

2.1 Laity Address by Vaselyna Babych and Audun Westad

“For in Him we live and move and have our being”

I was born in Christian family in small village Kamyantsya, that is few minutes from Hungarian and Slovakian border. Wonderful village with a small creek running aside of the road, beautiful trees, mountains that surrounds the village from all around, people that know each other and greet you with the words “ Glory to Jesus” - a perfect place on Earth before you go to Heaven.

When I was a kid my parents always took me to church on Sunday morning and sometimes I was upset with this as all of my friends could sleep longer on Sunday when my sister and I had to wake up early to get ready for the church. I didn't realize that church will play such a significant role in my life and obedience to my parents will bear wonderful fruits.

My grandfather was faithful to God during Soviet Union time and Methodist church in Kamyanytsa continued to exist during persecution. Durability of Pastor Ivan Vuksta and my grandfather along with other church members of his age strengthened my faith. Still today we have older people in our church that had gone through many persecutions and stayed close to God. When you look into their faces you see the Love of God and you really can feel the warmth of their souls.

When I grow up I always had a desire to do more for God, to be used more for His Kingdom. Thus I became Sunday school teacher at the age of 13 and in a few years I was engaged in youth ministry. Till this time I serve to young generation of our church, and that also keeps me younger ☺

“For in Him we live and move and have our being”. We all probably spent a lot of time contemplating on this verse, as it is a theme of our Central Conference. What does this verse mean to you and me personally, do we really understand what does it say about? When I was a child I had many dreams and one of them was to speak English, I mean not to learn English but to speak, because I did not really want to spent time studying language, I thought that God will give me a gift of English and one day I will wake up in the morning speaking English fluently, but God had a different plan. Nevertheless at the beginning of practicing my English with native speakers there were words that I did not understand and I was too shy to confess that I don't get them. Most of the time I got the point of what people were talking about, but also there were times when people asked me something and were expecting to get a reply but instead of that I just nodded my head confirming that I understood them and kept smiling with no reaction to their question or request. Now for sure I am ashamed for those cases. Recently we had youth summer camp for the young people from Ukraine and the theme of the camp was parable about Sower and different types of the soil. One of the types was soil at the path, which means we hear the word of God but as we do not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart.

Thus what it means for us to live in Him and move in Him and have our being?

I will not be able to answer this question for you, but I will share my feelings about it. To live in someone probably means to have the same flesh, blood, heart. We know that Jesus was the one without sin, if we are the same body with Him our main goal is to be without sin. Jesus said that He is the vine, and we are the branches and if we remain in Him we will bear much fruit, apart from Him we can do nothing. To be the part of the vine means to have the same juice running in our branches.

We, Methodists, help millions, and at the General Conference I have received a Tshirt with print on it: “United we help millions. What's next?” I would say: how about to help ourselves? Often time we focus so much on bearing fruits by helping others, doing ministries, fighting for the rights of people and these things are very much needed and important, BUT what about our living in God? Do we still have His blood running in our veins? God says to us in Psalm 46:10 “Be still, and know that I am God”. As I serve in church for many years, I

used to do a lot of ministries, and I have a plan for the year ahead, what kind of camps we are going to have, conferences, meetings, celebrations, there are so many events, so that the whole year turns to be very busy. When time comes to fulfil all these plans I am running with the whole head into it, and I can honestly confess that there is no free time to “be still” and to link to my very being, my God. I am too much busy doing ministry for God that I have no time for God Himself. He says that time spent with Him has crucial importance for my life. Nowadays we strive a lot for unity of our church, but have we ever thought that our Global unity depends on our personal unity with God? Without it we will struggle trying to be really united church. But if we all have true God inside of us He will unite our hearts.

Every day when we wake up, one of the very first things we do - we dress up. God wants us to “Put Him on” and “wear Him” throughout the days and it means to have His thoughts and mind, to look like Him, so that when other people look at us they could see the image of God in us.

The United Methodist Church along with other churches is called to be a bride of Jesus.

The imagery and symbolism of marriage is applied to Christ and the body of believers known as the church. The church is comprised of those who have trusted in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and have received eternal life. Christ, the Bridegroom, has sacrificially and lovingly chosen the church to be His bride. Just as there was a betrothal period in biblical times during which the bride and groom were separated until the wedding, so is the bride of Christ separated from her Bridegroom during the church age. Her responsibility during the betrothal period is to be faithful to Him. Church is also compared with the hospital, where all who are seek and weary, tired and lost may come and find a shelter. When we visit the hospital, we pursue the only goal – to recover, not just to visit it and remain the same. Those lost, seek, weary and tired that come to the church need also to be transformed into a bride of Christ. At the second coming of Christ, the church will be united with the Bridegroom and the official “wedding ceremony” will take place and, with it, the eternal union of Christ and His bride will be actualized.

Meanwhile we are placed on Earth to be the light of Jesus Christ and do good deeds so that others seeing them may glorify our Father who is in heaven. God gives us many opportunities for ministry in our areas. When we live out the word of God others may read it through our lives. Someone said:” Preach the gospel at all times and use words if necessary”.

Central Asia District of UMC is the youngest district in Eurasia. It consists of 14 congregations in two countries Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. From the beginning creation and development of strong ministry with young people was our priority. For this purpose we started to conduct annual evangelism camp which gathered together up to 100 people each year – 50% of them are believers and the other half are unbelievers who didn't attend church before and have never heard about Jesus Christ. We've had wonderful fruits of this camp each time – people who committed their lives to our Lord. Now almost all our churches have youth ministry and several years ago we started doing annual Youth Forum for young leaders of our churches to inspire and equip them for ministry. Besides official district programs our youth regularly makes visits to each other, has sport programs, helps in work with children, participates in social ministry and does mission together during the year.

We have good and fast growing ministry with international students in Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan, where people with different background come to faith in Jesus. But our main joy is many young local pastors and elders who serve in different locations and many young students at Centre of Church Leadership who decided fully commit their lives to ministry. Young people are very active in evangelism.

The hard part of our ministry in Central Asia District is the fact that we have very strict laws on religious affairs and very big distance between the churches.

The church has many ministries, holding its carriage in the needs of society and church purposes. "Youth to Jesus", organization of young people in Lviv, Ukraine, has taken a unique position in the Body of Christ, where in accessible form and outside the church walls Gospel is preached to those who do not dare to cross the threshold of the church but is open for contact in an informal atmosphere. A kind of organization became a buffer zone between the world and the church also allows people who just started their walk with Jesus to decide a part of which church they want to be. One of the strong sides of "Youth to Jesus" is the fact that we allow people to participate in all ministries we have and then they may decide with their vocation. It can be involving in such activities as English club, small group, work with orphanages, worship, preaching, or come up with some new creative ministries.

At this stage of the service in Lviv, Ukraine we faced with such problems as the traditional desire of all Christians to stay with what they have achieved. To move from the motion into a steel structure, where you can comfortably watch stability.

Imagine a train hurtling at full speed. Suddenly it is disconnected from the mains. What happens to it from the perspective of someone sitting in the train? At first, nothing. The train continues to move by the inertia, but slower and slower. However, the speed reduction is very little due to the great mass of the train; it stretches in time, which is almost not perceived by the consciousness. Yet at some point, a passenger suddenly realizes that the rhythm of the wheels changed, it became much more slowly; and this train will soon stop at all. The church is like this big massive train, and it may happen to us that we took a very good start and move with a high speed, we all are people sitting in the cars of the train. But what if our train is moving only by inertia? What if we are no longer connected to the mains? It is our responsibility to check this out, and fix it if it is needed.

Dear believers in Jesus Christ, dear bride of Christ, we wait with great anticipation for the day when we will be united with our Bridegroom. Until then, we remain faithful to Him. We all have to live in Him and move and have our being in Him and with all the redeemed of the Lord proclaim: "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Vaselyna Babych

*Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?
May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?
Without all doubt, we may.*

John Wesley, in his sermon "The Catholic spirit"

I

I have many fond memories from growing up in the southern part of Norway, in a town called Flekkefjord. I remember playing soccer with my friends in the park right by our house, running around with the other kids who grew up in the same street as I did. I remember the smell of summer rain when we stood down at the docks fishing. I recall the sound of all the cars passing by, as we were climbing the enormous tree across the street from the church. I remember how we knew everyone we met when we were taking a walk downtown. It was a good life growing up in this little town.

Luckily, I remember going to church, too. Or "Metodisten", as it was often referred to. One of the things I remember the best from my childhood in "Metodisten" is attending Sunday School. The Sunday School teachers taught us about Jesus, the prophets of the Old Testament, the Bible and much more. They taught us that the Gospel was about loving and caring – even for those who did not deserve our love and caring. They taught us that the Good News was about unconditional love from Jesus Christ to all humankind. In summary, it is fair to say they taught us the same things that Sunday Schools all across the United Methodist Church in Norway did.

When I became a teenager, I was proud of being a part of church with a real care for the world and the people who live in it. I learned that there were many cool examples of how John Wesley and the people called Methodists had worked to make the world a better place.

As a student in Kristiansand, I had the pleasure of attending a UMC congregation whose pastor was really keen on reaching out to new people with the message of God's unconditional love. I do not think I will ever reach his level of commitment, but he inspired me to talk more about God's love to people I met in my life. Kristiansand was also the place where I first experienced and realized that the people called Methodists were not of one mind in all questions. However, this was not a negative thing for our work or our fellowship. We had good dialogues about our different opinions on many different topics: human sexuality, our responsibility for our planet, how to understand different passages in the Bible and much more. No matter what topic we talked about, I never experienced that anyone thought less of me when I was expressing my opinions and beliefs. One of the elderly in that congregation even said that our disagreement on certain issues was a good thing, since it forced him to really think things through and to study the Scripture.

II

There are many social justice issues throughout history where the people called Methodists have been in the forefront, fighting the good cause. The fight for the abolition of slavery is one example; the fight for women's liberation is another. This year we are fortunate enough to be able to celebrate the 60th anniversary for the ordination of female clergy in The United Methodist Church. The long and painful struggle fought by the faithful, visionary and brave Methodist women, and some men, paid off at the General Conference in Minneapolis in 1956. These brave women sacrificed a lot, just to make sure that you and I could inherit a stronger and more inclusive church. A church where equality is fundamental.

However, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that there is equality between the genders as soon as the organizational and disciplinary obstacles are removed. Even though one may say that the battle was won 60 years ago, we still see that there is a long way ahead – even in our Central Conference. I'm truly thankful for

belonging to a church that has been in the forefront in the fight for gender equality. But we should be wary of simply praising ourselves for our previous victories, as there is still much work to be done when it comes to gender equality. For example, we have yet to see a female bishop in our Central Conference. Neither has there been a long line of female district super intendants in any of the Annual Conferences in this Central Conference, even though we have seen a few in both Latvia and Russia. For my own Annual Conference, I must sadly admit that we have only had one female district superintendent, and that was early in the nineties. Moreover, for our laity in all the different annual conferences: the average female worker earns less than a male worker in a similar job. One can find many saddening examples of inequality both within our church and in our society. The struggle was not just a one-time fight, won once and for all in Minneapolis. It is our job – yours and mine, clergy and lay – to honor the brave Methodist women who fought for us, to continue their fight, both within the UMC and in the societies where we live our daily lives.

Returning to the topic of ordination of women within the UMC, there is one aspect in particular that fascinates, and sometimes frightens me: It is 60 years since we changed the Book of Discipline, but still we are not of one mind in this question. The disrespect some of our female colleagues experience from some laity and clergy members of The United Methodist Church is unworthy, especially since The United Methodist Church so clearly is a Church where gender is irrelevant when it comes to a person's ability to live out their calling from God.

III

As Christians, we sometimes have a tendency to overcomplicate questions that should be held simple. In our transition from being a Methodist Movement to becoming a Methodist Church, we have complicated many things – both organizational and theological.

In all Sunday schools I have attended – both as a child, as an uncle and as a dad – they have kept their teachings simple. Some might say too simple, but I am not sure that is entirely true. Their teaching is not false: It is just easy to understand and to get a grasp of. The main mission of the modern Sunday schools is to teach the essence of Christianity: God's unconditional love for all human beings.

I have heard many pastors and many wise lay preachers preach in such a manner that you have difficulties with really understanding their message. The older I get, the more I grow fond of what is written in Luke 18:17: "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it". In a society so fixated on growing up that we almost go from toddlers to teenagers in one giant leap, maybe we should try to hold on to childhood and all that comes with it. If not all, then at least some aspects of it.

In our different Annual Conferences, we all sing different songs that in essence is quite like the English song "Jesus loves me!". The way I see it, these types of songs sum up what we want to teach our young ones: The Bible tells us that Jesus loves us. End of story. No questions asked.

Jesus loves me! This I know,
For the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to Him belong,
They are weak but He is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus loves me!
The Bible tells me so.

IV

By now, I think many of you will say that I am keeping it too simple and you might be wondering how we should deal with the difficult questions. You might even wonder how I can make up my mind in difficult questions, when all I seem to care about here is a simple message of God's love for all. But I say, let us keep it simple.

Let us not overcomplicate things.

Let us stay true to the essence.

Let us not be fooled to focus only on minor details.

Even John Wesley struggled with people being of different minds within the same church. In his sermon "The Catholic Spirit", Wesley talks about people being of different minds, but still of one heart. And even though he stresses the point of unity, he also says: "Hold you fast that which you believe is most acceptable to God, and I will do the same." . For some, it might seem as a contradiction – especially when we start talking about social justice and our fight for equal rights.

For me, social justice and the fight for equal rights is an essential part of being a Methodist, whether it be for female leaders in our church, for LGBTQ people or against racism. For others, it is not. For United Methodists, there are many topics on which we do not totally agree on all details. Examples include the status of LGBTQ people within the United Methodist Church and society as a whole, baptism or our role as caretakers for a green but wounded world. Nonetheless, we stay united. We are a global church covering hundreds of different cultures. Our differences are natural and nothing to be afraid of. We are of the same heart and acknowledge that our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world is easier done when we stay united and work united as one body for Christ. A good example of our united strength is the spectacular results of the campaign "Imagine no Malaria".

To sum this up; In his sermon "The Catholic Spirit", John Wesley says that we all should stay true to what we believe is correct, even if others of same heart do not share your point of view. And this is important! It is in our Methodist core, our theological DNA, to use the Methodist Quadrilateral to interpret Methodism and not just accept a set of rules and teachings. The Methodist Quadrilateral is a method of theological reflection that embraces, but also encourages, people of same heart to have different opinions. It is utopian, and somewhat naïve, to think that I will get the same answer as you in all questions when we use Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience to find out what religion and Methodism is to oneself.

V

The reason why we are here in Fredrikstad today is that we are of one heart.

The reason why we all go to the same churches each Sunday (and the other days of the week too) is that we are of one heart.

The reason why we stick together as a United Methodist Church, a church who wants to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, is that we are of one heart.

We are not, and will never be, of one mind. Nevertheless, we have the choice to stay together. We can choose to stay together because we are of one heart and because our mission is greater than our differences.

In closing, I would like once more to congratulate the United Methodist Church and the women of the United Methodist Church with the 60th Anniversary of the ordination of Women. This is a fundamental celebration, and we will use this as motivation:

As long as it is needed, we will continue our fight for equal rights.

And even though the road ahead of us may be bumpy and sometimes unpleasant, we must remember our mission: To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Therefore, we will continue together.

As long as it is needed, we will continue to fight for what we believe is right.

As long as it is needed, we will stay a United Methodist Church.

Audun Westad