

BEYOND CHURCH RENEWAL

1 Brother Moore introduced me as the Bishop of Washington. I am sure there are at least three or four other Bishops of Washington who might want to challenge that introduction. Such is the divided state of the Church. That is one reason it is important for us to be here. I do not say that to amuse you. I am prepared to accept that introduction with all seriousness, for I was ordained a minister of Jesus Christ. I was not ordained a minister of the United Methodist Church. I was ordained as a minister, presbyter, in the Church of God. When I was consecrated a Bishop, I was not consecrated a Bishop of the United Methodist Church, but in the Church of God. That was the intention. That was my understanding. And I hope that at least some of us here in this room may live long enough to see that understanding accepted by the whole church. I am willing to throw myself into the breach, even though there might be those who consider it a breach to be introduced in that fashion.

2 I want more seriously, if one can be more serious than that, to give you the New Testament greeting reminding you that,

Grace is yours and peace,

(Community: From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.)

3 I keep hoping that when we use those words, the meaning of them will dawn on people. For as you know, St. Paul meant by grace all the initiating power of God for good in our lives and through us in society. By peace he did not mean simply peace in the world or peace of mind, but rather he meant completion, our total health, our fulfillment, our sanctification. These two gifts are freely available and given to everyone of us.

4 I want to say in a less formal fashion what a joy it is to be here as a part of this assembly. It is appropriate for me now formally and officially to open the Summer Research Assembly of 1973, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

5 I said I was glad to be here, and I am. I said to someone today how sorry I was that I had been born a little too late for these old songs, which we reviewed awhile ago, to address me. You will recognize that as some distortion of the truth, so I declare the statement that I just made, now to be inoperative.

6 I declared the Assembly open in the name of the Triune God. This is appropriate, for we are here during the Trinity Season of the liturgical year. I am a little baffled by our Muslim friends who accuse us, when we use the trinitarian formula, of having three gods instead of one. This is strange because in every Sura, in every chapter of the Koran, there is a beginning and a trinitarian formula, a kind of triune or trinitarian affirmation. They ought not to speak in an accusatory way at this point, but perhaps rethink some of the implications of their own sacred book. We affirm the one Triune God, God in three persons, blessed Trinity, the manifestations of God and a response to our basic needs. For we know we are finite. We experience ourselves as creatures. We need a creator. We experience ourselves as separated, as alienated and estranged. We need one who reconciles us. Confronted as we are with the ambiguities of life, we need to know God as Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, as He is termed.

7 We have had now four assemblies. I have been pleased to have had some small part in every one of them, including this one which has to do with the Guild Dynamic. It is no coincidence that First John has been designated as the Epistle to be studied during these days together, for,

It was there from the beginning. We have heard it. We have seen it with our own eyes. We have looked upon it. We have felt it with our own hands. It is this we have beheld. Our theme is the Word of Life. We share a common life together.

8 I call particular attention to that verse, "We share a common life together." Actually, the substantive portion of that is expressed in one Greek word familiar to many of you, the word "koinonia". The man who taught Joe and me Greek told us one time, "Koinonia, put that among your coins, it is a very precious word." It is so precious, in fact, that it cannot in reality be translated into English. That one word takes at least five. It is the word we translate as communion, Eucharist. It is also the word which we translate as fellowship. I am glad that you commonly use the term fellowship because we have done something terrible in English with the word fellowship. We have made a verb of it. You know it is commonly said, we gather together to fellowship. Or we find ourselves fellowshipping, neither of which we do or can do. Fellowship is not something we do. It is a gift we receive. It is not a verb. It is a noun. This is one of the gifts we receive.

9 Not only that but it is the word we translate as community, for which we strive in a fuller sense, in which, if we are to have any significance here, we are in some sacramental manner representative of the community toward which we aspire, and which God desires to give the whole world. It may also be translated participation. We fully understand that though we are gathered here in Chicago, we participate in all that goes on among all of humankind. We participate in a more specific way in all that goes on in the name of Jesus Christ throughout the whole world and throughout all of history. That is something of the potency of that word. It also means sharing. We share a common life together through God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son. I repeat that it is not just accidental or coincidental that we should turn to First John for our basic instruction and prompting during these days together.

10 What you are about has everything to do with what is going on in the world of everydayness and in the congregations of Jesus Christ across the world. In the last eight months I have visited more churches than any other man alive, some fourteen hundred of them, and at least three hundred parsonages. I have visited all of the churches in the Washington area. I have also had the privilege of meeting representative laity, some fifteen hundred of them. I do not mean those in congregations, for they are beyond that. I mean people I have greeted personally and tried to ascertain where they were in Jesus Christ. I want to say this. We are in for a new day.

11 We have talked a long time about the renewal of the church, painting with a large brush. One might say that if anyone wants to get in on the renewal of the church, he is too late. It has already happened. In any event, it was the renewing power of the Triune God, and we were involved in His activity. I have seen evidence of the resurgence of the church. It is not the same church. I could give chapter and verse for that.

12 I used to think that the church was the most underused building in any particular community. That might have been said with validity even a decade ago. It can no longer be said. I do not take great pride in the constant use of church buildings but rather in the fact that those buildings represent sacred space. Our society suffers sorely from lack of enough sacred space. The archeologists of the future will dig around ruins and find evidence of places of worship. This will be evident by the cruciform nature of the buildings. If they are discerning they may see, in the cities they uncover, some evidence of our lives there, they may see the meaning of life. We ought to regard most highly sacred space.

13 It used to be said that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning was the most predictable hour of the week. It is no longer so. Because it is no longer so, it is just possible that the Holy Spirit may begin to have his way in countless congregations. Once it could be said it was the most segregated hour in American society. It is still truer than I wish it were, but it is not as true as it once was, thank the Lord. I have seen vast potential to get the job done that you intend, under God, to see done.

14 It was Jacques Maritan who said, "We cease to have a decorative Christianity and have a demonstrative one." I am convinced after my little visitation that there is nothing God intends to do or wants done that will not be possible for us to perform. If I must stand here as indeed I must, as a kind of establishment figure, I guess I am the house establishmentarianism, I want to affirm that this movement is what you undertake here this summer.

15 You have had many reminders that we are global people, vivid reminders by those introduced from all over the world and by local people. I should think that the Gospel can be put this way: there are no nobodies anymore, that in Jesus Christ everybody is a somebody. There are no out of the way places, that every place is of vast significance, for God intends his work of witness to be discharged there.

16 As we continue reading the first portion of the first chapter of First John we find these words: "We want you to be with us in this common life with God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son because the more this fellowship extends, the greater the joy it brings to us who are already in it." It remains then for us to pray.

17 Almighty and everlasting God, by whose Spirit the whole body of the Church's covenant is sanctified, receive our supplications and prayers which we offer before You for all states of humankind and for your Holy Church, that every member of the same, in his vocation and ministry, may truly and loyally serve You through Jesus Christ our Lord. And grant, O Lord, that as we are baptized into the death of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, so by continually mortifying our corrupt affections, we may be buried with him and that with the grave escape death, and pass to our joyful resurrection, for his merits who died and was buried and rose again for us, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. And, finally, Almighty God, maker of all things and Father of all humanity, you have shown us in Christ the purpose of your creation, and called us to responsible service to the world, so we pray for the world society for all humankind, for all nations, for our own country, for the countries of all peoples. And we pray for your

blessing on this Assembly and all that it undertakes in all its parts. May what we do be well-pleasing in your sight. Where we may be at fault, forgive us. Where we are in accord with your purposes, prosper our efforts, which we understand to be rendered on behalf of all mankind, for whom all the efforts of Jesus Christ were rendered. In His name we pray. Amen.

-- Bishop James K. Mathews