

## What Times Are These?

Charles Dickens opened his famous novel *A Tale of Two Cities* with a sentence which many of us recognize but can't quote the source. He wrote about the events leading up to the French Revolution of 1789 and the consequent horrors that ensued when the peasants had finally gotten angry enough with to do away with much of the French aristocracy. He begins the book with these memorable words. "*It was the best of times; it was the worst of times . . . .*"

However, there is more to that first sentence than most of us know. Dickens also said, "It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the Spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going the other way."<sup>1</sup>

My sense is that Dickens's description fits what is happening right now all over the world. What we notice and how we respond to it depend very much on what our experiences have been like up to the point of knowing that this suffering is too much suffering. So, we ask, "What is going on? Is this truly the time for all these terrible events to be happening? Is this God's time? Why is God allowing all of these forms of suffering to happen at the same moment in history and in so many places? Are these times somehow different from all the times of suffering in the past?

What am I suggesting? I'm suggesting that we look at what we live with as well as the suffering of countless other people around the world to see how they are connected. One of the experiences that we share with people worldwide is the suffering brought on by war. For literally thousands of years people just like us have wondered, "Where is God when we go to war?" Almost unnoticed in recent years are changes in what we expect of God in the midst of suffering around the world.

Yes, a great deal of blood is shed daily by wars, rebellions and terrorism. However, governments have developed other ways to cause suffering. These include economic sanctions such as freezing of funds, tariffs and increasing taxes on the poor to give to the wealthy who have no need of more money! Such actions cause suffering and death to people who were created by the same God as we all were.

We have even adjusted to accepting the nightly news as fact—facts that are so overwhelmingly awful that we cannot begin to see how to resist. We listen to reports of the latest nation, rebel group or individuals chosen to fight—often in God's name! We listen passively as a television anchor reads from the teleprompter about the latest casualties whether in war, in poverty, from preventable diseases and other forms of human made suffering. We wonder, if God is in those hellish conditions, why aren't people willing to work with God to restore peace?

Sometimes, the damage done to people by largely unseen forces is done by tax law changes that shift vast amounts of wealth from the lower socio-economic levels to those who have no need of more money. We even extend the suffering of those at the bottom of the income ladder by relegating to them schools that are understaffed, hospitals that are under-equipped and emergency services that are not able to respond rapidly enough. Does this mean that the time has come for God to intervene in our history?

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) bk. 1, ch. 1; quoted in *THE Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (Elizabeth Knowles, ed.) (Oxford University Press, NY, 1959) p. 265.

Finally, for those of us who are interested in ecumenism (i.e. the working together as one body, of all Christian churches throughout the world,) what is going on? For at least a few years following the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church in the late 1960s, I had hope that the various denominations would find ways to work together. I never seriously believed that we would find a way to merge with all Christian denominations, but I did and still do expect more ecumenism as a manifestation of Emmanuel (“God with us”).

I now find myself in a very difficult position. I have been an advocate of Christian unity for decades. Now, as a retired minister in The United Methodist Church, I am utterly horrified at the intractable positions taken by both sides in the LGBTQI issues. I am saddened at the rhetoric that expresses the disdain, if not outright rejection by people on each side in this complex



disagreement over issues involving human sexuality. The issues at the forefront, of course, are twofold: 1) whether to permit United Methodist clergy to officiate at same sex marriages, and 2) whether to ordain a person who is in a committed and loving same sex marriage.

In place of mortar shells, we lob Bible verses at each other over same sex marriage. In lieu of targeting someone with a cruise missile we launch or passively approve as others launch a flurry of remarks that range from disdain to condemnation. When we question the state of grace of people in a same sex relationship, do we ever wonder about our own state of grace? Look in the Bible for the lists of ways that we could both follow and pray for each other to follow to deepen our relationships with God. (Beginning with the Garden of Eden ([Gen. 2-3](#)), the 10 Commandments ([Exodus 20](#) & [Deut. 5](#)), the Beatitudes ([Matt 5:1-12](#)), [Matt. 25:31-46](#), [Gal. 3:28](#) (all are one in Christ), [Eph. 6:10-20](#), [Col. 3](#) and [1 Peter 3:8-17](#)). I also wonder why we don't remember that God came in the person of Jesus Christ who died for us all – “All” includes people who are in same sex relationships.”

I see no need for the United Methodist Church to split. To do so weakens our witness to the world as both The UNITED METHODIST CHURCH and as part of the worldwide Body of Christ. How can we allow this or even encourage it?

How best to serve God at this period in time is the question—especially at the [Special Session of General Conference](#) in February. My hope and my prayer are that the delegates will listen to God for guidance so that they find the most loving solution to end this heretofore unresolved difference in beliefs. This difference has for far too long defined and delayed us from fully serving God as loving and humble followers of Jesus Christ.

As always, I welcome your [responses](#).

Rev. Larry LaPierre

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