

ON STORMING THE CAPITOL: NO TO POLITICAL VIOLENCE, YES TO CIVIL SOCIETY

Lifewatch strives to serve the Gospel of Life. Political violence, in assaulting people and property, is open rebellion against the Gospel of Life. Therefore, Lifewatch condemns all political violence.

On January 6, the United States Capitol in Washington, DC, was violently overtaken by a mob. Lifewatch condemns, without qualification and without question, this lawless act of political violence which resulted in several deaths, many injuries, considerable property damage, interruption of constitutional process, and harm to an already ailing civil society. Whatever their motivations, the perpetrators of this political violence must be brought to justice and pay for their crimes.

The Gospel of Life consistently collides with the culture of death. In the storming of the Capitol, the culture of death was on dramatic display. But the political violence of January 6 on Capitol Hill was not a stand-alone event. It was the culmination of many events and trends in the United States: Reducing everything in public life to politics. Deepening destructive, political polarization. Stoking political hatred on social media. Heightening tensions between identity groups. Enduring the pandemic that has caused and causes so many deaths, and the shutdowns that are spiritually, socially, and economically devastating countless people. Normalizing political violence in cities over the last year. Diminishing trust in journalistic and political institutions. Coarsening or canceling political speech—by presidents past and present, and by their allies and opponents; by Big Media and Big Tech; by Hollywood's celebrities and universities' professors; by commentators behind desks and demonstrators in the streets; and by far-away public officials and nearby neighbors.

The culture of death and its eruption on January 6 cannot be fairly blamed on one person, one group of people, or one political party. Nor can the culture of death and its future outbursts be ameliorated by one person, one group, or one party. Restraint of the culture of death

requires the best effort, in word and deed, from all of us. At this time, all American citizens, without exception, must rededicate ourselves to the tasks of responsible citizenship—that include upholding the rule of law and practicing civility in public life—as we exercise God-given freedoms.

As the Gospel of Life constantly conflicts with the culture of death, God's providence gives two gifts that restrain the culture of death: the rule of law and the virtue of civility. Justice in America requires laws that encourage citizens to do what is good and to avoid what is evil, and that apply equally to all citizens. Taken together, such laws make for the rule of law. (The rule of law is a legal consequence of the Jewish and Christian belief in the God who is Lord, who mysteriously rules over history and humanity.) Observance of the rule of law is necessary for justice in America to be approximated and advanced.

The culture of death is also restrained by the practice of civility throughout the land. As citizens exercise God-given freedoms, we must speak and behave in ways that build up, not tear down, civil society. Today American citizens must relearn how to: respect one another and avoid personal attacks (even in the midst of disagreements), tolerate (not criminalize) political differences, and set aside (not welcome and satisfy) the urge for vengeance.

The Gospel of Life relies upon the rule of law and the practice of civility to restrain the chaos of the culture of death. Though the culture of death has been defeated by Jesus Christ, in His death on the cross and His resurrection from the grave, it will continue its devastations in this world until Christ's return in glory. When Christ does return in power and completely destroys the culture of death, He will establish the Gospel of Life as the Kingdom of God, fully and totally. Until then, God's gifts of law and civility will be necessary to restrain the culture of death and protect the Gospel of Life.

The Pledge of Allegiance of the United States concludes: "...one nation under God with liberty and justice for all." "[O]ne nation under God" signals that the United States of America is under God's sovereignty, providence, and judgment. Reminded by the Gospel of Life, the United States and its citizens would be wise to live in liberty, under law, with civility—awakened to God's present and coming judgment. (PTS) ♥

2021 LIFEWATCH SERMON: “LISTEN, TRUST, AND OBEY”

by Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth

The following sermon was preached on January 29, 2021. A video of the sermon being preached is posted at the Lifewatch website (www.lifewatch.org).

In the name of Jesus Christ, welcome to the 2021 Lifewatch Sermon. Our location is the “global headquarters” of The Institute on Religion and Democracy in Washington, DC. Many thanks to IRD and to Mr. Mark Tooley for your hospitality today.

The annual Lifewatch Sermon is usually preached at Simpson Memorial Chapel in The United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill. But COVID cometh! Hence, this venue.

Modernity Tries to Disenchant

In his recent book Live Not by Lies, Rod Dreher declares: “The essence of modernity is to deny that there are any transcendent stories, structures, habits, or beliefs to which individuals must submit and that should bind our conduct. To be modern is to be free to choose. *What* is chosen does not matter; the meaning is in the choice itself. There is no sacred order, no other world, no fixed virtues and permanent truths. There is only here and now and the eternal flame of human desire. *Volo ergo sum*—I want, therefore I am.” (Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents [Sentinel, 2020], p. 115) According to Dreher, modernity denies there are transcendent stories that are significant, that make a difference in our lives.

Well, a few of us believe that modernity is, to use Dreher’s word, a lie. If modernity is a lie, then transcendent stories *do* exist. There *are* “transcendent stories...to which individuals must submit and that should bind our conduct.”

Here we are: in the middle of American modernity. Let’s do something really radical. Let’s turn to two “transcendent stories” from the New Testament: one about Mary and the other about Joseph. Listen to two stories about young people responding to the divine message spoken by two angels.

First, to our Lady: “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.’ Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the

servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.” (Luke 1:26-38, NRSV, here and below)

Second, to Joseph: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.” (Matthew 1:18-25)

Mary and Joseph: Listen, Trust, and Obey

Angels speak the Word of God to Mary and Joseph. Mary and Joseph respond in three ways: they listen; they trust; and they obey.

First, Mary and Joseph listen.

Espoused in the first-century, Jewish world of Galilean peasants, Mary and Joseph are well on their way to living a conventional, respectable, simple life together. Then angels arrive and announce disruption: unplanned pregnancy, birth of a son, one named Jesus, one who “will be great,” one called “the Son of the Most High,” one who will rule from “the throne of his ancestor David” (Luke 1:31-32), one who “will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). The angels bring news of disruption.

When confronted by an angel of disruption, Mary is “perplexed” and “afraid,” puzzled and fearful. When confronted by his disruptive angel, Joseph is consumed with doing the righteous thing—quietly dissolving his relationship with Mary, sparing her from the big shun and worse. Instead of doing what they want to do, what they feel like doing, Mary and Joseph listen to the angels. Neither protests: “Angel, I am too busy for you!” “I have too many plans for this!” “What you are saying is crazy!” “Your words are upsetting me; please, leave!” “I have already made up my mind; I know what is right; go away!” Mary and Joseph listen.

Second, Mary and Joseph trust.

After listening to the angels, Mary and Joseph must have been ready to run to a best friend, or steal away to a faraway village, or escape to a hiding place in the hills. But they do not. Though made very uncomfortable by the angels, they stay put. Mary just stands there. Joseph just lies there—sleeping, no less! And the Word of God from the angels works into their hearts and minds. A child is on the way. A unique child. Who is from God. Who is God. Who will be Emmanuel, “God with us.” A savior. A ruler. This Word of

God is the truth to Mary and Joseph. God's Word, the truth, wins their trust.

Third, Mary and Joseph obey.

Mary and Joseph listen to the angels. Then they trust God's Word from the angels. Finally, they obey.

After the angel finally stops talking, Mary responds: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." (Luke 1:37-38) Mary agrees to receive and carry and birth and raise and follow and suffer for the promised Child. Mary obeys. Regarding Mary's obedience in Luke 1, Rev. John Wesley speculates: "It is not improbable, that this time of the virgin's humble faith, consent, and expectation, might be the very time of her conceiving." (Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament, Baker Book House, 1981)

Later, when the angel finishes speaking into Joseph's dream, he wakes up. He wastes no time. He does exactly what the angel commands: he takes Mary as his wife. Joseph obeys.

So, responding to God's Word spoken by angels, both Mary and Joseph, in their unique ways, listen, trust, and obey. Their listening leads to their trusting, and their trusting becomes their obeying.

Obedience Means Togetherness and Sacrifice

Allow a couple of observations about what Mary and Joseph's obedience looks like.

First, the obedience of both of them involves togetherness. Mary receives Jesus as her baby. Joseph takes Mary, who was with Child, as his wife. Their obedience brings people together. It does not separate and distance and isolate people from each other. In bringing people together, Mary's obedience and Joseph's obedience reflect "...'Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'" Because God is indeed with us (in Jesus Christ), Mary and Joseph are called to be with others: Mary with Jesus, Joseph with Mary.

Second, this togetherness involves difficulty; it is not warm and fuzzy. As all of us know, just before he died, Rev. John Wesley declared: "The best of all, God is with us!" United Methodist preachers today retell that story too often. We repeat the story, probably, to help our churches feel good. However, God's togetherness, God's being with us, demands much. When God through Jesus Christ joins us, Christ "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:7-8) You might say that Christ's obedience to His Father, to join us in this world, points downward—from heavenly majesty to earthly humility. Likewise, Mary's obedience, her togetherness with her Son, points downward—from a life she planned just like she wanted to a life she accepted. Likewise, Joseph's obedience, his togetherness with Mary,

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points downward—from a life with good appearances to a marriage with a questionable start. When God joins us, when God is with us, when Jesus and Mary and Joseph are obedient to God, their direction turns downward. The going gets rough. Sacrifice is in.

Listen. Trust. Obey. And this obedience demands togetherness

and downwardness (or sacrifice); remember Mary and Joseph—and even Jesus.

Listening, Trusting, and Obeying Today

What about today? How do listening, trusting, and obeying fit into life today? Into modernity? Here are three illustrations.

First, a young, stable, married couple discovers that a child is on the way. They are thankful. Midway into the pregnancy, the parents are told by their doctors that their child has a rare, mortal disease. The child will be born, then he will soon die; so the medical authorities suggest abortion. What should the couple do? Long, difficult discussions follow. Long, sleepless nights ensue. There is anger and uncertainty and dull pain and, finally, peace. After much consideration and prayer, they decide to welcome the child and love him as long as possible.

So, the child is born. The tiny son is loved by mother and father. He is perhaps baptized by a hospital chaplain. Tragically and sadly, the newborn son dies from the disease. In a matter of days, A Service of Death and Resurrection is held for the little one: he is offered to God's mercies, his soul to the Communion of the Saints and his body to the ground to await the General Resurrection at Christ's return.

As this story unfolds in real time, God must be speaking; and mother and father are listening, trusting, and obeying. Their obedience is difficult, but they do what is right: they welcome their little one, and then offer him back to God.

Second, the year is 1958. A young woman in Italy becomes pregnant with her first child. The mother is hospitalized with a common ailment. Doctors advise her to be rid of the child, who "would be born with some disability." A devout Catholic Christian, she continues to carry her child. Her son is born with congenital glaucoma. He is completely blind at 12. But also he has what has been described as "the most beautiful [voice] in the world." Andrea Bocelli's song "With You I Shall Leave" is one of the best-selling singles ever, and his "Sacred Arias" album is the best-selling album by a classical artist of all time. Day after day, Bocelli tells his story, and his mother's, on a video that is watched by thousands. Mrs. Edi Bocelli: she listens; she trusts; and she obeys. She welcomes and raises her son, as she humbles herself. We cannot help but think that her son, Andreas, also listens, trusts, and obeys in a unifying, sacrificial way.

Third, consider a counter-example of listening, trusting, and obeying. Even years ago, the sexuality debate is jostling The United Methodist Church. A seminary holds a public

event on the topic. Several professors and an activist-revisionist sit on a panel and make presentations. Many students, eager to learn, take it all in.

The professors are thoughtful and sophisticated, but they talk about their own opinions. They do not give serious attention to the Biblical witness or Church history or Church doctrine. From the perspective of today's sermon texts, one might say that these presenters do not first listen, trust, and obey—before they make their presentations. Instead, they take for themselves supersized roles. They demonstrate to their audience how to silence God's Word, replace Church doctrine, and allow the freedom-to-choose to run wild in the Church. Their presentations and their examples might actually render some of their listeners incapable of listening to, trusting, and obeying the Word of God with regard to human sexuality. A great sadness.

Good News Overcomes

"I could never live like Mary and Joseph. I could never listen to, trust, and obey God's Word—for the good of others and at my own sacrifice. I just couldn't do that," most reply.

Well, on our own, by ourselves, apart from God's grace and Christ's Church, that is correct. On our own, we cannot follow Mary and Joseph's example of listening, trusting, and obeying. However, we can do things that will help prepare us to do what we think is impossible. Regularly attend a local church, a local church whose listening to the Word of God becomes trusting and obeying. Receive Holy Communion as often as possible. Stay in close fellowship with a small group that holds us accountable. Do those things, and listening, trusting, and obeying become imaginable.

Be warned! Along the way, we will fail. We will listen to the latest podcast opinion. We will trust the self-help section at the local bookstore. And we will obey our own desires. We will fail. We will sin. When we sin, fear not! That boy, who was carried by Mary and defended by Joseph, died on a cross for the forgiveness of the sins we commit. He was raised from the dead, so that we might turn from our sin, and toward God, for new life. So that we might continue to listen, trust, and obey.

One more thing. God and the angels, Mary and Joseph, went to a lot of trouble to make sure that Jesus was born. Now, can you imagine the Church, gathered around the risen Jesus Christ, backing the notion that children are just a matter of choice?

Nor can I.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit! Amen! ♥

SCANDAL

In a sanctuary or in a Bible-study setting, United Methodists occasionally hear the word "scandal" said aloud. This is how. Upon hearing "stumbling block," Methodists are usually quick to define that idea as "scandal." As in, "we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block ["skandalon" in the Greek] to Jews...." (I Corinthians 1:23, NRSV). That quick definition exhausts the understanding, and application, of scandal in United Methodist life today. Sadly, prematurely cutting short the consideration of scandal now makes the idea

of scandal nearly irrelevant in The United Methodist Church.

On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church maintains a strong, working definition of "scandal." When carefully put to work, the Roman Catholic definition of "scandal" can defend and protect the Church, laity and clergy. Perhaps United Methodists can learn from the Catholic Church, reclaim the word "scandal," restore the word's use in United Methodist life, and encourage its contemporary application so that it can help defend and protect The United Methodist Church.

Scandal According to the Catholic Church

A presidential election in the United State, that features a Roman Catholic running for President or Vice President on the Democratic ticket, raises this question: Will the Catholic Church deny Holy Communion to this candidate (or this President or Vice President, should he/she win the vote) because of his/her pro-choice (or pro-abortion) commitments and votes? The 2020 presidential election is no exception. The case of candidate, then President-elect, and now President Joe Biden raises the subject of the denial of Communion.

In "Mr. Biden and the Matter of Scandal" (www.firstthings.com, Web Exclusives, December 4, 2020), Charles J. Chaput, the Archbishop Emeritus of Philadelphia, addresses the matter of scandal and Communion. And Chaput addresses this matter in a way that should cause United Methodists to consider recent scandal in The United Methodist Church.

In his article, Chaput admits: "I believed then [when Sen. John Kerry ran for President in 2004], and believe now [that Sen. Joe Biden has been elected President], that publicly denying Communion to public officials is not always wise or the best pastoral course. Doing so in a loud and forceful manner may cause more harm than good by inviting the official to bask in the media glow of victimhood. What I opposed in 2004, however, was any seeming indifference to the issue, any hint in a national bishops' statement or policy that would give bishops permission to turn their heads away from the gravity of a very serious issue. At the time, fortunately, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [in Rome, then led by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, who would become Pope Benedict XVI] resolved any confusion about correct practice in these matters with its July 2004 memorandum [[Worthiness to Receive Holy Communion: General Principles](#), hereafter abbreviated as [Worthiness](#)] to then-Cardinal McCarrick [whose homosexual activity recently removed him from the priesthood]...."

Informed by [Worthiness](#), Chaput contends: "[t]he implications for the present moment are clear. Public figures who identify as 'Catholic' give scandal to the faithful when receiving Communion by creating the impression that the moral laws of the Church are options. And bishops give similar scandal by not speaking up publicly about the issue and danger of sacrilege." There in Chaput's comment is the key word, "scandal," used twice.

Chaput uses the word "scandal" with care. He knows that the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) defines "scandal" for the Roman Catholic Church with precision: "Scandal is an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil. The

person who gives scandal becomes his neighbor's tempter. He damages virtue and integrity; he may even draw his brother into spiritual death. Scandal is a grave offense if by deed or omission another is deliberately led into a grave offense." (2284)

Furthermore, according to the Catechism: "Scandal can be provoked by laws or institutions, by fashion or opinion. Therefore, they are guilty of scandal who establish laws or social structures leading to the decline of morals and the corruption of religious practice, or to 'social conditions that, intentionally or not, make Christian conduct and obedience to the Commandments difficult and practically impossible.' This is also true of business leaders who make rules encouraging fraud, teachers who provoke their children to anger, or manipulators of public opinion who turn it away from moral values." (2286)

(Interestingly, the Catechism defines and discusses scandal under the heading "Respect for the Dignity of Persons" and under the subheading "Respect for the souls of others: scandal" [Second Edition, 2000, p. 551]. That certainly makes common, and theological, sense.)

So, according to the discernment of Charles Chaput, when several American Catholic bishops ignore Worthiness [the memorandum from Rome], avoid working with other bishops who are striving to be as faithful as possible to Catholic doctrine and discipline, and declare that they will serve Communion to a President who advocates for the morality, legality, and availability of abortion, they give "scandal to their brother bishops and priests, and to the many Catholics who struggle to stay faithful to Church teaching. It does damage to the bishops' conference, to the meaning of collegiality, and to the fruitfulness of the conference's advocacy work with the incoming administration."

Archbishop Emeritus Chaput writes the truth: bishops who do what they want to do, even if their words and deeds go against the Church's established teaching and order, bring scandal into the Church. This particular scandal harms the bishops' conference, other bishops, priests, and laity by undercutting their trust, faith, and obedience—indeed, the whole church.

Understanding Scandal in The United Methodist Church

The idea of scandal is seemingly irrelevant to The United Methodist Church today. However, this word can and should become a part of our denominational, annual-conference, and congregational discourse—the sooner, the better.

Turning to the Bible

A crucial passage in the Bible for recovering the idea of scandal in United Methodism is Matthew 18:6, where Jesus warns His disciples: "'If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.'" (NRSV) Here "stumbling block" is English for the Greek "skandalizo," which means "entrap, i.e. trip up (...stumble...

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or entice to sin, apostasy or displeasure) ... offend" (Abingdon's Strong's Concordance of the Bible, Greek Dictionary of the New Testament, p. 65, 4624).

Dr. Dale C. Allison, Jr., the Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, recognizes the importance of Matthew 18:6

for the Church: There, "... Jesus now warns, in the strongest possible language, against causing others to stumble...."

"'Puts a stumbling block before' means to pervert and mislead, intellectually and morally. Here, in view of the consequent punishment, it must signify causing others to lose their faith and fall away from God.

"'One of these little ones' appears four times in Matthew (10:42, 18:6, 10, 14). The expression has been taken to refer to missionaries (as in 10:42), catechumens, recent converts, young Christians, or lowly Christians—those lightly esteemed by others. A firm decision one way or the other is impossible....

"In Matthew the general meaning is not in doubt: 'these little ones' are believers ('who believe in me'), and to harm them is to harm oneself, for one cannot cause others to stumble without causing oneself to stumble. Salvation is part of a social process, and there can be no thoughtlessness towards others: 'Our life and our death is with our neighbor; if we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against Christ' (Anthony the Great [251-356])....

"One can...confidently state that [St. Paul's] application of the 'stumbling block' sayings in Romans 14:13 and I Corinthians 8:13—the apostle applies them to weak believers—is not foreign to the spirit of Matthew 18." (Matthew: A Shorter Commentary [T & T Clark International, 2004], pp. 297 and 298). Needless to say, a scandal in the church is serious business.

Turning to Wesley

On Matthew 18:5 and 6, Rev. Wesley provides commentary: "And all who are in this sense little children are unspeakably dear to me. Therefore help them all you can, as if it were myself in person; and see that ye offend them not: that is, that ye turn them not out of the right way, neither hinder them in it." (Wesley's Notes on the New Testament, emphasis added)

The United Methodist Church's doctrine on the Church can encourage the relevancy of scandal in the denomination's life and faith. "Article XIII--Of the Church," in The Articles of Religion, speaks of the centrality of the Word of God faithfully preached, and the Sacraments duly administered, in the Church. At the end of this article (or paragraph) on the Church, this ambiguous, hard-to-parse phrase appears: "in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same." This phrase appears to suggest the following: besides being a congregation of Christians gathered by Word and Sacraments, the Church is composed of other "things" that are necessary to support the "requisite" (or the required,

which are Word and Sacraments) in the Church. So, all Church faith and life, ministry and mission, administration and connection, are to be ordered or determined or driven by the Word and the Sacraments.

It could be proposed that everything in the Church should flow out of (and return to!) Word and Sacraments. For example, the Church's offerings are given because the self-giving of the Church and its members results from the self-giving of Jesus Christ, who is present in Word and Sacraments; with these offerings, the congregation's bills can be paid, so that the Church can continue to preach the Word and to administer the Sacraments. Therefore, in the Church, no activities, beliefs, practices, ministries, or organizations stand apart from Jesus Christ present in Word and Sacraments. If something in the Church appears to stand alone, apart from Christ in Word and Sacraments, it should be named as a scandal, and reformed or removed. If that does not occur, this scandal will metastasize, and vulnerable members of the Church will have their faith diminished or destroyed; and the Church will be harmed.

The United Methodist Church's doctrine also includes The Confession of Faith's "Article V--The Church." That paragraph-long doctrine on the Church refers to the Church as the "redemptive fellowship" built on Word and Sacraments. The Church is dedicated to freeing the Christian community and the individual Christian disciple from sin and evil. That is accomplished "[u]nder the discipline of the Holy Spirit [as] the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world." In the "redemptive fellowship" of the Church, something is called a scandal when it erodes the Church's faith and/or when it rocks the faith of little ones in the Church. Then, through Word-and-Sacraments ministry, the Church can lovingly and justly deal with the scandal to protect itself, especially its most vulnerable members.

Scandal in The United Methodist Church

Only if the Church understands, and calls out, and addresses scandal—in the Catholic sense, in the Biblical sense, in the Wesleyan sense, in the doctrinal sense—can the Church maintain a faithful, redemptive life. The idea of scandal exists so that a morally or doctrinally sickened church can be healed, and vulnerable Christians can be more protected from the harm of scandal.

All the above leads to this question: Has there been scandal in The United Methodist Church? Sadly, yes. Plenty of it. When bishops have not taught the doctrine, including the morals, of the church. When bishops have not lived the doctrine, including the morals, of the church. When bishops have flagrantly broken or ignored the discipline of the church. When bishops have protected bishops in error from the discipline of the church. (In the name of "collegiality!") When clergy have been unfaithful to their ministerial vows. When laity have been unfaithful to their baptismal vows.

When all of the above things happen, most United Methodists turn away, act like they did not occur, and mumble a trite comment about "grace." In these ways, scandal occurs in The United Methodist Church—again and again and again; and scandal is not addressed in any substantive way. So the faith of little ones is diminished or

destroyed. The church is harmed, immeasurably harmed. And when nobody and no body uses the word "scandal," the church is further sickened.

But surprises can occur. When "scandal" is used, the possibility of healing appears. In this season of waiting, before the next General Conference, the idea of scandal might well be rehabilitated among a few United Methodists—and under God's providence, that could awaken some minds, open some hearts, transform some lives and ministries, and ignite some rethinking on the faithfulness of The United Methodist Church.

United Methodist Church, be the Church of Christ! And that includes understanding, and addressing, scandal and its devastations. (PTS) ♥

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

- Thank you for responding to the December 1, 2020 letter from Lifewatch. Your prayers for, and financial support of, this ministry are essential. Again, thank you for helping us to serve the Gospel of Life within The United Methodist Church at a most challenging time.

- [Unleashing the Work of God: The Necessity of Word and Sacrament in Methodism](#) (Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR, 2019) is written by Reverend W. Joseph Stallings, a brother in Christ and in Christ's Church. Rev. Stallings pastors Lucama United Methodist Church just south of Wilson, NC. In the weekly worship service, he actually does what he writes should be done. Each Sunday morning, since early August until the present, he offers sermon and Sacrament at the Lucama Church. Marsha and I are deeply grateful for his faithful ministry.

Here is your scribe's brief comment on Rev. Stallings' recent book, [Unleashing the Work of God: The Necessity of Constant Word and Sacrament in Methodism](#) (Wipf & Stock, 2019): "Jesus Christ speaks as the Word of God and works in Sacrament. Therefore, the Church's clergy should be uncompromisingly committed to Word and Sacrament ministry. Joe Stallings powerfully makes this case by relying on Scripture, the Church Fathers, the Reformers, the Wesleys, and many contemporaries. As a pastor, he refers to his own ministerial experience, and he writes clearly for all. The United Methodist Church and other churches have feverishly tried every available means of renewal. Here Rev. Stallings simply proposes that the Church invite Jesus Christ into its midst. What a novel idea."

A congregation strengthened by faithful, Word-and-Sacrament ministry is often a congregation willing to preach the truth about the most difficult public issues of the time—including life and abortion, marriage and human sexuality, and religious liberty. [Unleashing the Work of God](#) is a book that can build up clergy, laity, and congregations to be the Church of Jesus Christ in the Year of our Lord 2021.

- On the matter of Word-and-Sacrament ministry, you might want to take a look at "Pro Ecclesia (For the Church): An Ecumenical Confession." (Simply google "Pro Ecclesia: An Ecumenical Confession," click on the St. Peter's United Methodist Church link, and then click on the ProEcclesia Ltr link.) Completed ten years ago, in 2011, by several clergy

and laity in Carteret County, NC, this confession attempts to anchor the local church's life and ministry in Word and Sacrament. The confession's nine articles—"Father: Sovereign of the Church," "Son: Builder of the Church," "Holy Spirit: Sustainer of the Church," "Marks of the Church," "Mission of the Church," "Ministry for the Church," "Worship by the Church," "Obedience of the Church," and "Perseverance of the Church"—begin with references from Scripture and doctrine, contain strong affirmations, and conclude with specific rejections (or anathemas). Needless to say, this is not your go-along-to-get-along statement on parish ministry. Because it is challenging, it might prove to be helpful to you and your congregation.

- The December 1, 2020 issue of Lifewatch leads with an article entitled "Division in Church and Division in Society: Been There, Done That." It describes the "church struggle" in The United Methodist Church, the "culture wars" in American society, a divided Methodist Episcopal Church in a divided United States of America before the Civil War, and how a divided church, addressing its divisions, offers witness (faithful and unfaithful) in a divided nation. The article might have ended in the following way.

Sadly, the pre-1844 Methodist Episcopal Church proved that it could not remain as one; so it divided. And if a church could not hold, how could the nation be expected to stay together? In the United States during 1844, the Methodist Episcopal Church divided into a northern denomination (Methodist Episcopal Church) and a southern denomination (Methodist Episcopal Church, South); in 1861, the United States divided into the North (Union) and the South (Confederacy). Then the Civil War came; oceans of blood were spilled; and the political dispute was finally settled.

In 2021 or soon thereafter, The United Methodist Church may officially divide into two or three (or more) denominations. Let us hope and pray that this does not signal to the larger society that, if a church can divide, then the nation somehow has the permission, even the responsibility, to divide; and that those two sides, if need be, can take up arms to settle a seemingly unresolvable dispute.

Consider this: The Church and the churches, it seems, can and should offer an alternative to the way things are dividing and unraveling in the greater society.

- The "Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation" (original title) is now occasionally referred to as the "Protocol for Separation." This abbreviated reference seems more honest than the original title. The negotiated Protocol is actually a "Protocol for Separation." The "Reconciliation and Grace," which appear in the original, are quite beside the point. The most transparent title of all might well have been the "Protocol for Separation without Lawsuits."

- "[F]or the death which they thought to inflict on Him [Jesus] as dishonor and disgrace has become the glorious monument to death's defeat. Therefore it is also, that He neither endured the death of John, who was beheaded, nor was He sawn asunder, like Isaiah: even in death He preserved His body whole and undivided, so that there

should be no excuse hereafter for those who would divide the Church." (Athanasius [295-373], On the Incarnation, quoted by For All the Saints: A Prayer Book for and by the Church [American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1995], Volume II, p. 1072) "[T]here should be no excuse hereafter for those who would divide the Church," declares Athanasius, one of the greatest defenders of the Church and the Church's faith over her 2,000-year history. No excuse. Not one. Not even: "We're tired of fighting." And not even: "We cannot continue the harm we are doing to each other." Instead of dividing the Church, United Methodists would be faithful to learn to love one another (in a way that sacrifices for the true good of the beloved) and to propose established doctrine and to uphold established discipline, even when dissent will be strong and blow back discomforting.

- Back in 2017, Monsignor John Williams of Southern Pines, NC, a long-time friend of Lifewatch, sent a copy of Lifewatch to the Most Reverend Charles J. Chaput, the Archbishop of Philadelphia from 2011 until 2020. Responding soon thereafter, Archbishop Chaput wrote to Monsignor Williams: "Thank you...for the issue of Lifewatch. I was surprised to see The United Methodist Church community quoting me as it did. I should pay more attention to those kind of ecumenical efforts." Needless to say, Lifewatch continues to be grateful to Archbishop Chaput for his theological writings—which often appear in First Things and on the First Things website, and which are always a blessing to the larger, ecumenical world, including United Methodists. As you probably know by now, "Scandal," in this edition of Lifewatch, relies heavily on Archbishop Emeritus Chaput. The Lifewatch community has profound gratitude for his faithful ministry.

- In case you are the least bit interested, this pastor's last sermon at Whiteville United Methodist Church—in Whiteville, NC—was preached on June 21, 2020. Its text was Matthew 10:24-39, and its title "The Uncomfortable Christ."

In the movie "A Hidden Life," a craftsman works fulltime (or close to fulltime) in a beautiful, ornate church sanctuary in Austria in the early 1930s. Working on a scaffold in the sanctuary, this elderly, gifted painter admits to Franz, who refuses to give allegiance to Hitler: "I paint the tombs of the prophets. I help people look up from those pews and dream. They look up, and they imagine that, if they had lived back in Christ's time, they wouldn't have done what the others did [to Christ]...."

"I paint all this suffering, but I don't suffer myself. I make a living of it. What we [painters] do is just create sympathy. We create admirers. We do not create followers.

"Christ's life is a demand. You do not want to be reminded of it. So we don't have to see what happens to the truth.

"A darker time is coming, and [people] will be more clever. *They won't fight the truth. They'll just ignore it.* I paint their comfortable Christ with a halo over His head. How can I show what I haven't lived? Some day I might have the courage to venture—not yet. Some day I'll paint the true Christ." (You can hear and see this at approximately 36.00 on the DVD of "The Hidden Life." Note that the italics are added for emphasis.)



Lifewatch

Taskforce of United Methodists on Abortion and Sexuality

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03/01/21

* **Annual Lifewatch Sermon:**

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Perhaps it is time for us United Methodists to say good-bye to the comfortable christs whom we have long enjoyed, and welcome into our midst “the uncomfortable Christ.” The uncomfortable Christ—who is the true, crucified, and risen Christ—should always be readily welcomed by His people, by His Church. Even if He makes us uncomfortable. Especially if He transforms us. (PTS)

● After the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, Dr. Robert George of Princeton University commented on why Americans are so polarized today: “We’re [that is, we Americans are] no longer united by commitment to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States and the concept of America as an exceptional nation. Exceptional, not because we’re better than other people or morally superior, but exceptional because we are a country founded on a noble ideal. The concept that all men are created equal [and] endowed by their creator with unalienable rights, as opposed to a country like most countries. This is what makes America exceptional, we’re not like most countries. Most countries are founded on blood and soil, or throne and altar, a long cultural history, shared ethnicity. We’re not, we’re founded on a creed, not a religious creed but a political creed with its roots in a deeper religious tradition, to be sure, the idea of human equality, human dignity.” (Interviewed by Lauretta Brown, “Robert George Discusses Capitol Riots and the Nation’s Polarization,” National Catholic Register,

January 8, 2021, www.ncregister.com/interview/robert-george-discusses-capitol-riots-and-the-nations-polarization) “We hold these truths to be self-evident....” Amen.

● “Life is sacred because it comes from God, belongs to God, and returns to God.” So writes Rev. Frank Pavone, who leads Priests for Life and the National Pro-life Religious Council, in Pro-life Reflections for Every Day (Catholic Book Publishing Corporation, 2009, p. 12).

● Richard John Neuhaus (1936-2009), a Lutheran and then-Catholic theologian, said: Christians “have not the right to despair, for despair is a sin. And we have not the reason to despair, quite simply because Christ is risen.”

● A long-time friend, brother in Christ and His Church, fellow graduate from Kansas State University and member of Delta Upsilon, and reader of Lifewatch recently emailed what he called “a common sense thought for the day.” Reba McEntire said, sang, or wrote: “To succeed in life you need three things: a wishbone, a backbone, and a funny bone.” Not a bad comment. Reason at work.

● *Magna est veritas, et prevalebit.* “Truth is most powerful, and will ultimately prevail.” ♥

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