

## **Sermon for UMCA 3.3.2019 - Life in the Spirit**

Scripture: Galatians 6:1-10

Please pray with me.

Holy Spirit, we want more than anything to live in you. None of us come here to mock God or to make light of the Scripture. We have all come with hopes and dreams for a church and a world that bears one another's burdens and works for the good of all. Hold us together this day, Lord, and hold us tenderly in your mercy and love. Teach us to sow the seeds of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control - so that we may work together for a harvest that transforms the world. O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's been a long week.

In case you haven't heard, since we last worshiped here together, the United Methodist Church has held its special session of the General Conference. The General Conference is, among other things, the body which creates official church policy for our denomination. For a month, here at the United Methodist Church of Anoka, we've been considering what it looks and feels like to disagree with one another without doing harm to each other's human dignity. We've read and considered and studied the Bible. We've asked questions without demanding answers. We've wrestled with our human nature and our striving to follow Jesus. We've promised to love and serve God and our neighbors. We've renewed our covenant to share together our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. We've prayed and sung and taken deep breaths. We've hoped and believed that there are real ways we can choose to live in the Spirit of God, cultivating the fruit of the Spirit and loving each other despite our differences.

The General Conference in Saint Louis this week did not reflect the hard work we have done here over the last month. The discourse I watched from a distance over live streaming did not reflect a genuine desire among those gathered to see and hear one another. Instead, what was broadcast to all the world was just how willing United Methodists are to harm one another with our thoughts, words, and actions in the quest to be the most holy, most righteous, most victorious in battle.

My heart is heavy. My spirit is damaged. My soul cries out to God.  
And that's before we even come to the decisions made.

The gathered General Conference had before it several options to consider in this special meeting intended to address one specific area of our mission and ministry. The question before the body: how will (or will not) the United Methodist Church be in ministry with LGBTQ+ persons.

The delegates chose to center their conversations mostly around two possibilities.

Plan 1:

To reinforce the decades old language in our current Book of Discipline against homosexuality, to firm up the regulations that prohibit LGBTQ clergy from being ordained and prohibit same gender weddings, and to increase penalties and create mandatory consequences for clergy or bishops who violate these prohibitions.

Plan 2:

To acknowledge that United Methodists are not in agreement in our interpretation of Scripture or our beliefs, especially with regards to human sexuality; to allow for the possibility that we might faithfully come to different conclusions; to remove restrictive and harmful language from our Book of Discipline; and to allow for clergy and bishops and churches the choice to be in full ministry with all persons regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. This plan allowed for clergy and churches to minister in their contexts and by their consciences without requiring us all to make the same decision about what that looks like.

You may have heard from your United Methodist connections, or you may have heard from the local, national, or global news media, that the General Conference delegates chose to adopt the first option. The process of a decision like this taking effect is not instantaneous. There will be months of work around whether or not these policies will be enacted. Simultaneously, there will be conversations among United Methodists about staying, splitting, leaving the church.

I want you to know that I don't know yet what all of this will mean for you, for me, or for us together. But in the coming months, Pastor Laura and I are committed to work with our new Servant Leadership Board and all of you to share our stories and our hearts, to have authentic conversations, and to address our congregation's options as those options become more clear. There is much work to be done, and I hope you'll stick with us so that we can do that work together.

We are a faith community, a congregation, of folks who don't agree about everything. I mean, we don't agree about how to arrange the furniture! It is to be expected that we do not agree about something as complex as human sexuality. Of course we interpret Scripture in more than one way. Of course we have encountered God's presence and God's revelation through our own unique learnings, experiences, relationships, and world views.

That means that some of us gathered here likely think the General Conference made the right decision. If that describes your response to this news, thank you for being part of this congregation. You are loved and valued here. Your viewpoint helps us to carefully consider the Bible and to take our actions seriously. I hope that you will continue to be part of this congregation. I love you and I want to hear your story, your heart, and your passion for living as a follower of Jesus.

And, I also need you to hear my heart and my passion for living as a follower of Jesus. First, because I cannot be dishonest or neutral about my response to the General Conference. Second, because I do not believe we can travel together with dignity if we do not tell one another the truth. Third, because my leadership is borne of my call and convictions, and so how I lead is inevitably impacted by that call and those convictions.

We've been reading together this month from Paul's letter to the Galatian church. Now, there are things I find problematic about Paul's writings. But this heart of his message, which was articulated again today, I can really get behind. Life in the Spirit of God, life as a follower of Jesus, frees us for love! Life in the Spirit works for the good of all people, bears one another's burdens, and plants seeds of hope that we are committed to tending in people and in our world.

*God will not be mocked*, Paul writes. I agree. God will not be mocked by our arrogance or our manipulations. God will not be mocked by our self-righteousness. God calls us to be humble, accepting that we see only a hazy part of the glorious whole of God's vision for all of humanity and all of creation.

This week, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church chose the narrowest possible way to define God's love for us and our love for one another. I do not agree to that definition. I believe God's love is expansive, not limited, and I embrace love between people that is life-giving and honest. I embrace love that honors human dignity and does not exploit or abuse. I embrace love that drives us to be better and to work for the good of all people.

I am a lifelong United Methodist, born and baptized, taught and confirmed, trained and equipped, ordained and appointed. This decision does not speak for me.

This week I read a helpful analysis from a prolific United Methodist writer named Len Sweet. He is evangelical in his theology, an advocate for church tradition, and an outspoken preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This week he wrote:

*The word "tradition" is a word to which I have dedicated my life. Teaching pastors the importance of transmitting the tradition into the future is one of my lifelong missions. But as passionate as I am about the transmission of "tradition," I am equally passionate about the need to beat back "traditionalism." True tradition is a creative act, not static but dynamic; it is continually being invented and reinvented, an act of confirmed, consolidated and adaptive creativity. Traditionalism is an act of calcified and fossilized cynicism.*

*Tradition moves us forward; Traditionalism moves us back. Tradition's way forward is not through method and methodological procedures but through methodical study of the scriptures and discernment of the Spirit. True tradition would have shown the church how to show the world a body of Christ where all people, whether "progressive" or "conservative," straight or LGBTI, can differ in theological persuasion and ecclesiastical orientation but worship in the same pew and be united in Jesus' passion to welcome all people into our Lord's body.*

This week one of you came to see me here at church. You said that you came in person to see how I was doing because, though you agree with the position taken by the General Conference this week, you suspected I would be grieving. You did not come to gloat, you came to offer me grace. You said that although you don't agree with me, you don't doubt my faithfulness to God and to Scripture. You said you also want all people to feel welcomed and loved in this church the way that you have felt. You even went so far as to say that you hope I get to see in my lifetime the change I seek, even knowing that change will be uncomfortable for you. That's the difference between tradition and traditionalism. You gave me life, even as we addressed our deeply held convictions and our disagreement. I am so thankful to be the church together with you now and in the future.

Others of you have contacted me this week to express your deep grief, anger, and pain at the decision of the General Conference. You have shared your anxiety about what will happen next and your stories about your own families and loved ones who are feeling rejected and publicly shamed by the United Methodist Church. You have wondered whether you can continue to stay here if staying here sends the message that you agree with the policies of the denomination.

You have grieved the people you love who have shut themselves off from the church and from Jesus because of decisions like this, because of the way they have been harmed over and over again.

I am aware that we are not of one mind. I'm also aware that this is an urgent and critical moment for us. The media has blasted around the world this message: The United Methodist Church rejects the LGBTQ+ community.

We must be clear in our response. Writer and minister Matthew Vines, in his book *God and the Gay Christian* observes, *For many LGBT people, the first time they heard someone in their family or church say they would accept a person regardless of sexual orientation was what helped bring them back from a place of crushing self-hatred.*

This image on the screen is a painting that my daughter created a few years ago. Stella painted this to reflect her experience at the Communion table, and for me this has become my dream. This is what I believe the kingdom of God looks like. This is the table to which I invite all of us today, a place of holy chaos that leads to creation and life, a place of diversity and vibrancy, a place where we lay down our disagreements in the name of God's grace and love and mercy.

In closing, I want to speak directly and clearly to you who are LGBTQ+, and if you have a loved one who is LGBTQ+ who is not here in this room, I hope you will share this message with them.

You are NOT a problem to be addressed.

You are NOT an issue to be discussed.

You are NOT a topic to be debated.

You are made in the image of God.

You are a reflection of God's expansive love in our world.

You are a member of the body of Christ. When you suffer, we all suffer.

We cannot live fully into God's vision for us without you.

I will not comply with policies that harm you or exclude you from the fullness of life and ministry in the church. I will continue to work for a church that embraces you and honors you.

God loves you.

I love you.

No exceptions.

Amen.