

*“Pulling Down the Poles”*

*Psalm 148; Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35*

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*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

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On August 14, 2003 at 4:09 EDT, the lights went out. The entire Northeast corridor, including New York and Boston, went dark in the largest blackout in U.S. history, shutting down everything including transportation. A good friend walked out of Manhattan 35 miles to his home in Ossining, New York.

Yet no one panicked. There was little looting; no price gouging. People shared cab rides and cell phones. One woman in Manhattan said she saw the Big Dipper for the first time in her life!

The reason for the blackout was the collapse of the Lake Erie loop involving more than 100 electric plants. It was traced, in part, to the failure to trim tree branches in Cleveland, and a telephone pole that brought down some electrical lines.

In the decade since, outages—especially in major storms—have become a way of life. Our supercharged, high-tech world relies almost entirely on a quaint, low-tech, 19<sup>th</sup> century tool: the telephone pole. Designed in the mid-1800’s to support Samuel Morse’s telegraph wires, they now deliver telephone, cable TV, Internet and electric power service. Wrote Steven Pearlstein in *The Washington Post*: “As a result it now takes only a strong gust of wind to bring the capital of the free world to a virtual standstill.”

The solution: bury the lines underground. Utilities say this solution is prohibitively expensive. It is expensive either way. Ask those who lost freezers full of food last fall and had burst pipes due to no heat this winter. Where is our vision for public works projects so much a part of our culture? The third water tunnel to New York City was activated in 1998 after nearly 30 years of construction. I am a layman in this area, but historically public and private partnerships have made such financing possible.

What it takes is a will to change. That's what it took in the Church over 2,000 years ago when it was poised to follow Jesus' mandate to make disciples of all nations. The problem was that some Jews—led by Peter—thought only Jews could follow Jesus as Messiah. To become a Christian one first had to become a Jew, to observe kosher laws, circumcision and all the rituals of Judaism.

That is the context for today's story in Acts when Peter explains his turnaround. The vision is in Acts 10 and now he's retelling his conversion to the Jerusalem Council. He thought fidelity to God meant excluding some of God's creation by the Jewish food laws. The vision said otherwise, the voice declaring, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." At that very moment Peter is called to go to Cornelius' home in Caesarea. Cornelius is a Gentile (a non-Jew) and a Roman army officer: in other words, about as far from righteous as one could get, except that he also worshipped God. So, though the religious rules would have kept Peter at home, he responds to the vision and goes. When he speaks to Cornelius and his household he declares (Acts 10:34) *"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."* Peter gets it! All are welcome! His very public "ah-ha!" in today's reading moves it a step further. He praises the action of the Holy Spirit for both Jew and Gentile, saying, *"If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"* Who, indeed?

Religious legalisms were the telephone poles that needed to be pulled down and replaced by a broad understanding of Torah: *"So God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."* (Genesis 1:27). "Them" includes Gentiles. This was a huge challenge for the early Church, resolved in Acts 15 by welcoming Gentiles as we studied in Disciple this past Tuesday. God is in the business of pulling down poles and doing a new thing. Who are we to hinder God?

Sadly, the United Methodist Church continues exclusionary practices toward people of same-sex orientation, denying the rites of ordination and marriage. It is worth noting that the Sacraments, Communion and baptism, are NOT denied on this basis. Sadly, some of us harbor prejudice against gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender people. Yet who are we to hinder God? I am glad this church is a Reconciling Congregation because, a year ago, I was clear in my own mind that I would not consider an appointment to a church that was not open this way. I am grateful you are. And I believe God is pleased. But there is more we can do. I hope you will join us in Dodd Hall on May 18 to see the 2009 movie “Prayers for Bobby” as we continue our witness and the growing vision God has for us in being open to all.

The challenge to be open to all is not limited to orientation. Each month we serve a meal in Dodd Hall to our neighbors who are homeless or at risk of being homeless. Are we to serve only, or also eat with our guests? I believe God calls us to the latter. The central act of our faith is a meal. Each month we come to the Lord’s table. It, and every meal, is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. Ought we not also to eat with our guests? There is always plenty of food. Yes, sometimes our guests do not have our same vocabulary or hygiene or world view. That’s okay. If we are uncomfortable about that, let us be honest and say so and ask God to guide us. Our guests DO have those unique fingerprints and retinas and DNA that are theirs alone among 7 billion people. Just like us. They have hopes and dreams. Just like us. They have fears, just like us. Who are we to hinder God?

One of the things we have studied in Confirmation is the history of racism in the United Methodist Church. That history deserves far more than a cursory glance here; suffice it to say, for this message, that our openness to people of different racial and cultural groups reflects, in large measure, the degree to which we are open to the Spirit. Our congregation does not yet reflect the average demographics of Milford which, in the 2010 census, is

85.4% white. If our 2013 average Sunday attendance of 180 reflected that percentage we would have 25 people of color present each week representing Black, Asian, Latino and Native American ancestry. We don't. This alone is not racism. Sociologists and others document reasons why some people are more comfortable with people from a similar racial and cultural background. But this is the Church of Jesus Christ. When a guest of color comes to Mary Taylor Memorial Church, as happened this Easter, and the white person they sit next to moves over, places a hymnal between them and doesn't look at them and doesn't respond to our guest's speaking "Good morning," the chilly reception makes one wonder. Of course, it was Easter, so it is possible that the inhospitable person was a guest themselves and inhospitable or in need of redemption. All the more reason that we who call Mary Taylor Memorial "home" must go out of our way to move beyond our comfort zone to welcome all. Who are we to hinder God?

The list is extensive: sexism, ageism, religious prejudice—today against Muslims but in my growing up years against Roman Catholics, and vice versa--; bias toward people with handicapping conditions; assumptions based on where someone went to school; where they live; the car they drive: we all can name them. But the ministry of Jesus, the witness of the Church, and the call to Christian living are clear: "*Do not call anything impure that I have made clean.*" Who are we to hinder God?

How do we get there? Prejudice is often undone by personal relationship. Yes, we can decide a positive relationship with someone different is the exception that proves the rule. Yet time and again I see rhetoric dissolve when we encounter people as people. This is what Jesus did the night before he died. In today's Gospel, Jesus knew Peter would deny him; he knew Judas would betray him. Yet he loved them until the end because he knew there was more to them. Sadly, Judas never discovered what Jesus saw. But Peter did. He discovered it because he was open to the Spirit that did a new thing; that promised a new future; that lived out the

truth of love that we are all, indeed, created in the image of God. The poles are being pulled down in our day, too.

The movie “42” is the story of Jackie Robinson and the integration of Major League Baseball. Please see it. An important aside is that both Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, were Methodists. At a pivotal point in the movie, Jackie Robinson is being stitched up by the trainer after having been spiked by Enos Slaughter of the St. Louis Cardinals. Jackie asks Mr. Rickey why he is doing this, integrating baseball. Rickey gives a broad answer: the Allies fought and defeated fascism; it’s time to defeat racism here. “No,” Robinson says, “why are YOU doing it?” Rickey pauses; and then tells a story about his days at Ohio Wesleyan with Charles Thomas, a black player who experienced discrimination. He said, “I told myself I did all I could, but I didn’t. I could have done more.”

We can always do more. Most, if not all, of us know what it is to be excluded. Once you’ve been you never forget. If you are from the wrong side of town, the wrong side of the tracks, the wrong side of the athletic field, the wrong side of the religious field, the wrong gender and you are excluded, you NEVER forget. You’re darn right it’s personal—I was going to use another word, but the children!—and I hope that anyone offended by my passion will take at least as much offense at the bias from which it springs.

But passion alone is not the answer. Christ’s love is. This is the spirit of Methodism, what John Wesley meant by going on to perfection: perfection in love. Is it easy? No. If it was, everyone would do it. But we who bear the name Christian—originally a term of derision—and who bear the name Methodist—originally a term of derision—ought to also be willing to bear other names—gay lover and n-lover and bleeding heart and dreamer among them. And if no one has called us that lately, then maybe it’s time for a spiritual inventory on how our lives bear witness to our faith. Let us pull down the poles. For who are we to hinder God? Amen.