a bit? In response to this tempting line of thought, Pope Pius—while acknowledging with evident sorrow the problems faced by married couples—declared: ‘No difficulty can arise that justifies the putting aside of the law of God which forbids all acts intrinsically evil. There is

no possible circumstance in which husband and wife cannot, strengthened by the grace of God, fulfill faithfully their duties and preserve in wedlock their chastity unspotted.’

“But importantly, as soon as he did so, he stressed that he was only following the line of perennial Church doctrine. He cited the Council of Trent [1545-1563, convened by the Roman Catholic Church to respond to the Protestant Reformation] and its solemn teaching, derived from the Church Fathers, that ‘God does not ask the impossible.’ and the Church’s condemnation of the Jansenist heresy [Catholicism tempted by Calvinism!] that ‘[S]ome precepts of God are...impossible of fulfillment.’ By standing within a tradition, Pius’s teaching rang out with an authoritative voice.” (“In Defense of Regal Popes,” 11.28.17, [www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/11/in-defense-of-regal-popes](http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/11/in-defense-of-regal-popes), accessed on 11.29.17)

In the same article, Mr. Hitchens recalled that G.K. Chesterton, on a visit to Rome in 1929, received a papal blessing in which Pope Pius XI used the plural “we.” In a moment, Chesterton understood why: because “it was indeed ‘We;’ We, Peter and Gregory and Hildebrand and all the dynasty that does not die.”

United Methodist bishops might well learn, in the very short term, how to speak in the plural “We.” This might help rescue them from their autonomous individualism that allows them to express freely their personal opinions—which are of little use to, and are often destructive of, Christ’s Church, including The United Methodist Church.

- Bardaisan (154-222 AD) generally lived in the area we call Turkey. He was a Christian, of sorts, and an intellectual with wide-ranging interests. In Book of the Laws of the Countries, he described how Christians are forever swimming against the stream of their culture. Bardaisan wrote: “And what shall we say of us Christians, whom

*“[W]herever they are, and in whatever place they are found, the laws of the several countries do not hinder [Christians] from obeying the law of their Sovereign, Christ.”*

Christ at His advent planted in every country and in every region? The [Christian] brothers who are in Gaul do not take males for wives, nor those who are in Parthia take two wives; nor do those who are in Judea circumcise themselves; nor do our sisters who are among the Geli [*people in Sicily?*] consort [*intimately*] with strangers; nor do those brothers who are in Persia take their daughters for wives; nor do those who are in Media abandon their dead, or bury them alive, or give them as food to the dogs; nor do those who are in Odessa [*Turkey*] kill their wives or their sisters when they commit impurity, but they withdraw from them and give them over to the judgment of God; nor do those who are in Hatra [*Iraq*] stone thieves to death; but, wherever they are, and in whatever place they are found, the laws of the several countries do not hinder [Christians] from obeying the law of their Sovereign, Christ; nor does the Fate of the celestial Governors compel them to make use of things which they regard as impure.” (Underline for emphasis, [*italics*] for commentary.)

We United Methodists would do well to learn this lesson—that is, learn to live out of step with the cultural powers that be.

- The recent revelations of television journalist Matt Lauer’s immoral behavior on the job at the “Today” show caused

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this pastor to consider an earlier time. Growing up in a Methodist household in a southwestern Kansas town in the 1950s and 1960s, I remember the "Today" show regularly playing on our family television set while our family prepared for another day of work and school. At the time, this NBC program was probably a morning media staple in many households across the United States. The "Today" show, at the time, seemed innocent enough. This program continues to be welcomed into millions of unsuspecting, middle-class, Christian homes. What's the problem?

I have come to the opinion—and it is an opinion, of which I have too many...—that the "Today" show functions now, as it has for many years, as an agent of change in middle America. Its hosts and hostesses are handsome and pretty, witty and well spoken, but more importantly, on the set, they act like our friends and neighbors. They come across as reliable, trustworthy middle Americans. Then, in middle-American disguise, they present what is newest and trendiest in American culture as what should be morally acceptable to all middle Americans—that is, if middle Americans want to keep up with the times.

The Sexual Revolution? My impression is that the "Today" show, over many decades, advanced it, one step at a time. Divorce. Abortion. Homosexuality. Same-sex

marriage. Gender choice. The television personalities smile, report, interview, analyze, conclude, and beckon: "Come on, middle America, this is good and good for you. Get on board. Try it! When you do, you will be happy you did. And you will make others happy. And most importantly, you will help to make the world a better, less judgmental place." There is so much sugar added that the Sexual Revolution's bitter poison being ingested is not even noticed.

Decade after decade, this was going on. The "Today" show—and many others!—has been changing the minds and the morals of many in America—especially middle Americans, which includes many United Methodists. And for a long time, we did not even notice what was going on.

Mr. Lauer, for whom we hold no ill will and for whom we pray, was a key player in this media shell game. Evidently, he took the Sexual Revolution with personal seriousness and acted out on the desires it encouraged him to cultivate. We do not rejoice in the fall of Matt Lauer. But we are grateful that his fall caused us to stop and think about the "Today" show and its morally corrupting influence.♥

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**LETTERS/COMMENTS TO THE EDITOR:**

Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth, *Lifewatch* Editor  
902 Pinckney Street, Whiteville, NC 28472  
910.642.3376 / [paulstallsworth@nccumc.org](mailto:paulstallsworth@nccumc.org)

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