

*As the Storm Rages*  
*2019 Episcopal Address to the Central Texas Annual Conference*  
*by Bishop Mike Lowry*  
*June. 11 2019*

For years it was simply known as the Cape of Storms; a dire place of shipwreck that none could safely pass. This was based on the slight misconception that the Cape was the dividing point between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans; the place where the two currents collide, and the water turns back upon itself in fury. But then finally, in 1488 a.d., the Portuguese explorer [Bartolomeu Dias](#) sailed beyond the Cape. Instead of the Cape of storms its was renamed the Cape of Good Hope.

Something like this serves as an analogy for a Christian understanding of death and resurrection. Long had the world known that death was the end. There was no more. And then, there was one three-day period of time when Jesus met death on Good Friday and conquered it “once for all” on Easter morning.

Such also is an analogy for the church. We have faced smashing storms in the past only to find that under the captaincy of Christ, the church has sailed beyond into a new day. Think of the great division between the [Eastern and Western Christian church in the eleventh century](#), or the [Protestant Reformation](#), or the [Wesleyan revival in the 18<sup>th</sup> century](#), or the schisms caused by [slavery and the accompanying Civil War](#) in the United States.

Today, we are once again in a storm. The most obvious waves which toss us about are collectively focused on issues of human sexuality and LGBTQ+ questions of marriage and ordination. These are seen as issues of inclusivity by some and biblical fidelity by others. Many if not even most on both sides and all along the spectrum, insist that they alone are holding fast to both inclusion and biblical fidelity.

The theological waves that pound us are even higher than a debate over LGBTQ questions. The white foam of orthodoxy’s boundaries crash over the planking of the church challenging the core tenants of our faith. As [C. S. Lewis put it to a group of Anglican Church youth leaders and young pastors in 1945](#), at the close of World War II: *“I insist that wherever you draw the lines, boundary lines must exist, beyond which your doctrines will cease to be Anglican or to be Christian; and I suggest also that the lines come a great deal sooner than many modern priests think. I think it is your duty to fix the lines clearly in your own minds: and if you wish to go beyond them you must change your profession. This is your duty not specifically as Christians or as priests but honest men [and women].”*

As the waves pound the ship of the church (for a ship on the high seas has been an image of the church since its inception) even stronger winds tear at our sails and superstructure. As numerous scholars have pointed out, we have gone from the Christian faith (or faith alone for that matter whether Jewish, Christian, Moslem, Hindu or Buddhist or even some other variety) as the default cultural option to an agnostic secularism as the leading preference of many. Amid the rampant individuality of our age and time, many more have adopted a privatized version of faith loosely

labeled “spiritual but not religious.” [It is worth noting that none of the world’s major religions endorse such a position!]

As the pounding waves and lashing winds slam into us, public virtue is under assault from virtually every direction. A sense of social appropriateness and ethical congruence floats like flotsam in our public life. [It is worth remembering that the Ten Commandments are not the ten suggestions.]

Much of social civility is lost in the swirling seas of modern life. To borrow a phrase from the cartoon strip [Pogo](#), “we have met the enemy and he (or she) is us.” And yet, more significantly, we are not the enemy at all. We are both together and individually beloved children of God.

It is here, in a gospel truth, that we pause, remember and recommit ourselves to the Lordship, the reign and rule of Christ. As the storm rages we who call ourselves Christian hold to different narrative. Listen again to the Word of God and a story we all know well but forget easily.

“And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We are perishing!’ And he said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, you of little faith?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. <sup>27</sup> They were amazed, saying, ‘What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?’”<sup>1</sup>

It is with this backdrop, the church as storm tossed sailing on the high seas, that I speak to you as your bishop. We sail with the Cape of Good Hope in our sight and not the Cape of Storms. We have been here before. Our Captain is Jesus Christ. “God put everything under Christ’s feet and made him head of everything in the church, which is his body. His body, the church, is the fullness of Christ, who fills everything in every way.”<sup>2</sup>

As the storm rages, I bid you always and everywhere to remember that with Christ in the lead, we are approaching the Cape of Good Hope. Thus, it is of first order in importance, that we must keep Christ at the center of our life, ministry and relationships.

### **As the Storm rages: KEEP CHRIST AT THE CENTER**

[Alan Hirsch](#) has it right. “The desperate, prayer-soaked human clinging to Jesus, the reliance on His Spirit, and the distillation of the gospel message into the simple, uncluttered message of ‘Jesus as Lord and Savior’ catalyzed the missional potencies in the heart of the people of God.”<sup>3</sup>

### **As the Storm rages: LIVE IN HUMILITY**

I know this is shocking, but you and I might both be wrong! Do you recall at [Senator John McCain’s memorial service](#) one of the speakers highlighted his humility even while he

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 8:23-27, NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 1:22-23

<sup>3</sup> Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 86

passionately held strong convictions? The comment that sticks with me is one that goes something like “On the high road of humility, you won’t encounter an abundance of traffic.” Even more to the point is that we need to live Paul’s word to the embattle Philippian church. *“Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. Don’t do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:”*<sup>4</sup>

### **As the Storm rages: Let Praise Ring Out**

In the passionate intensity of our time, it is a matter of critical spiritual importance to let praise of God in Christ through the presence of power of the Holy Spirit have the first word over our lives. St. Augustine, arguably the greatest Christian thinker and theological outside of the Scriptures themselves, would often start his prayers in *Confessions* with the words “Great is the Lord and greatly are you to be praised.” Praise reminds us not only of who we are, but of whose we are! It centers us in allegiance to the Lord. It is easy to begin with a complaint or gripe. It is also un-Christian. To guard myself against doing so, I have taken to reading a Psalm every morning as a part of my devotional time. Remember, “theology [talk about God] without doxology [praise of God] leads to ideology.”<sup>5</sup> Wherever you are on the theological spectrum, all of us need more theology and less ideology! Which leads naturally to a deeper life of prayer and spiritual openness to the Lord’s love and guidance.

### **As the Storm rages, Trust the Lord.**

This sounds obvious and easy, but it is not. Whether or not it is clear to you, the Lord is work. Live out of Proverbs chapter 3, verses 5-6: *“Trust in the LORD with all your heart; don’t rely on your own intelligence. Know him in all your paths, and he will keep your ways straight.”*<sup>6</sup> The great Roman Catholic theologian [Teilhard de Chardin](#) understood this essence well. He wrote poem entitled “Patient Trust” whose first stanza reads as follows:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.  
We are quite naturally impatient in everything  
to reach the end without delay.  
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.  
We are impatient of being on the way to something  
unknown, something new.  
And yet it is the law of all progress  
that it is made by passing through  
some stages of instability –  
and that it may take a very long time.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 2:1-5

<sup>5</sup> J. D. Walt, Seedbed Productions

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 3:5-6

<sup>7</sup> “Patient Trust,” Teilhard de Chardin

Trust and obedience biblically and theologically are linked. Remember the old hymn, “trust and obey, trust and obey, for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.”

**As the Storm rages: Focus on Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.**

I have said this over and over and I am going to keep saying this over and over because it is so true! If you are an ardent progressive, what do you need most as the church moves into a new more inclusive future? You need vibrant vital congregations that are committed heart and soul to “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” If you are a passionate traditionalist, what do you need most as the church moves into a new more orthodox future? You need vibrant vital congregations that are committed heart and soul to “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” So, wherever we are on the spectrum of the debate which threatens to swamp the ship of the church today, what we all need are more vibrant vital congregations that are committed heart and soul to “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

This is, of course, precisely the Great Commission of the crucified and risen Lord to his followers as found at the close of St. Matthew’s gospel. This is our wildly important goal, our WIG!

Friends, let’s keep the main thing the main thing. We have great reason to give thanks and celebrate. Stories, narratives, of transformation abound. In the WIG awards we are encountering during this Annual Conference, we find but a small sampling of these inspiring stories. Truly, the Lord is moving in our midst! For over a full year we have been showing growth in average worship attendance. The Central Texas Conference is one of two or three conferences in the United States where this is happening. You are to be congratulated!!! Don’t miss the importance of this.

Worship, properly understood, is central to discipleship. Worship is at once both an “input” to discipleship formation and an “output” (or outcome) of discipleship. This is why the “metric” of average worship attendance is so critical to the [WIG \(the Wildly Important Goal\)](#) of making “disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” The central role of worship as discipleship formation represents a significant change over the lifetime of my ministry (45 years ago; I was ordained a Deacon in 1974). Back in the day of Christendom (whose sunset was in the 1980s), worship attendance was an almost taken-for-granted element of American culture. In fact, talk among clergy about putting “butts in the seats” was spoken of dismissively. In a Christendom culture, worship attendance was seen as being about cultural acceptability. In a post-Christendom era (which we have been in for at least the last 30 years!), worship is just the opposite. Regular attendance in worship is a sacrifice. It is a witness and declaration of allegiance and identity. Worship is a fundamental act of discipleship!

I cannot help but remember the 7<sup>th</sup> grader at [University UMC in San Antonio](#) (where I was a pastor) who gave up a starring role on her soccer team voluntarily because she refused to practice on Sunday morning. The witness of Gold Medal Olympian [Eric Liddell](#), as chronicled in the

movie [\*Chariots of Fire\*](#), offers profound insight into faithfulness. In our own Fort Worth neighborhood, on the way to worship on Sunday mornings, Jolynn and I are greeted by a virtual peloton of bikers speeding in the opposite direction.

However we understand the Christian faith, let there be no mistake: **Worship is central to discipleship**. Let the Word of the Lord speak into our lives and times. *“All who call on the Lord’s name will be saved”*. [Joel 2:32] So, how can they call on someone they don’t have faith in? And how can they have faith in someone they haven’t heard of? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, *“How beautiful are the feet of those who announce the good news.”* [Isaiah 53:7].”<sup>8</sup>

Professions of faith are a metric that complete the narrative of life transformation. Every number represents a person for whom Christ died. When I first started out as a United Methodist pastor, I had a DS who used to say that new persons joining, especially those who joined on a profession of faith, were like the reinforcements coming over the hill in an old western. I know that this image is politically incorrect, but it is suggestive. A profession of faith is so much more. It really does represent a life submitted to Jesus Christ as both Lord and Savior. It is an embrace of grace that gives people back their future as children of God.

Stay focused on the mission, the WIG, of “making disciples of Jesus Christ.” From the depth of my being I wish to convey my profoundest appreciation for your faithfulness. As the storm rages, the Lord is with us! Let the old song be our prayer.

*“When the storms of life are raging,  
Stand by me (stand by me);  
When the storms of life are raging,  
Stand by me (stand by me);  
When the world is tossing me  
Like a ship upon the sea,  
Thou Who rulest wind and water,  
Stand by me (stand by me).”*<sup>9</sup>

I thank God for you and for the privilege of being your Bishop and sharing with you in ministry. “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Romans 10:13-15

<sup>9</sup> “When the Storms of Life are Raging,” Hymn No. 512, Charles A. Tindley, *The United Methodist Hymnal*

<sup>10</sup> Philippians 1:6, NRSV