

Sermon Series: Can we be civil? part 7

Title: Loving the Other in Church

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Scripture: Acts 15:1-21

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This past summer, the United Methodist Church held its General Conference. At General Conference--held every four years--Methodists do the business of the denomination, establish priorities, and decide on matters of church policy and law.

This time around the issue of homosexuality was front and center. Controversies related to homosexuality have consumed much of the denomination's attention for the last three decades, but Supreme Court decision regarding same sex marriage and a recent church trials regarding the ordination of openly homosexual persons created the very real possibility for a church wide division.

The church's *Social Principles* and *The Book of Discipline* explicitly disallow the ordination and pastoral service of self-acknowledged homosexuals. And yet there have been efforts made to disallow or overturn these very positions. Movements inside and outside the church have forced a moment of decision for the denomination.

No final decision was made at the Conference this summer. The bishops put forward a plan for further conversation, prayer and study. There will be a special General Conference in 2019 to address the issue further. But clearly, many are unhappy. And the future of the denomination is uncertain. Some congregations have threatened to leave the denomination if the matter is not resolved to their satisfaction. Many Clergy serving churches are torn between church law and the desire to provide weddings to same sex couples. And the UNITED part of the United Methodist Church name is far from settled. In fact, the word United in our name may need to be changed to *UNTIED*.

We are now faced with prospects of division, if not schism, over our positional differences. It's happened before, such as when the church split over the issue of slavery. It may well happen again.

So, it seems to me, that there is one last matter we need to touch on before bring our civility sermon series to a close:

**How might we practice civility**

### **when it comes to getting along with other people in the church?**

What are we to do particularly when we hold positions that are at odds with those held by others in our church, such as on the matter of homosexuality?

This, might be the time for a prayerful pause.

Having already brought up political divisions in this country, and the ways in which race continues to divided us, haven't I already gone far enough? Now I want to talk about the divisions within the church when it comes to sexual orientation. There must be something wrong with me! There must be some sort of twisted part of me that wants to alienate and anger not just some of you, but every one of you!

Well, friends, that's not the case. Hopefully that's not the case. I am just your humble pastor, trying my best to make sense out of the words I first learned in Sunday school a long time ago.

Words like:

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

“Love your enemies.”

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

These are not my words, mind you. No. These are the words that come from Jesus and I find them every bit as challenging to practice as you do. Jesus doesn't command us to agree with one another or just get along with one another. He commands us to love one another, just as he loves each of us.

Now, I want to be clear. I am not going to address the issue of homosexuality today. I know that there are deeply held views on each side of the issue and I don't expect that to change. However, what I do hope to do is find a way that we may still be civil and connected to each other, even in spite of our opposing positions.

I am greatly indebted to Gil Rendle for helping to shape my thoughts on conflict within the church. Gil Rendle has written several books about effective and vital churches. He has studied churches across the country and seen the ways that healthy churches operate as well as the ways that they break down. He argues that the real work of the church is not the work of agreement or unity, but rather the work of **connection**.<sup>1</sup>

The challenge now facing our denomination is not whether we can all agree, nor whether we will find unity. The answer is, we probably can do neither. Our attention is much better focused on those things that *connect* us to each other. And the best sort of connection is a connection based around a clearly stated purpose.

The question the church people should be asking is this:

*“Do we have a shared purpose in our life together as a denomination and as community of faith?”*

To put it another way,

*“Is there a clear task to which we are called to put our hands?”*

If so, this is what can keep us connected to one another even in spite of many disagreements and contrary opinions that would otherwise keep us divided. We find connection as we share together in the work Christ calls to do, even though we hold many different positions.

For example, when Washington Football fans root for their team, they may have many different opinions on political and social issues. They may even hold divergent positions on theological matters. But what connects them is a shared purpose namely, the desire to see a well-played game with victory for their team. This is the point of connection.

If we, as United Methodists, can move our conversations from human sexuality to purpose, we will have moved from dividing POSITIONS to shared INTERESTS. **Positions** are conclusions. They are fixed and non-negotiable. And you either agree with them or you don't. **Interests** however, are the reasons that lie beneath the positions. Interests are always negotiable because they are connected to our purpose. It is time to claim our purpose and the ways in which we can be connected around that purpose.

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The scripture lesson today is perhaps a strange text for a Sunday morning sermon. It's about, of all things, a church meeting. The book of Acts is set in the time just after Jesus's resurrection and Ascension into heaven. With Jesus no longer present with them in bodily form, the believers had to figure out what comes next. They had to figure out their purpose as followers. There were no written instructions left behind. No recipes to follow for building a community of faith. They had to figure it out as they went along.

Of course, they had the memory of Jesus, what he said and did. And they also had the promise that the Holy Spirit would be with them and guide them forward. And so, as they faced one challenge after another, they learned to trust that God would go with them and the Holy Spirit would guide them where they needed to go.

One of the challenges the earliest believers faced was just who got to be a part of this community of faith, the church and what would hold them together.

You see, the first believers were Jewish. Jesus was Jewish. The disciples and the other believers came to the understanding that Jesus was God's messiah, the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. So, it made perfect sense for them to think that the doors of the church would only be open for those who were already Jews. However, after the resurrection, Jesus told the disciples that they were to make disciples of *all nations*. Not just the Jewish nation, but ALL NATIONS. (Matthew 28:19). And Jesus also said that they were to be his witnesses

*“in Jerusalem,  
in all Judea and Samaria,  
and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 2:1:8)

Soon enough, Gentiles, that is, non-Jewish, people began showing up and asked to be included in community of Jesus followers.

Acts is the story of how the church dealt with the shock that *“God has enabled Gentiles to change their hearts and lives so that they may have new life.”* (Acts 11:18 CEB)

The culmination of this story takes place in Acts 15. A church meeting. The believers are together and an argument breaks out about just who is to be included and who is to be excluded from this new thing that God was doing. Who gets to be a part of the church?

As the meeting went on, Paul and Barnabus told everyone about the signs and wonders that God was doing among the Gentiles. Nobody planned such things. Nobody expected such things. But there they were. Lives were transformed by the gospel. People were healed. And it wasn't only among the Jews. Joy and hope and new possibilities abounded among the Gentile followers also.

And who can argue with that? And so, the believers realized that what unites people in the community of faith is not rites and rituals. It's not the practices that we have grown accustomed to. It's not ancestral lines or Jewish heritage. It's not our theological positions or a certain style of music in worship. No, what unites all

believers is a decision to follow Christ and do the work he commanded us to do. The connection comes through a common purpose, sharing in the work that Jesus gave his followers to do.

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Gil Rendle also points out that he has often seen this at work in certain in larger congregations.

He writes,

“It is common in our largest congregations to have members span the fairly wide continuums of politics, socio-economics, social justice commitments and moral behavior. I have been in large congregations where young husbands hold bible studies focused on being the head of the household, while women in the same congregation meet in groups to strategize female leadership. I have been in large congregations where small groups advocate, while other small groups oppose, same gender weddings. I have been in large congregations where some small groups have a deep passion for evangelism while other small groups follow passions for mission, youth, or issues of justice.

Large congregations manage their vitality despite, or because of, these differences by following two principles.

**The first** principle is that nobody in these churches insists that everyone must think the same on every issue. People on one side of an issue are aware of people on the other side of an issue. ---And that’s okay. Uniformity is not necessary for there to be a vital and faithful community of faith so long as there is a clear vision and purpose.

This leads to **the second** of the two principles. The senior clergy and governing board in these churches very clearly set the vision, the outcomes, and the priorities of the church. People and groups with deep differences are invited to stay as long as they share in the identity and purpose of the congregation. The mission is communicated widely and often. People are constantly being reminded why they are there and what connects them. This is the glue that keeps people connected, even though they may have plenty of disagreements or opinions that could drive them apart.

Healthy faith communities can live with differences so long they share a connection around a clear purpose and mission. Not everybody has to think

alike. Not every person has to agree. They just need to share a common purpose.

What I would add is that churches don't have to be big in order to learn the lessons that some large churches have discovered. Any size church can benefit from putting these two principles into practice:

- There is never a requirement that everyone in the church has to agree or be unified in order to participate in the church, and
- Clear vision, outcomes and priorities are to be set by the leadership in the church which creates ongoing connection across the congregation.

The church will have to learn to live as a gathering of people who are connected by a shared purpose even though they hold different positions.

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John Wesley, aware of the differences held by people around him, said that if others' hearts were as his heart, then he welcomed their hand in Christ's work. Not everybody had to think just as he did. <sup>2</sup> He welcomed people with many different backgrounds and tastes and theologies because all that really mattered was a desire to live the life of scriptural holiness that Jesus proclaimed. That was to be the connection.

The church is where, if we are being faithful and being the church God calls us to be, we meet Christ who gives us a task to carry out. He sends us out into the world to proclaim the good news, care for others, welcome the stranger and practice a more excellent way of love. And what we cannot achieve on our own, God graciously provides.

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I think this is what we are beginning to do here at Calvary United Methodist Church. In January, the Church Council approved a framework for a planning process that will get us thinking about the future and what lies ahead for us on the horizon. Not just coming us with a mission statement, but also specific recommendations, goals and objectives that will move us towards accomplishing that mission.

After receiving names from the Church Council, I have been working with Zan Flemming and Kyle Bostian, the lay leaders of this congregation to identify a group that will lead the church through a six-month process to prayerfully discern the ways that God is calling us to do ministry in this time and place. This group will be

getting started soon and there will be opportunities to hear about their work and what God seems to be leading us to do and be in the coming years. This can be the sort of connection and purpose that connects us to one another and to God, even in spite of the different positions we may hold when it comes to politics, social issues, and even theology.

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In the midst of the world, we are called to take up a better way of living, a more excellent way. We are called to show signs of peace, genuine peace to one another. We are called to recognize the connection we have as we carry out Christ's call. We are called to love one another and work together to bring God's kingdom here on earth. We can do so not because we all think the same or agree on every topic. No. We can stay connected to one another because we share a common mission and purpose in Christ.

And God is working many signs and wonders in our midst today. Blessed be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. We may not always agree in every position, but we can still join hands in taking up the cross in a life of obedience and service to Jesus Christ.

**Amen**

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<sup>1</sup> Gil Rendle, "A Call to Quiet Courage," TMF, Monograph, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, "On Catholic Spirit," sermon 39. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-39-catholic-spirit/>