

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Abby Cox. I'm a sophomore at GU, where I've been majoring in business management and theology. I've been coming to St Paul's for about a semester or two. The reason why I'm standing up in front of you today is because I recently became a local ministerial candidate at my hometown church, Knox Knolls Free Methodist. As a result, the pastoral team here has graciously allowed me to speak for you today.

As a part of my journey as a local ministerial candidate, I've taken a course about Wesleyan theology. As a part of this course, I've learned a lot about the band and class meetings that Wesley championed for. The class meetings were a way for people to deepen their relationships with each other, with themselves, and with Christ. During these meetings Wesley would ask the people gathered questions that were meant to help them search their own souls and hold themselves accountable to people other than themselves. These class meetings were meant to help congregants prepare themselves for worship together with the whole congregation. It was only through participation in the class meeting that one could then participate in worship with the congregation in methodist societies.

In the past few weeks, pastors Sam and Ayebale have talked with us about accountability to ourselves. Sam talked with us about the Israelites and how they needed to hold themselves accountable. Ayebale pointed out that perhaps we need to follow St. Kendrick's model of admitting that we're the biggest hypocrites of 2023. In order to help ourselves better with this accountability and ability to admit that we are hypocrites, I'm going to read some of Wesley's questions of accountability for us. You don't have to answer out loud, these are just for us to sit with for a moment this morning.

Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am? In other words, am I a hypocrite? (pause) Do I disobey God in anything? (pause) Do I thank God that I am not as other people, especially as the Pharisees who despised the publican? (pause)

It is only in asking ourselves these questions and understanding ourselves well that we can live well with each other. We cannot join the congregation until we've taken a good look at ourselves and the sins we've committed. We also cannot join the congregation until we've brought these sins before God, until we've repented of the ways in which we've failed to love each other. The good news from our texts today is that these gifts of inward accountability and repentance can lead us into a new life, lived in community with one another.

In our Ezekiel passage for this morning, the Israelites are willing to blame anyone but themselves for their own misfortune. We see them blame the generations that come before them for their problems. We even see them blame God for the wrongs that they've committed. It reminds me of those people that we often encounter in our lives that seem to blame other people for their own bad choices. We've even coined a phrase for this behavior, we call it "playing the victim." It seems like the Israelites are definitely "playing the victim" here. I think it's interesting because we often get annoyed with the Israelites and the people we know who play the victim. Yet, how often do we blame other people for our choices and bad circumstances?

If we are like the Israelites who are playing the victim, what can we do to right our wrongs? In our gospel passage, Jesus calls out the Pharisees and the chief priests, asking them why they never followed John's message of repentance. Jesus says that it was the tax collectors and the prostitutes that were able to do the work of holding themselves accountable. I think that often we think of ourselves as the sinners that Jesus died to save, but forget that we are also still the Pharisees that need to repent.

It's also interesting how Jesus doesn't place a timetable on when the Pharisees can seek repentance. God doesn't place limitations on His mercy and grace. He does not rejoice in our death. But isn't it justice for those who do wrong to suffer? I wonder how many times we break God's heart by seeking revenge instead of repentance. Why do we need to go out of our way to ensure that those who do wrong are punished for their sins? Their iniquities will lead them to punishment, God has assured us of that. The church isn't called to hold grudges, but to accept the repentance of our brothers and sisters.

After we've repented and accepted the repentance of others, what then? We have to find a new course, a new way to live. In our Philippians passage, Paul does a good job of outlining what this new life after repentance might look like. When he discusses this new life, he speaks not about our lives as individuals, but about our lives within the community of the Church.

Paul talks about the attitudes that we're supposed to have towards one another. We are not to think too highly of ourselves, but we are meant to elevate others. We're meant to see the good in our brothers and sisters, not the things that we can hold against them. So not only are we to accept the repentance of our brothers and sisters, we are to forgive them. If we don't forgive our brothers and sisters, how can we be of one mind with them?

The language that Paul uses when he says, "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind," reminds me of the language that is often used to describe marriage. It makes the heart posture that Paul calls us to seem more attainable when we think about it this way. Not that I know anything about marriage, other than what I've been able to observe from my lovely parents. It makes sense though. One day we leave our homes and our home churches, hoping to be embraced by a new community. We become one with that

community, choosing to call it home. Much like how married people leave their homes and find each other in order to make a new home with each other.

If we think of the Church as a joining of souls, like in marriage, then it makes sense that we should no longer do anything out of selfish desires. We are not the only people that we have to think of anymore. We have a new family and we have to consider each other's needs. Just like marriage often requires spouses to sacrifice for each other, living in a Christlike community requires sacrifices of us. Our thoughts should no longer be about what's best for us, but should be about what is best for the community as a whole. This also means that new church movements shouldn't revolve around the changes we may want to see, but rather what is best for the community we're serving. In order to be like Christ within our communities, we have to completely die to ourselves. This means that we have to empty ourselves of our egos, our relevance, our opinion that our ideas are the best, and on and on the list goes.

I don't know about anyone else, but I'd rather burn myself with a curling iron than admit that I'm wrong. The thought that my ideas aren't the best ones? Unthinkable. How am I supposed to let go of an attitude that is so firmly ingrained within me? The only way that I can think of is through the work of God within me. He is the only way that I can get through group projects without harming my peers. He is the only way in which I am able to love my friends well when they are being difficult. The only way that any of us are able to love each other in the ways that we are called to is through the work of God within us. We need to have the humility to admit that it isn't us that loves well, but God that gives us the ability.

As we leave here today, I think maybe we need to take the first step toward this new way of life we've been called to. Today, let's start by assessing where our souls are at. I'm going to

ask Wesley's questions of accountability again. Once again, you don't have to answer out loud, I just ask that you think about them.

Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am? In other words, am I a hypocrite? (pause) Do I disobey God in anything? (pause) Do I thank God that I am not as other people, especially as the Pharisees who despised the publican? (pause)