



9:30 AM - WESLEY CHAPEL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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WCUMC.Urbana@gmail.com
Website: <https://wesleychapelurbana.com/>
Music Minister: Jean Wood

11:00 AM - CLARKSBURG UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
23425 Spire St., Clarksburg, Maryland
<https://www.facebook.com/clarksburgmdumc/>
Accompanist: Rick Beede
Choir Director: Cathy Warfield

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

MAY 5, 2024

9:30 AM

PRAYER

dwh

God of righteousness and justice, grant us your grace that we may hear familiar words of scripture with fresh ears, and be guided by your Spirit to hear your holy message, and respond to it faithfully as we seek to follow Christ today. Amen.

FIRST LESSON

Acts 10:44–48

GOSPEL

John 15:9–17

EPISTLE

1 John 5:1–6

SERMON

Jesus said that faithfulness as followers of Christ means living lives of love.

By now it is likely that you have heard news reports, from various secular news outlets, sensationalizing the events of General Conference. My experience, across my 30+ years of ministry is that this is what they do ... every ... time.

The fact is that, yes, with super-majority votes, and little or no debate, several significant changes were approved to our Book of Discipline.

Some changes remove some language, some proscriptions, from the Book of Discipline. There are intended consequences to these actions of General Conference., and there will be unintended consequences as well. There always are. The road ahead of us is not clear or well defined. We will find ourselves living our way into it.

On Friday, our bishop posted a video on the conference YouTube channel, talking a little about the experience of General Conference this year. The atmosphere, the interpersonal dynamics, were more healthy and encouraging than they have been in (literally) decades.

She talked about rich conversation and collaboration, and how it felt like brand new day, a fresh wind of the Spirit blowing through all of the sessions. Morning Worship on Friday was a celebration of God's love for us, and our love for one another.

It seems the experience was an expression of what Jesus was talking about in our Gospel lesson today. If you would like to hear what she had to say, the video is easily found by searching for youtube bwc umc, and then going to the videos tab; probably still the most recent video.

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_wvfPdLiyoQ

She goes on to talk about her concern for those who have been hearing about the work of General Conference over the last two weeks and feel conflicted, and may be concerned about the changes in our Book of Discipline and how they may affect us, perhaps even right here in our church.

More interpretive help will be coming from our conference leadership, both our Bishop, and those who represented us at General Conference. She said the most important thing for us to take away at this moment is that the changes will allow us to contextualize ministry.

We have always been a “big tent”, with very diverse points of view represented among our members. The changes will allow us, as a denomination to be more welcoming and affirming for more people. Hopefully it will allow us also, as a local congregation, to better live out our mission and ministry .

Again, this sounds to me like an expression of what Jesus was instructing his followers in our Gospel lesson.

The Bishop prays for those who are responding to General Conference with joy, that the joy will be effervescent and conveyed to those we meet. She also prays for those who are weeping, that they may know God’s sustaining grace in this time, and also have confidence that God will continue to work with the Church, to bring us into conformity with the likeness of Christ. Again, I do encourage you to view this 5 minute video by our bishop on our conference YouTube channel.

Jesus told us, as recorded in the preaching of John’s Gospel, that in his ministry he had loved us with God’s kind of love. He told us that living responsibly, faithfully, in relationship with God and with Jesus, was the key to “abiding in his love”. And he explained what living responsibly and faithfully looks like. He said that faithfulness as followers of Christ means living lives of love.

Think about this for a moment. It is in this same Gospel, near the start, only in chapter 4, that Jesus has a conversation with a woman from Samaria. You know the story, I know. Still, permit me to share it with you again, in context. In John 3, we are told that Jesus was the expression of God’s love for everybody. We all know John 3:16, right? And this is followed by the assertion that...

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

It includes the further assertion that those who come to Jesus are those who are not condemned, while those who do not come to him are self-condemned, choosing to live in darkness. This is followed by a short comparison and contrast between Jesus and John the Baptist, and then by Jesus taking his disciples on this excursion into the heart of Samaria.

So, while the disciples go into town to try to find and buy some food, he sits down there by the well. He was tired, the Bible tells us.

Did you ever notice that before? Jesus got tired. He understands when you and I get tired. I think that is a good thing; Jesus knew what it was to be just as fully human as you and I.

And sitting there by the well, he has a conversation with a woman who had come out to draw water. He asks for a drink of water, and offers to return the favor with more besides. You know this story, right?

*Notice though, that Jesus does **not** get into an examination of theology and liturgy. **She** tries to go there, but he will not allow that to get in the way of relationship, of the expression of hospitality, of living in love toward the stranger in your midst. He tells her that all theological arguments will be set aside in God's coming kingdom. She tells him that she is waiting for the messiah who will make such matters clear, and he claims he IS the messiah she has been waiting for.*

This exchange at the well was an opportunity for love to happen, for one person to meet the needs of a stranger, and for the other to graciously accept. It is instructive. Jesus was about love.

They did have different theologies.

They had different ways of worshiping.

Jesus could have made an issue about theology, but he did not.

For Jesus, the work of God was about the practice of love, setting aside our differences, whatever they might be, even the issues of marriage, and whether one is married to the person they are living with Jesus sets these aside for the purpose of building relationship.

John tells us that many Samaritans believed in him, came to trust him, came to recognize him as God's agent for saving the world... all because Jesus was all about relationship... all about love.

In 2001, United Methodist Communications began a marketing campaign for us, with Television spots and everything, with the slogan

Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors

This was under the authority of General Conference in 2000.

One person commented

Openness implies a posture of welcome. An open heart is willing to embrace your neighbor, maybe even when it is complicated. An open mind is willing to listen and consider new ideas or opinions without shutting down or tuning out. An open door is an often very literal willingness to let anyone, no matter their identity or station in life, walk through your door. And in each of these cases, being open means we should be ready for how God is calling us to change.

Some didn't like the marketing campaign because that slogan was not explicitly crafted and approved by the careful work of General conference. Do you hear that... it is an argument about how we should do things, essentially – in our context – a theological argument.

*Others did not like it because it seemed to be **honored more often in the breach, than in the observance**, the actual application.*

That is an expression from Shakespeare, in Hamlet, Act 1, scene 4. In short, it means we may talk a good game, but often fail to live up to it.

*But isn't that the way of it? We are followers of Christ, right?
But do we always get it right? Again, to borrow from Shakespeare, in Hamlet... **There's the rub.** We do not always get it right. We often fail.*

*But, in a sense, that is why I always have liked the slogan.
It holds our aspiration up before us. It says this is who we want to be, this is who we try to be.*

Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors

Such a big tent will not satisfy everyone. Some will find it too threatening to their comfort zones. They like boundaries well defined and clear and consistent. Having one set of practices in one place and another in a different place results in a dissonance for them so troubling that they may choose to move on to other pastures.

***I want to make two connections now. One connection is to remembering our heritage, the topic on which I spoke last week.**
The other is to the matter of May 5. I will address them in that order.*

John Wesley had theological disputes right and left. He wrote about them extensively. In the volumes of his works you can read all about them, in his sermons, letters and treatises. One of the arguments that seemed to be an especially sore point for him concerned Calvinism. There were others to be sure, but this one was especially touchy.

His argument with George Whitfield became public when he published a sermon entitled Free Grace, in which he dismantled Calvinism point by point. In an open letter Whitfield responded, point by point, tearing apart Wesley's arguments. What could have been a private discussion became a matter of public debate that caused the first real split in the Methodist movement.

In March of 2022, Charlie Baber did a comic strip about the controversy, which you may find here...

<https://www.wesleybros.com/wesbros/this-one-is-totally-just-about-calvinism/>

The point is that arguments about theology, or about practice will not serve us well. Never have they served us well. Jesus did not say that people would know we were his disciples by our theology, or our arguments, but by our love.

In 1742, Wesley would declare that it is having a right heart that matters, and if we are willing to love, then we may be in fellowship.

“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.”

— John Wesley

Now the connection to May 5.

For some, today may be just another Sunday, or just another Communion Sunday. For some it is Kentucky Derby Weekend. For some it is Cinco de Mayo. Some see it as the day after Star Wars day. For others, different connections are made.

Today is “Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women” awareness day. You may see some hashtags in posts that relate. You may see people wearing red dresses. You may see some with hands painted red. You may see some with a red hand print across their mouth and face.

These have to do with the violence faced by indigenous women, and girls and “two spirit people”, the “sisters that have been stolen”, and the voices that have been silenced. Specifically, the red hand

... stands for all the missing sisters whose voices are not heard. It stands for the silence of the media and law enforcement in the midst of this crisis. It stands for the oppression and subjugation of Native women who are now rising up to say #NoMoreStolenSisters.

Some of us may be aware that alcoholism (and diabetes) are epidemics on the reservations. Others may be aware also of significantly higher rates of domestic violence “on the res”.

*But there is so much more, and we should not turn away simply because the truths are uncomfortable. We do **not** know what to do. We should become informed, because this will equip us to act, to become agents of change, to love, even if that love only means saying... I see you, and I hear you, and I will stand with you.*

Not only is the murder rate ten times higher than the national average for women living on reservations but murder is the third leading cause of death for Native women.

“The National Crime Information Center reports that, in 2016, there were 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, though the US Department of Justice’s federal missing person database, NamUs, only logged 116 cases.”

National Missing and Unidentified Persons System - the only national repository for these cases

Since our work together really should be more about formation than information, more about what we do, and how we live, than about absorbing new data points... Where do we go with this?

As I said, there is so much more. **I encourage you to research, to learn about** “Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women”. And then to connect what you learn back to what Jesus said in the Gospel today...

*“This is my commandment,
that you love one another as I have loved you.*

As the author of the Epistle read today reminded us,
*the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.
And his commandments are not burdensome,*

And as Cornel West provoked our conscience on the matter,
Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public

As a second branch of formation, consider also the damage done by heated debates about theology, and what good may be done when people of differing perspectives work together.

Put it in the context of

We love... because he first loved us.

And *Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors*

“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.”

INTERCESSIONS

Creator God, we pray for Love.

*We thank you for the love that these families and communities hold
for their daughters, mothers, grandmothers, aunts,
sisters, cousins, and friends.*

We mourn with them.

*We pray for all those whose lives are marked by trauma
because of these murders and disappearances.*

Hold them in love, ... Catch every tear that falls.

Creator God, we pray for Honesty.

*May those who have information about the whereabouts
of these women and girls be moved to share it.*

Creator God, we pray for Humility. *Give all persons the humility
to open their hearts to hear stories from this country
that are not celebratory;
stories of colonization, racism, and marginalization.
stories of violence*

Creator God, we pray for Wisdom.

*May the leaders of the various inquiries and all those who direct them
have the wisdom that comes only from you
to listen deeply and make wise recommendations,
so that we may all heal together.*

Creator God, we pray for Respect.

*May the families who share their pain and perspectives in any venue
with the inquiry be treated with respect — may the needs be heard.*

Creator God, we pray for Truth.

These stories are far from simple and clear-cut.

May the truth of the impact on Indigenous women become clear.

Creator God, we pray for Courage.

For families and community members speaking their stories.

For those who will be crafting recommendations.

*For social organizations and churches raising awareness
and pursuing justice...*

For all persons, as we prepare

to listen to these stories

and in love to advocate for action to meet the needs.

For our political leaders, in responding to the needs .

Great and Holy Mystery, Comforter, Advocate,

Receive our prayers at this sacred time

for the families *of missing and murdered Indigenous persons*

the vulnerable women, girls, and two-spirited people

They have waited for a very long time to share their stories

They have waited for a very long time

to obtain a true sense of justice

and reach a true place of peace

Receive our prayers, at this important time,

for National / Governmental agencies *and the Inquiries*

into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

May the Inquiries unfold in a way

that honours those who have been lost

and that respects in every way in which it

acts, speaks, and conducts its business,

the needs and wishes of the families and loved ones

of those who have been lost

*These prayers we bring to you, seeking to honor the command of
Christ that we should love each other, as you love us. Amen.*

PRAYER & SENDING alt from Carol Prickett original in Presbyterian Outlook

*“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself,
and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” (2 Cor. 5:18-19) .
“That’s the task of Christians – to move fences, to tear down walls.”*

~Maxie Dunham

*Christ drenches us in love every moment of our lives.
It is in response to that love that we are called to love others.*

*As the church we go out to celebrate God’s love,
and to make it tangible in the way we live.*

*May the God who made you uphold you,
the Christ you saved you enfold you,
and the Spirit who dwells within you embolden you,
this day and forevermore.*

Amen

POSTLUDE

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<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning>

or from Feasting on the Word (eg **FotW** - see also insert)

or from the Book of Common Prayer, (**BCP** - public domain).

or other sources as noted.

(*)Note: *Quarrelling* is the preferred spelling in the UK;

Quarreling is preferred in the US.

George Bernard Shaw is credited with having said:

“England and America are two countries divided by a common language”.

Reflecting on and Praying with Scriptures
As suggested by the Revised Common Lectionary
Year B – Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 5, 2024

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Scriptures

Acts 10:44-48

Psalms 98

1 John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

Questions for Reflection:

In our Gospel lesson this week, Jesus speaks of his extreme love for us, calls us his friends, and says that he makes known to us everything that he hears from God.

How does thinking of Christ as our friend and lover—or Lord and Master—affect our daily living?

Morning Prayers:

Holy One, I begin today breathing in your love
for me, for others, and for the world.

Keep me mindful of all the marvelous things
you are doing around and within me today.

Help me to feel my friendship with Jesus
and his confidence in me.

Maintain in my heart the image of myself as a tree,
bearing the fruit of Christ's love everywhere I go today. Amen.

Evening Prayers:

God, you are both judge and friend.

Even as I review my day, I give it over to you.

I let go of the good, the bad, and the in-between,
trusting in your care for me.

I am content this night to abide in your love.

I breathe in your joy and your peace.

Whatever I need, I ask of you in Jesus' name. Amen.