

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Put Away That Malice!

Epistle Lesson

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 (NRSV)

²⁵So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Bible/Sermon Focus

Space for theological diversity is part of what makes the United Methodist Church what it is. John Wesley once said, *"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."* Outside of Christian essentials (the beliefs that all Christians hold alike), we are allowed to have disagreements about nonessentials. All Christians believe in baptism, for example. Baptism is an essential. But when or how we baptize a person may differ. Those details are non-essential.

As we heard in Pastor Andy's sermon this week, the new Methodist denomination that splintered from the UMC (the Global Methodist Church) is striving for more theological conformity among its leaders and followers than the United Methodist Church currently does. This conformity goes beyond Christian essentials, and into nonessentials. And there are many denominations around the globe that share such conformity within their denomination. But we are not one of them.

The richness of theological diversity in the UMC is a strength. Sharing the pew or the row with people who see the world differently and imagine God a bit differently, while still practicing Christian community and fellowship, reflects the diversity that Christ's church has always held since its inception. It reflects the diversity of the Gospels, the diversity of the prophetic witness in the Old Testament, and the diversity of the early church. It reflects the diversity of us, a people who are not all alike.

And this may not seem like a big deal, but it is when one considers the outcomes. If your scriptural interpretation guides you to believe that according to *Biblical Law* women should not be ordained, then that leads to a theology of a God who does not allow women to be

ordained and a church that prohibits the ordination of women. In the words of Rev. Dr. Cheryl Anderson,

[T]he exclusions within the law correspond to the same exclusions within the church tradition and to developments in Christian ethics... Whether we recognize it or not, however, such laws and their underlying values shape how we think of our own lives of faith and the parameters of the contemporary Christian community. Essentially, a "true" Christian is one who excludes these other perspectives, as implied by these laws. In other words, the faith tradition itself has become defined by continuing those exclusions; therefore, whether a contemporary Christian community is deemed orthodox is based on how stringently it has adhered to excluding the particularities of the "Other."

Quite frankly, when diversity is not considered our community misses out on ideas about God and scripture that have been shaped by those who have not historically been given a voice or place at the table, and that is dangerous. When considering what it means to silence entire groups of people from theological discourse, my heart breaks for all we lose, and for all of those who will inevitably be harmed.

When considering the sermon this week, a poem by Audre Lorde kept coming to my mind:

A Litany for Survival

For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children's mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours;

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid

it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

I want to "live in love, as Christ loved us." I do not want to live in fear. And we can be the kind of community and church that sets the example of what it means to live in love, as a people of God, who can witness to the strength of our differences. We can be one together, or we can have the "us" and the "other." It's our choice.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you like about the United Methodist Church?
2. What are the pros and cons to a theologically diverse denomination? A theologically conforming denomination?
3. Reflect on this quote from Rev. Dr. Cheryl Anderson, *"Christian community is deemed orthodox...based on how stringently it has adhered to excluding the particularities of the 'Other.'"*
4. The Wesleyan/Methodist movement has many denominations and has gone through many iterations. Why do you think that has happened? What is God doing there?

Prayer

God of our ancestors, God of our future, help us to live in love more each day. Build us up to build your church and your world. Make us one. Teach us peace. Help us encourage one another to practice it. **Amen.**

"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. -Ephesians 4:30"