

REV. JIM'S THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS

March 2018



Dear Friends,

I'm writing this letter on a cold February day. As I write, it's just days after the horrific school shooting that took the lives of 17 high school students, teachers and staff members in Florida. I'm at a loss for words.

Each day it seems we hear the news of another life changing event that occur in our community, nation, and the world. It's easy to become overwhelmed as we hear stories of senseless violence, abuse that violates the dignity of people, economic crisis, terrorism and threats of war. At times we answer a telephone call or start reading an email and wonder if it's news of a loved one struggling with sickness or struggle. *Many days folks ask me, "Pastor, where is the Good News? Where is God in the messy, painful places of life?"*

The longer I live, the more I wonder if at some level, in the midst of our human experience; we all struggle to find the answer to those gut wrenching questions. *Where is the Good News? Where is God in the messy, painful places of life?"* When the foundations of my life are rocked with pain and uncertainty, I often cry out to God with variations on those questions. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit brings me comfort and an answer from the words a dear pastor friend shared with me years ago. He said, "Remember, God is always there with us, and don't take my word for it, read the words of Psalm 23"!

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. -- Psalm 23 (New Revised Version)

Friends, we all know how painful it is to go through the valley of the shadow of death. We know death has many faces; sadness, disappointment, anger, illness, an unwillingness to forgive or be forgiven, loss of a job, hatred, broken trust, strained relationships. The list goes on. *However, we also are assured God is always with us!*

Since the day of the terrible shooting in Florida, some folks have asked me how God's Church can reach out to the world in the midst of tragedy and invite people to receive the Good News of God's love and the gift of eternal life. As I continue to pray for God's guidance and live out a personal response to that question. My prayers are focused as I wonder how the people of the United Methodist Church can be faithful to our mission to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world "and how we will do that with "Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors."

These words from a letter Bishop Bickerton wrote to the churches of our Annual Conference in 2012 help guide my prayers, *"If we are going to be faithful to the call God has placed on our lives, it is time to pray for a 'turnaround'. The future may look daunting, but the Holy Spirit at work around and within us can revive our spirit and our resolve to be the Church of Jesus Christ.* The Bishop also encouraged every Christian to make a commitment that *"Each one reach one for Jesus, but first begin with prayer."* Finally, Bishop Bickerton invited us to be strengthened by these words from the Bible, *"With God on our side like this, how can we lose?"* – Romans 8:31b (The Message)

May we all be filled with comfort, hope, and a commitment to share God's love as we look forward to Easter.

Love and Hope,

+ Pastor Jim