

## Message and Scripture 22 September 2024

### Scripture: Philippians 2:1-8 Message

<sup>1-4</sup> If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you *care*—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

<sup>5-8</sup> Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human!* Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

**Thanks be to God.**

### Message: United Methodist Social Principles: The Social Community

As you may remember, I did not attend a United Methodist Seminary, although it was recognized by the United Methodist Church and had a rather large contingent of Methodist students, Brite Divinity at TCU, is a Christian Church, Disciples of Christ seminary. That is not a denomination that is very well known around here, but it is big as one travels further west. All that is to say that I was exposed to many church traditions and ways of thinking. My classmates were Southern Baptist, Unitarian Universalist, Disciples, Presbyterian and Episcopal. In fact, the only major Christian denomination that was not present was Catholic, but we did have a Roman Catholic professor who taught the Old Testament and Hebrew classes!

Everyone had their own way of interpreting Scripture and understanding how to hear God. In our United Methodist Tradition, we speak about the Wesleyan Quadrilateral – a good “mathy” way, or at least a geometrical way, of doing theology. Scripture is the base of our Quadrilateral – always start with Scripture, but then build on that using tradition on one side. What is the tradition of the church? And then add reason, for the second side—what does your own mind tell you, and finally add in experience as the top of the quadrilateral. What have you experienced around this issue? This personal examination of moral questions is to me, one of the great strengths of our church. I know it would sometimes be easier to just be told what to do and what to think, but is that really satisfying? And what happens when what you are told and what you experience are at odds? That's what happened to my dad when he was a youth – his church told him he had to believe what his mind – his reason and experience - told him was wrong. So, he left the church.

Of course, sometimes my reasoning and experience is going to come into conflict with your reasoning and experience. What do we do then? Well, Wesley famously said, "Although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection?" which is often misquoted in the more accessible language of, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity". In other words, we can disagree about much and still agree that we are both faithful Christians. This big tent is what drives what are often called the wishy-washy answers in today's section of our social principles, the social community.

I prefer to call this section nuanced. I prefer to read this portion of our social principles remembering that we do not all have the same life experiences. For instance, we recognize that families come in all shapes and sizes, and we further recognize that children do not a family make – we even go so far as to say that a single person can be their own family – no one should be penalized or discriminated against for their particular type of family. However, we cannot endorse the practice of polygamy.

Of course not, Robyn, how ridiculous, even mainstream Mormons no longer endorse polygamy. BUT United Methodism is not just a United States religion. There are parts of the world where polygamy is common and accepted – not only accepted but expected. So, what happens when a polygamous family converts to United Methodism?

Here is the response, “We acknowledge that the forced dissolution of such relationships presents significant problems. All too often, the women and children forced out of polygamous relationships find themselves cast into abject poverty with no means of support. “We, therefore, urge church leaders, when dealing with the dissolution of polygamous relationships, to exercise the utmost care and to prioritize considerations related to the continued health and well-being of dependent women and children.

“We reject attempts to ostracize families who are or have been in polygamous relationships, especially women and children, or deny them access to the ministries of the church, including participation in the sacraments. Instead, we urge pastors and congregations to extend the same gracious welcome and hospitality to all those in need.” (p. 23)

Throughout this section of the social principles you will read, “we cannot condone, we do not endorse...but.” But...we need to remember the actual human beings involved. But... we need to treat **every human being** with love and compassion. But...we understand your lived experience may be contrary to what is written down here and we love you anyway. That is what I hear again and again in these social principles – You are a beloved child of God no matter what your lived experience and we will continue to love you even if we disagree with you. This is the United Methodist Church I remember from my youth – the big tent with room for all who call Jesus, Lord.

John Wesley lived this. Now I need to say that John Wesley and his brother Charles were not saints – they were people steeped in the culture of their time. The Wesleys often visited debtor’s prisons and because of their complaints about the conditions and treatment of the prisoners, they were often barred from returning. However, they didn’t just come and preach and pray – they brought change. Seeing the conditions of the French soldiers – the Wesleys with the local Methodist class raised moneys to get these enemy soldiers blankets, bedding, and clothing – as well as food. John also was appalled at the treatment of a man in debtors prison accused of being a sodomite, a homosexual. Newgate Prison in London was often described as hell on earth, and one could be incarcerated there for the cost of an apple. Again, he didn’t just preach and pray with him, John found him a lawyer and paid his debt. The Wesleys didn’t do this because they were ahead of their time, but because they didn’t believe anyone should be so foully treated – not debtors, not homosexuals, not even the enemy French soldiers. And this may have come as a part of their lived family **experience** – their father Samuel Wesley – who was also an Anglican Minister – was once imprisoned in a debtor’s cell. Ahh, you say, that makes sense now. They had the experience! And that was what made them such fierce advocates for change. Yes, they had the experience to add to the Scriptural message to visit those in prison, added to the tradition of the church visiting and caring for those in prison. And to that they added the reasoning that no one should be made to live in such horrible conditions. Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

The Social Community section of the Social Principles is filled with nuanced opinions about many issues. There is a section on Bullying and other forms of violence, a section on death with dignity, medical experimentation and research, marriage and divorce, even the media and communication technologies. I invite you each to find some time to read through whichever sub-topics you find interesting. And I invite you to practice theological thinking in the approved United Methodist way: look at the Scriptures, ask what the traditions are, and use your own ability to reason coupled with your lived experience. It takes work, but it is worth it. And I know that we will not always come to the same answers, but I know we can still be friends – and not just friends, but family – beloved children of a God who is bigger and wiser and more experienced than all of us.