

Text: Luke 9:28-36

Title: "And a Voice Came from the Cloud!"

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Tired and weary from the week's events, a couple of the disciples went up the mountain with Jesus to pray. Exhausted and nearly asleep they literally saw Jesus in a new light. Now shining in dazzling white, Jesus stood with Moses and Elijah learning his eventual fate in Jerusalem. Soon, Jesus would have to face his death on a cross and the reality that the disciples he loved would abandon him in his time of need. It was not the most welcome news Jesus wanted to hear but face it he must. Rather than receiving encouragement from his disciples, even though they saw him in a new light, once again they tried to force Jesus into their view of him, bidding him to stay. Faithful, and with good intentions, the disciples tried to honor Jesus, but they didn't bother to ask Jesus, "What are our instructions?" "What is the mission?" "How can we help you and support you on the mission you must face?" Instead, they tried to get Jesus to conform their notion of righteousness and mission. Once again, the disciples were in a cloud of their own making, before the cloud of God enveloped them. For a while they were left in a fog – Jesus and his disciples alike. Then a voice came from cloud that said, "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him!" But in the days that followed this event, did the disciples ever really stop and listen? Did they ever stop and ask Jesus how they could help him? Did they ever really heed the voice from the cloud? Instead they ignored the voice from the cloud and stuck to their view of Jesus' mission as a political one and argued who would sit on Jesus' right and left when he came into that kingdom. One even went as far as betraying Jesus to try and force Jesus' hand into being the Jesus he wanted him to be. The disciples chose to live in a cloud of their own making, listening to the voices that came out of their own mouths rather than take the recommendation from the divine voice that said, "Listen!"

Now I know you have come today in expectation to hear my take on the General Conference and what impact it means for Laurel. Some of you are maybe even expecting me to be that voice from the cloud that will shed light on where we are as a denomination and what this means for our future. I don't presume to be the

voice of God. But I have done a lot of listening, and I can answer what it means for Laurel and what we are going to live into here at Laurel.

For several decades now the United Methodist Church, we, have been living in a fog of our own making regarding the amount of inclusion the denomination will extend to LGBTQI+ individuals. Faithful disciples on all sides of the issue have struggled, prayed, debated, and have formed battle lines to defend their position. With each decision that has been made in these last few decades, we continue to behave as the world behaves. We draw lines in the sand, we go to war and if someone crosses our line, we fire rounds of ammunition promoting our own view of scripture, our view of Jesus and our view of righteousness, wounding and hurting each other in the process. Some have even gone as far as proclaiming victory when their view of Jesus wins the day, all the while ignoring the suffering inflicted on all sides, and those who unfortunately get caught in the crosshairs. Thankfully Jesus stands with us in the fog, but I am sure he is wondering, when will punch pause on our own mouths long enough to listen to the voice of God.

Now I know there is always that one person out there who says, "Well if we just follow the Bible, we will not have this problem! If we just listen to Jesus, we won't have this problem!" What they are usually saying is that if you believe the Bible as I believe, or see Jesus as I see Jesus, we will not have this problem!" True, if we all thought alike, there wouldn't be this problem. But in case you haven't noticed, God didn't create us alike. We don't speak the same language, we don't look alike, think alike, or see the world alike. Just like the disciples, we do not see Jesus the same! We see the Jesus we see. And like the disciples, we often see the Jesus we want to see. Some see the Jesus who upholds and fulfills the law, others see Jesus the revolutionary who never seems to agree with the religious leaders and challenges them at every turn to lay aside their narrow interpretation of the Scripture. Some see Jesus as friend who walks along side them, some see him holy, high and lifted up, worthy of our thanks and praise. What I am saying is, like the disciples up on the mountain, faithful people see Jesus differently, and our view of Jesus is often skewed by our preconceived notions of righteousness. Our biggest failure is the failure to ask Jesus where are you leading us today and how can we help? When we ask that question, then we stand a better chance of seeing Jesus more than just in a new light, but quite possibly see him as he actually is!

So, what does this have to do with General Conference and how does their latest decision affect Laurel? In terms of Laurel, the answer is quite simple.

Laurel will continue to be Laurel. We will continue to be this strange diverse mix who loves and appreciates each other. We will continue love, care and support our more conservative brethren at Laurel, and we will continue to love, care, support and utilize the giftedness of our LGBTQI+ members who have been given gifts from God. We will comfort our LGBTQI+ members in this most recent hurt inflicted upon them at the General Conference and through various social media postings. We want to say we love you, care about you, will continue let you use your gifts at Laurel and to say how greatly impoverished we would be without you! I have cried with you more than once this week.

Laurel has always been this wonderful strange mix of people. In many respects it has been a mini kingdom of God. We are Cub fans, White Sox fans, and Cardinal fans. We are Christians and Non-Christians seeking to understand God. Our membership consists of life long Methodist and former Catholic, former Baptist, former Pentecostal, former non-denominational and people of other religions. We are politically conservative, liberal, libertarian, progressive and socialist all under one roof. Heterosexual and LGTBQI+. We speak multiple languages. We are not the same or of one mind in any of these things, let alone theologically unified in one belief, other than we are united in our desire to know and follow Jesus and we are united in love for one another.

Despite what the General Conference says, we at Laurel will continue to be a church that makes a witness to our community that strives to live out that **we can be a church united in love without being united theologically. Love is our higher calling!** And if our denomination would spend as much time trying to find ways to love one another as we have spent fighting with one another on this one issue then we would have a lot fewer hurt people and be a denomination that looks much different than what was portrayed in the press this week.

Do you remember how the church was viewed back in New Testament times? Non-Christian people used to look at Christians as being strange because they were so diverse yet bound by love. Non-Christians used to comment, look at those Christians? See how they love each other? They are strange! They are this weird conglomeration of people yet see how they love one another? Early press

coverage of the Christians where they were this strange mixture of people who loved one another despite all the differences. That love was so great their opponents made fun of them for it! I ask you, “What did the world see this week from us? What did they report in their newsfeeds?” A global church, fighting just like the rest of the world, trying to figure out how to love! Whom to love! And if it is even possible to love one another!

Laurel will continue to be a church that makes a witness to our community **that we can be a church united in love without being united theologically.** We will continue to be open and caring for all people. We can be that church that lives into John Wesley’s call for Methodists to do no harm, do good and stay in love with God.

We can be that church. We do not have to live in the fog. But in order to do that we need to do some confessing. Mother Teresa reminds us we need a clean heart to see God and hear God.

We need to confess when we have bullied conservative voices in our church to the point they have walked away rather than continue to share their insights and gifts.

We need to confess when we have made centrists in our congregation feel uncomfortable by the mudslinging that goes back and forth between opposing viewpoints.

We need to confess the pain and hurt we that has been inflicted upon the LGBTQI+ community and their supporters and how unwelcoming and how unloving they have been made to feel. Not just in this last week’s vote, but how we have approached the entire conversation over the last few decades.

We need to confess it. We need to confess to all the hurt. And the communion table that is right before us is the place where that healing can begin.

Jesus invites all to his table. Jesus had two religious’ zealots at his table, but they were invited. He had an outcast at his table, he had disciple whom he loved at this table, one who would betray him in word at the table, and another who would betray him in deed at the table. All were invited. They were not of one mind. Neither are we of one theological mind. We also need to remember the disciples were all wrong about their understanding of Jesus and what he was

trying to do, but all were invited to his table. Each of us is invited so we can be a part of Christ's church and to receive the healing we desperately need. All were a part of Jesus' fellowship.

Let us heed the voice from the cloud that said, "Listen to him!" And what did Jesus tell us? Jesus said in John 13:34-35 "A new command I give to you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

The apostle Paul reminded us further in Romans 12:10 "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves." And in Ephesians 4:2 "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."

Like the disciples on the mount of transfiguration, we are tired and weary from the week's events. We need a new vision of Jesus in our church! We need to escape the cloud of our own creation and acknowledge we don't know as much about righteousness as we think. We need to heed the voice from the clouds and listen and align ourselves with Jesus and our savior's mission. We need to ask Jesus today, "What is our mission?" "Where are you leading us, and how can we bring God's hope and love to a divided church and broken world stuck in the fog of life?"