

Script for A Congregational Hymn Sing

Our theme today is “Among Friends.”

In the year 1624 John Donne wrote a meditation in which he pondered an experience that was common to his day. 400 years ago there were no cars, no radios, no TV’s, Game Boys, iPods, Xboxes, DVD’s or any of the myriad other distractions we have today. 400 years ago life was lived at a slower pace. 400 years ago the world was a lot quieter place than it is today. And communication was slow too. So when people heard the sound of a bell it usually meant one of three things. Since the sound of the tolling bell was usually coming from the church bell, most often it was calling people to prayer and to worship. The bell tolled at the beginning of the day to call people to prayer. It tolled at the end of the day to call them to prayer again. On Sundays it tolled to call people to worship. In this way, the tolling of the bell, and the call to worship, was an integral part of nearly every community in John Donne’s day.

But the tolling bell was also a major link in the communication systems of the time. There were few, if any, newspapers in Donne’s day. Printing was still in its infancy in 1624. So when any major news arrived in town, the church bell rung out across the land to call people to come hear what was happening.

And, more to John Donne’s point, whenever someone died, the bell tolled to announce that the community had lost one of its members.

This is the context for Donne’s famous lines:

No man is an island¹³, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. **If** a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less . . . **Any** man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee¹⁵.

Scripture

Scripture is crystal clear: we are not meant to live alone. We are created to live in community with God and with each other. The tide flows in the opposite direction. Our tendency is to isolate ourselves from each other, and from God. Of course, some people try to run away from God by running after people, and others run away from people to immerse themselves in their private life with God. But neither of these aberrations are what God created us for. Struggling with the preference of his time to isolate, to believe and act as if one were self-sufficient, John Donne concluded no one is an island. We all are part of one another. Yet, it is not an easy thing being a part of one another, feeling

other people's pain, suffering their losses, feeling diminished by the violence or the warfare that victimize others. Isolating ourselves from others either makes us grossly self-centered and selfish, or else makes us loopy.

So it is important that we feel and celebrate our connection to one another, our community with each other. We live in a negative world, however, surrounded at times by negative people. We scoff at advice to ignore all the bad stuff and just "be happy." As the people of God, we have something even better than happiness. We have thankfulness. When we are spiritually healthy, our hearts are turned not to grumbling, but to gratitude.

Until a scant 100 years ago, the vast majority of people in America lived and worked on farms—over 90% of us. Farming by its nature was a communal activity as neighbors helped each other raise barns, plant fields, harvest crops, and care for each other's sick animals. It was out of this kind of rural and agricultural context that Henry Alford wrote the hymn we will open with this morning: "Come Ye Thankful People, Come."

I don't know how your heart was this morning when you heard that internal bell calling you to worship, but whatever state you were in, our hearts can be transformed by the gratitude felt by God's people for all that God provides—even though it may be in the midst of hardship. Let's stand and sing our opening hymn with grateful hearts.

694 Come Ye Thankful People, Come vv. 1-4

Until the advent of modern medicine people lived almost daily with a preoccupation about death. There was little protection then against the many diseases that cripple, maim, or kill people. There was hardly a family that had not lost a child to illness, or a parent at a young age. Life was harsh and violent with little to cushion folk from its randomness.

Few people knew this better than the early Methodist circuit riders who went from village to village by horseback in all kinds of weather 24/7 to preach the gospel to people who struggled with life and death every day. The life span of those early circuit riders was around 34 years of age. John and Charles Wesley knew how important it was to gather the rag-tag band of preachers together once a year to encourage their spirits and renew their calling. John inspired them to another year of preaching and Charles honored their courageous service to the Lord by writing a hymn that Methodists have used ever since to open our annual conferences. Imagine those early circuit riders, lumbering in on their tired old steeds, once a year every year to report to one another on their work and to celebrate God's grace together. They looked over the crowd eagerly to see who was still with them as they sang "And Are we Yet Alive and see each other's face?"

553 And Are We Yet Alive? vv. 1-4

Jesus valued friendship so much that when he met with his disciples for the last time before his death on the cross, he said to them: “I no longer call you servants, but friends.” He has ushered into his own friendship circle every person who has ever left everything to follow him, who has reorganized their life around what he taught, who has taken up the work of the kingdom he came to proclaim. Not Kingdom citizen, not employee of the realm, not servant nor slave, but friend. Many of us learned this next hymn as children, and many of us love it still: What a friend we have in Jesus!

526 What A Friend We Have in Jesus vv. 1-3

Youth is a stage in life when we often struggle to discover where we belong—our place in the world, as it were. Adolescence is a lonely time for many. And it is a time when many teenagers discover that their best friend is Jesus. One of the most significant things we help our youth discover through our youth ministries here at MUMC is that Jesus Christ will be their life-long best friend, if they will let him. Most people accept Christ when they are teenagers, and the decision to invite Jesus into your heart and your life is the pivotal event in their whole life. It certainly was for me. And it was also for _____, who died when he was still serving as the President of METHESCO. I did not know him, but I was moved when I read that at his own request the song they sang at his funeral was the heart felt tune by Tommy Dorsey, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.”

474 Precious Lord, Take My Hand vv. 1-3

There is something that holds together the people of God that is unlike any other bond we know. There is a love and a common mind and spirit and work we share that is unlike anything else shared by any other group. When we understand the life and the work to which God calls us in Christ, and when we truly give ourselves to that life and work, then our brothers and sisters in Christ become more important to us than anyone else. As a child I used to love to sing our next hymn because it gave me such a strong sense of inclusion and belonging. It still does.

557 Blest Be the Tie that Binds vv. 1-4

The place where we are among more among friends than any other is at the Lord’s table. It is here that we are reminded of how Jesus always gathers together with his church, his people, his friends. Our relationship with him and each other is celebrated in the intimacy of a meal—not just the sacramental meal of holy communion, but in the fellowship gatherings of the church and in every meal that we share with each other. We may not be very familiar with our next hymn, but its words are important to our theme today so I want us to sing it and to think about as we do. Carol will play this through for us once and then we’ll sing all three verses.

632 Draw Us in the Spirit's Tether vv. 1-3

Holy Communion

We are people on a journey. We have a destination. We join our feet and voices together in countless ways as we set our faces toward Jerusalem and begin marching to Zion, which for the body of Christ is symbolic of heaven and eternal life.

733 We're Marching to Zion vv. 1-4

All the hymns we have sung today are "We" hymns. None of them are "I" hymns. We have celebrated the we-ness of our faith and our faith community. We are, none of us islands. The sorrows and losses of one are those of us all. When one dies, we are all diminished. When one suffers, we all weep. When one is victimized by injustice or violence, we all are lessened. But as we respond to these unavoidable human experiences by joining together to comfort each other in our losses, and fight against the injustices that seem determined to make us less than we are, we have discovered that we shall overcome. We need each other to do it, but we shall overcome. And we are needed by others to do it. But we shall overcome. Because no man is an island unto himself. So brother, sister, ask not for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee. It calls you to prayer. It calls you to worship. It calls you to confront your own mortality. It calls you to community. And it calls you to join the forces of righteousness, and when you do, we shall overcome.

533 We Shall Overcome vv. 1-5