

## **“What a Tradition!”**

Date: May 22, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Philippians 3:12-14

Occasion: Heritage Sunday

Theme: Perseverance, Francis Asbury, Richard Allen

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect. Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal, the prize for which God has called me upward in Christ Jesus.” Powerful words. Powerful words.

The apostle Paul writes these words while in prison, nearing the end of his life. What words of hope. What words of encouragement. What words of inspiration to the church. “I press on toward the goal of the prize in Christ Jesus.”

What encouraging words to hear after this week’s contentious debates at General Conference. We, as United Methodists, are not perfect by any stretch of the imagination. But we press on toward the goal of the prize in Christ Jesus. And .... today is Heritage Sunday.

So today we’re going to take a look back at some United Methodist history, as well as looking forward to our future. The year 2016 is special in United Methodist history. This year is the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the founding bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church. We’ll learn more about him in a minute.

This year also marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of The African Methodist Episcopal Church under the leadership of Richard Allen, the first AME bishop. Issues that plagued our church 200 years ago are still relevant to our church today.

Looking back enables us to see from whence we have come. But Heritage Sunday and days like it are not meant to be nostalgic

and rear-view mirror driving. They are intended to stir our faith, reminding us who we are. What's in our DNA that makes us who we are and what sends us out into the world to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The United Methodist Church does not designate saints like the Catholic Church does. However, if we did, Francis Asbury would likely be among those canonized. The Rev. Alfred T. Day III says Asbury has been called "The American Saint," and "The Prophet of the Long Road." (Day is the general secretary of the General Commission on Archives and History).

In the United States there are towns and cities, churches and hospitals, homes and schools named for Francis Asbury. We even have a road in Erie, PA named after him. Asbury was the man who brought Methodism to America in 1771.

Let's watch this short video clip about the man who brought the Methodist message to America.

Talk about a man who pressed on towards the goal. A man called of God – out of the church pew and into the pulpit, who gave himself over to God to be used as God saw fit. He rose to the position of a bishop, and literally helped to transform America as it was being birthed into existence. Francis Asbury reminds us all to press on.

Another early saint in our tradition is an African-American by the name of Richard Allen. You heard him mentioned in the video. He was born into slavery but bought his freedom and changed his name from "Negro Richard" to Richard Allen. At a young age he

attended Methodist meetings, heard the gospel, then became a lay preacher.

Richard Allen was later ordained by the newly ordained bishop Francis Asbury and went on to preach mostly to slaves and to freed slaves, but the whites were also drawn to his charismatic style. Asbury considered him an excellent preacher.

One day, while worshiping in St. Georges Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, the custodian asked Allen and two other black worshipers to get up from their seats on the main floor and move to the balcony, to allow some white worshipers to sit where they were.

The greatest insult was this happened while they were praying, and the custodian would not wait till they were finished. The three black worshipers got up and walked out of the back of the church, never to return again.

Not all, but many of the black Methodists left the movement and started their own congregations. Richard Allen's first church was a nearby storeroom. These black Methodists struggled with the question of whether to remain in the Methodist Episcopal Church or establish a new one.

Finally, in 1816 Allen became the first bishop in the new African Methodist Episcopal Church. However, Allen repeatedly said that he was brought to Christ by Methodists, he was nurtured in the faith by Methodists and he would always and forever be indebted to the Methodists for his strong faith in Christ.

In spite of his treatment, in spite of the prejudice that was shown, he still expressed love towards the church that gave him his faith. Richard Allen inspires us to press on toward the goal.

On Tuesday of this past week (May 16<sup>th</sup>) General Conference remembered and celebrated the birth of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The Rev. Alfred T. Day III, whom we heard speak in the video, was present and delivered an address to the delegates gathered in Portland Oregon.

He remembered out loud with the delegates, how under the leadership of Richard Allen, the AME Church emerged from the same Wesleyan theology, spirit and practical divinity as the Methodist Episcopal Church of Francis Asbury. And Day had these comments:

“What striking timing for this presentation. General Conference coming to worship this morning, with rumors of schism rampant all over the hall, remembering a painful 200-year old breach among Methodists – a breach that was only brought back to full communion in 2012.”

During the worship at General Conference, various leaders celebrated the strength, perseverance and resilience of the AME church. Rev. Day speaking again: “To this great Methodist church, conceived in racial injustice and born out of an unquenchable thirst for freedom; to brothers and sisters of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church says – YOU are the Lord’s doing and YOU are marvelous in our eyes.”

Today the AME Church is 3 million strong in more than 7,000 congregations in 20 episcopal areas, in more than 40 countries on 5 different continents. They are the spiritual sons and daughters of

John and Charles Wesley, Francis Asbury and Richard Allen. And the Methodist tradition is stronger because of them.

However, it was not all praise and back-slapping and a big party. Rev. Day reminded General Conference, as he reminds us, that the racial tensions and the discrimination that caused black and white Methodists to split into separate denominations and even separate congregations is a painful scar from our past.

Rev. Day called on the General Conference to renewed confession and action that will end all racial injustice, and to work for the full and equal participation of the varied hues represented in the United Methodist Church, even around the world.

We have a wonderful history, and a painful and ugly history, and they exist side by side. Ours is a wonderful tradition. I am so proud to be a United Methodist Christian. It is the UM Church that gave me my faith, taught me in college and trained me to be a pastor.

We have deep problems in our denomination, problems that will not go away simply by wishing them away. We have serious disagreements about how we interpret Scripture and deeply divided opinions about issues of human sexuality. We are far from perfect.

And still, we press on toward the goal of the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus. May God bless the United Methodist Church as we struggle together, in love and in prayer.

God's love is available to everyone. We are a tradition that from the beginning has valued inclusion, including all who would follow Christ. We are a people who believe that it is possible to experience God's love in Jesus Christ, and in the experience be transformed by it. We are a people who are propelled to put God's

love into action and to be difference-makers, literally to change the world.

May God bless the United Methodist Church. What a tradition!