

Sermon 10-6-19  
Paul Purdue preaching

**In May of 2020**, the United Methodist Church General Conference will bring together delegates representing the **136 countries** that are a part of our worldwide denominational communion. Our own, Rev. **Marie King** is one of those delegates. **Jacob** Vaughan, Jefferson Furtado, Linda Furtado and I will be alternates there as well. The gathering will consider legislation that may dissolve the denomination or divide it into 2 or 3 or even 4 churches. On this World Communion Sunday, it seems appropriate to ask: **how do we deal with divisions inside institutions, communities, and families we love?**

**Our 2019 disagreements are not as deep as those inside the early church.** Paul, Barnabus, Silas, Phoebe, Priscilla, and Aquilla planted churches in about 15 cities around the Mediterranean Sea. The Apostle Paul's team broke theological ground **by including gentiles and not requiring circumcision**, the very sign of God's eternal covenant with Abraham. (compare Philippians 3 and Genesis 17). Now there were already a variety of Jewish cultural expressions inside the early church: Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealous revolutionaries, cultural Jews, and not quite kosher Jews. However, **the introduction of gentiles tested the limits of grace and unity inside the early church.** In Lystra, the crowd shouted "The gods have taken human form and come down to visit us" as they brought bulls and wreaths in order to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabus, who they called Hermes and Zeus (Acts 14) In Ephesus, new Christians burned their old magic books, reportedly worth over a million dollars. (Acts 17) The influx of these gentile Christians disrupted a homogeneous Christian-Jewish culture. **If we share the same culture and beliefs, we do not need love to get along.**

Imagine, loading the grandparents, one aunt, and three kids into your mini-van. You ask: **"Where do you want to eat supper?"** Now if everyone yells "Fido" you're done... no love required. But if the chorus comes out "Hop Doddy, Smiling Elephant, Pancake Pantry, Grill Cheesery, Double Dogs, McDougals... and what if a teenager yells out: **"meat is murder- I only eat vegetables!"** Well, **those dining decisions require love. Doing church, life or family with people who hold different points of view, experiences, and languages requires active love.** If we all agree, love is not necessary. However, God's presence is revealed and perfected inside anyone who chooses to practise Love ( 1 John 4).

**Romans 14 is about love and where to eat dinner! The inclusion of new folks at God's table challenges trusted rules. However, new expressions allow us to explore what deeply unites us!** Torah observant Jews would not eat meat if it was not slaughtered according to kosher laws. Remember how Peter, cried out, "Lord, I have never eaten anything impure?" God's vision answers the uneasy bishop: "Never consider unclean what God has made pure!" (Acts 10) In time the church decided that Following Christ, mattered more than circumcision or kosher meals.

**If we live inside God's abiding Love, then God, not theological assent is what creates unity. I will love my children no matter what they do.** The Apostle Paul holds an opinion. In Corinthians 8, Paul says "We all have opinions, but knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Paul believes those clinging to the Levitical rules as "weaker" in

faith. **Yet, Paul offers a remedy to the deep divisions and different understandings. Paul has a vision for peace within the division.**

*Welcome each other. Do not argue about differences of opinion.. Do not look down on others. Do not judge: God has accepted them, so who are we to judge?... Do not let something you consider to be good be criticized as wrong. God's kingdom is not about rules but about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Let us strive for the things that bring peace. Let us seek to build each other up.*

Paul's argument goes like this: **Who is right does not matter. That requires radical Love.** What we believe matters less than the ways we treat each other. **However, that does not mean we should stop lovingly standing up our beliefs.** Our inclusive theology is rooted in God's grace, Jesus' practice, our baptism vows, and an internally consistent application of scriptures. We understand women in ministry, the rejection of slavery, and the inclusion of divorced pastors with the same theological lens that we use to fully accept queer christians. The voices of exclusion lack this internal biblical consistency, employing a liberal reading with some verses and then falling back into literalism with other verses. Paul warns do not let those who disagree with you, put down your theology. God's justice demands we become a voice for the voiceless. **However, if God is Love, then Loving orthopraxy matters more than our orthodoxy.**

*Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice. Love rejoices with the truth. It puts up with stuff, trusts easily, hopes for the best, and endures all things. Now, our knowledge, preaching, and arguments will all end. Love never ends. Love never fails.*

**Now, I have a lot more I want to say about will happen in Minneapolis next May.** I hope our denomination follows the slowly moving arc of inclusion, which included uncircumcised Gentiles and eventually included women in 1956. The name carved in stone across the front of our church tells of our slow progress to fully love: The Methodist Episcopal Church South. We have a history of resisting God's moving us towards justice and love. **However, even if the denomination clings to the vestiges of an exclusionary past, I have hope. Belmont will be alright, because we are part of a movement bigger than the institutional church.** My faith does not rely on the institutional church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said "Christianity conceals within itself a germ hostile to the church" (Bonhoeffer, Pastor, Prophet, Martyr, spy 84). The UMC does so much good in our world, **but our rule book is longer than the Gospel of Matthew!** **Let us place our hope in Jesus- who had some troubles with institutionalized faith. Let us be part of that movement Jesus called the Kingdom of God.**

**Three hundred years ago, we methodists were a part of movement** seeking to reform the church of England. **About 175 years ago, the Bible was translated into Karen** by American Baptist missionaries. Thirty years ago, God's movement flowed through Belmont as we welcomed Christians who later became the **Nashville Korean Church.** The Kin-dom of God sprouted up as Belmont planted **Justice For Our Neighbors.** **As we worship together today, not understanding all that is said in Karen or English, we demonstrate God's movement. We welcome each other. We**

**trust God is at work in the other, while not even knowing exactly what the other is saying. We accept each other. We include each other. This is Love's work! Love welcomes, includes, defends, forgives, hopes, accepts, stops arguing, and Love never fails. Let us walk together in love. Friends, the very gates of hell are not be able to withstand our marching together in love. Amen.**