# 2026 Opening Worship Sermon

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## 06/04/2026, Williamsport, PA

In this season, the Holy Spirit is inviting us to live our faith with passion, intention, and courage as we live into a new vision for the people called United Methodists:

"United Methodists form disciples of Jesus Christ, who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously in local communities and worldwide connections."

This year, we are anchoring ourselves in the first movement of that vision: Love Boldly.

I want you to help me preach today. When I say, "Church, rise up," you respond, "Love boldly."

Let's practice. Church, rise up. People: Love boldly.
Again—Church, rise up. People: Love boldly.

Friends, this is more than a response. It is a calling God is placing upon us together. Church, rise up. People: Love boldly.

About two years ago, I sat with a group of faithful church leaders—good people, committed people, people who love the Church. But they were tired, not because

their church was empty, but because it was full of activity that no longer felt like ministry.

Meetings without purpose. Debates that divided rather than brought clarity and unity. Fundraisers driven by anxiety. Programs disconnected from mission. A quiet fear about the future.

Finally, someone named what many were feeling: "Bishop, I just don't know what God wants from us anymore."

Without planning it, three questions rose up in me:

- How are you loving God?
- How are you loving the people God places in front of you?
- How are you inviting others to embrace the hope of Christ in their lives?

The room went silent—not because they felt judged, but because everything that seemed complicated suddenly became clear.

A lawyer once asked Jesus, not to learn but to test him, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus refused to argue, refused to divide, and refused to complicate what God had already made clear. He answered: "Love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself."

Then Jesus said something astonishing to everyone listening: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Church, everything depends on love. Everything depends on love. Susquehanna, everything depends on love. Not rules. Not perfect theology. Not methods. But love. Not sentimental love. Not convenient love. But God's bold love—love that takes risks, crosses boundaries, heals wounds, and transforms lives. That is the love God pours into us and invites us to share with others.

Church, it is time to rise up. People: Love boldly.

To rise up is to turn our hearts toward Christ, to choose again and again to center our lives in the love of Jesus—not as an idea, not as tradition, not as a role or title, but as a living relationship with Jesus Christ that shapes who we are, how we live, how we serve, and how we lead.

Before we can love boldly, we need to rise up to Christ. If rising up, as John Wesley would say, is the inward movement toward Christ, then loving boldly is the outward movement into the world.

Jesus never separated love of God from love of neighbor. If our love for God does not move us to proclaim the good news, welcome the stranger, stand with the hurting, and challenge what dehumanizes God's children, then it is not the love Jesus modeled.

Jesus proclaimed hope without apology. Jesus touched those others avoided. Jesus welcomed those others excluded. Jesus confronted systems that crushed human dignity. Jesus restored worth to those pushed aside by religion and society.

Church, bold love sees the image of God in every person. Bold love proclaims Christ's hope. Bold love builds community. Bold love heals wounds. Bold love challenges injustice. Bold love refuses to let fear or evil have the final word.

Bold love is not passive. Bold love is not reactive. Bold love is revolutionary.
And when we rise in love for Christ and love boldly in the world, God leads us into nothing less than a revolution of love—a revolution not fueled by anger or hate, but by hope. Not loud, but powerful. Not violent, but liberating. Not destructive, but healing.

God is leading us into a revolution of love that brings liberation, healing, reconciliation, and wholeness for all through the gospel of Jesus Christ.
The world is longing for this kind of love—not more opinions, not more debates, not more division, but bold, Christ-shaped love.

Our communities across Central Pennsylvania are crying out—from Harrisburg facing economic strain, to York carrying wounds of racial violence, to Scranton navigating economic transition and infrastructure strain; from rural towns burdened by the opioid crisis, to cities wrestling with mental health and loneliness, to communities seeking belonging and hope, to rural areas impacted by hospital closures and school consolidation.

Our nation is crying out as division fractures relationships, as racism and inequities crush human dignity, as distorted ideologies wrapped in Christian language confuse and harm people, and as fear erodes trust.

Our world is crying out—from places torn by violence and war, from migrants seeking refuge, and from creation itself groaning under climate disruption.

These are not abstract issues. These are our neighbors. These are the communities where our churches stand. These are the places God is calling us—right here, right now—to rise up and love boldly.

We rise up and love boldly when we choose courage over comfort, hospitality over fear, community over isolation, and justice over silence in the face of evil.

We rise up and love boldly when we leverage common ground, celebrate diversity, and protect the unity the Spirit has entrusted to us.

We rise up and love boldly when we take risks for the sake of the Gospel, open our hearts, and cross the boundaries society has drawn to divide us.

We rise up and love boldly when we refuse to add to the chaotic noise of this world and instead lift our voices together with the countercultural hope of Jesus Christ.

As theologian Elaine Heath reminds us, "The future of the church will be forged not by clever strategies, but by communities radically committed to loving God and neighbor."

This is not about programs or structures. This is about being a people whose lives proclaim the Gospel—lives led by the Holy Spirit, lives that make the love of Jesus Christ visible and tangible to the world.

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world."
So, church, rise up. People: Love boldly.

You are the light of the world. So rise up and love boldly.

Remember those exhausted church leaders? Three questions changed everything. They began to pray—individually, then together, then as a congregation. Their conversations, priorities, and hearts shifted. They stopped obsessing over the past and fearing the future and became present to what God was doing.

They launched a prayer ministry. They read Scripture as formation rather than ammunition. They walked their neighborhood. They listened. They built relationships. They asked new questions.

Worship changed. Energy changed. Purpose changed.

They began feeding the hungry, building a community garden, partnering with a local school, standing with those experiencing food insecurity, and opening their building as a warming station.

Some people left, but new people came. New baptisms followed after years without them.

This is what a revolution of love looks like.

Susquehanna, how are you loving God? How are you loving the people God places in front of you? How are you inviting others to embrace the hope of Christ in their lives?

If these questions move from our heads to our hearts, they will reshape our future. So here is the invitation: rise up—go deeper in love for Christ. Let Christ reshape us, stretch us, and awaken us to renewal.

And love boldly—go wider in love for neighbor. Let proclamation become hope, hands become mercy, presence become welcome, and witness become belonging.

This is our moment. If not now, when? This is our calling.

Church, it's time to rise up. People: Love boldly.

Rise up and love boldly—for the glory of God and for the healing of God's world.