

THE PARADOX OF AFRICAN AMERICAN METHODIST HISTORY

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Good evening. Grace and peace are yours, because God is the Creator of all of life, and Jesus Christ the Redeemer of each life. Amen.

First, may I express my deepest gratitude to Rev. Robert Williams, the General Commission on Archives and History, and all those gathered here for this special recognition and award. A special thanks to Dr. Shopshire for that wonderful introduction, Mr. Mark Miller for the inspiring music and to Rev. Denise Smartt-Sears for the tribute from Black Methodists for Church Renewal. All of these have deeply moved me. Then to my family, my daughter, Lori, and her husband, Mark Robinson, who are present; to my wife, Josephine, who has stood with me, around me, and supported me for 49 years. In a real sense this is her award, too. And likewise, thank you to members of the African American Methodist Heritage Center Board who are present, and in whose behalf I accept this very special award. Thank you all.

As I have reflected on this great honor, I am reminded that life is filled with many paradoxes. That is, experiences which seem to be beyond reason or contradictory, and yet like rain, lightning, and thunder result in dramatic growth of vegetation.

My freshman year's survey of history class, where 200 of us were herded into a large auditorium to hear various professors drone on and on about the history of the world from A to Z, was an experience which should have made me vow never to read another history book. Yet, little did I know that in subsequent classes and personal readings, history would come to mean so much to me that it would be my major along with education.

I have watched our United Methodist Church struggle amidst the hemorrhaging loss of members, attempting to find its path for the future. At the same time it often rejects or ignores its great and illustrious history. Instead, it spends so much energy and money to find the magic elixir, while the stories and personalities of our history could fill a "how to" book. And whereas James Russell Lowell was right, that "new occasions teach new duties," and whereas we need new wineskins for new wine, let us never forget that our purpose for being, is not new but resides in our great history—the history of the New Testament, the Wesleys, the long rides of the circuit riders like Francis Asbury, the two Great Awakenings—and the social consciousness throughout the years that addressed the social evils of this nation, from alcohol to slavery, to women's rights, workers equality, and justice for all God's

people, everywhere.

The paradox is that we cannot find the new wine, save we rediscover the values, theology, and spirit of those who went before us. There were those who saw no contradiction between evangelism and social action, or the important pairing expressed in the words of Charles Wesley, "Unite the pair so long disjoined, knowledge and vital piety." Is it not paradoxical that the uniqueness of the historical evolution of this great denomination has been its ability to be inclusive; its inclusion of lay members in decision making, of persons of color, of women and a large number of ethnic minorities and other groups?

It follows that such an evolution is filled with creative tension. For those eight million who represent the racial majority, it often requires energy, time and financial resources to be inclusive, that are often seen as sacrificial at the most, and simply annoying at the least.

But for the minority, like the 440,000 African Americans, it is often a struggle of emptiness in a sea of the majority world's culture, and a hunger for models, images and symbols that represent our unique cultural heritage. It is a constant struggle for identity and purpose, most especially during the period of 1939 to 1968. Beyond all this, proportionally and in practice, no other religious entity in the world is as diverse.

All of this is a paradox. Or in the words of the philosopher George Santayana, "those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat its mistakes." But another philosopher said the lesson of history is that we never learn the lessons of history. It is a paradox.

There also exists the paradox that we, who treasure the Bible, cannot heed the Biblical lessons of Joshua. When the Hebrew children were about to cross over the Jordan into the promised land, he stopped them in their tracks, and told each tribe leader to pick up a stone, so that in years to come when their children ask, "Mommy, Daddy, what do these stones mean," you can tell them that the Lord delivered us. The message of Joshua was that if you have no purpose, no identity, and do not know from whence you came, you are lost and can never forge a future. No, we have come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord. And who will teach this history if there are no stones?

When the African American Methodist Heritage Center became partners with the Commission on Archives and History, the decision was made after several years of futile attempts to create our own entity in a historical black college. And yet, because of this fortuitous partnership, we gained accessibility to more materials than we could ever have amassed. Amidst the state-of-the-art archives facility located on the campus of Drew University, which is ideal for in-depth research, we suddenly found ourselves in a better bargaining position to negotiate with the same schools that were financially unable to envision a full archives center, but are now excited. This is seen in our recent agreement with Dillard University to create an archival center in their new library in partnership with the African American Methodist Heritage Center. Likewise Gammon Theological Seminary has agreed to become our first designated site, with a focus on helping future pastors learn

their rich history. Others who were timid will now follow in developing significant historical sites and archive centers, utilizing our contacts, basic resources and the General Church Archives Center and staff. The result will be that the story of African Americans and our United Methodist Church can be shared with young people and other constituents all across the large populations in the south of our country, far beyond our wildest dreams.

But the African American story itself is filled with paradoxes. On the one hand, Blacks were present from the very beginning of the Wesleyan movement in this country. Yet, for a majority of the members of this denomination, Blacks are seen as an addition, a kind of an appendage. For example, one African American woman asked me recently, did Blacks join this church at the time of the Central Jurisdiction? It is a paradox. And yet, it also understandable. It becomes difficult for any group of people to embrace their past when it is filled with tragedy and oppression. Like a drama, those in the white hats always win, and in every story you read, you are wearing a black hat, without even a black horse to ride.

Yet, what a story we have. We are those who remember that when the Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in 1784, one of its first set of resolutions was against the institution of slavery. Those resolutions were first formulated at Barratt's Chapel on the eastern shore of Maryland in a preliminary meeting before the Christmas conference. Although some Methodists continued to cling to the rationale of slavery as God-ordained, including George Whitefield, the actions of the Christmas Conference of 1784 eventually prevailed, and continued to do so right up to the 1844 great schism forming two branches of Episcopal Methodism. Yet, all of this was a sign of hope for Blacks. John Wesley himself put it this way: "I strike at the root of this complicated villainy . . . I absolutely deny all slave holdings to be consistent with any degree of natural justice . . . Liberty is the right of any human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air, and no human can deprive him of that right." The theologian H. Richard Niebuhr once said, "it was the position that Methodism took against slavery and its efforts to exclude slave holders from its membership that attracted Negroes to the Church."

And in large numbers we came. By the end of the Civil War some 200,000 were members in the South, though many of these were lost to other Methodist denominations. During those days, a Negro Spiritual captured the spirit of the Methodist movement:

"Get ya ready, there's a meeting here tonight,
 Get ya ready, there's a meeting here tonight."
 "I know it by the way you walk
 There's a meeting here tonight."
 I know it's among the METHODISTS
 There's a meeting here tonight."
 "My father says it is the best,
 There's a meeting here tonight
 To live an die a Methodist,
 There's a meeting here tonight . . ."

I share that authentic spiritual to illustrate the significance of Methodism for Blacks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. African American Methodists continued to play a vital role in this great Church. The abolitionist Frederick Douglass funeral was in Sharp Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore. Harriet Tubman, conductor of the Underground Railroad, was born a slave and a Methodist. Charles Albert Tindley, a Methodist pastor in Philadelphia, was a great preacher and hymn writer. The list goes on through Mary McCleod Bethune, Prince Hall, Dorothy Height and Joseph Lowery.

Perhaps that is the reason I have set this project as my total focus. Our hope as a denomination is inextricably tied to our ability to know and share the stories of all our people. It is this reality which places us into the New Testament kingdom of God—where all God’s people are worthy and equal. As our Lord put it, “except you lose yourself you cannot find yourself.” Or paraphrased, the key is to affirm one’s unique baggage, but then deposit it on the welcome table and pick up the baggage of all God’s children, and walk together children and not get weary.

And thus, I accept this award. I am ever conscious of the fact that I am a symbol and a sign of that struggle. There are feelings of anger, guilt and sometimes shame. The solution is that those who are in the minority of this great denomination must rediscover their positive identity. And that cannot be unless one learns their history.

The paradoxical question is, who will tell the story? Can the majority tell the minority’s story, and if they do, will it be believed? And yet, if the minority does not feel proud of their story, can they and will they tell it, revel in it, and share it with others? It is a paradox. I discovered recently an African proverb, “Until the lion has its own storyteller, the hunter has the best part of the story.” Without demythologizing that proverb, it is crucial that as African Americans we must tell and promulgate our own story. This is the critical value of the African American Methodist Heritage Center.

The final paradox, in a sense, is my own story. Although I have always loved history, I never spent much energy around my personal history. My father had told me the stories of his grandfather and his escape from slavery throughout Ohio and into Canada. So, though writing was not his forte, he wrote a book called *Sunrises and Sunsets for Freedom*. In this autobiographical book, he was able to trace his grandfather’s journey from slavery to freedom into Canada, to a settlement in North Buxton, Canada, where he and others created one of the most significant towns in the late nineteenth century. In recent years Josephine and I visited the settlement that still stands. I discovered that his church and the primary church of the community were Methodist and still carries the sign of the Buxton BME Church—I assume it meant Black Methodist Episcopal Church. Its origin I could not trace, but the paradox was that I, a Bishop of the Church, did not know my own Methodist history. I thought I was a third-generation Methodist; but I discovered I was at least a 4th generation Methodist; and my daughter, Lori, makes it five generations. Of course, my great grandfather William P. Walker, got caught in a scam and with a group of other ex-slaves and took a long wagon train to

Nebraska, chasing a dream of land and plenty. All this was only to discover that the free land was the western sand hills, where nothing could grow. That is how I got to Nebraska.

So tonight, I stand on hallowed ground, the ground of so many who watched, fought, and prayed. And as I hold this crystal rock, this symbol of the Distinguished Service Award, I hold it for 225 years of triumph amidst struggle; steal away melodic voices in the midst of suffering; of God's Trombones preaching amidst denial; the empowering sacraments in the midst of cotton fields; of whites and Blacks transcending segregation and bias. Or in the words of James Weldon Johnson:

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way
Thou who hast by thy hand
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in thy path we pray
Lest our feet stray from the places our God,
Where we met thee,
Lest our hearts drunk from the
Wine of the world we forget thee
Shadowed beneath thy hand
May we forever stand,
True to our God, true to our native land.