

“Love Must Be What Binds Us Together”

Based on John 17:20-26

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Today we come to the end of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples. He is preparing them for the time when he will ascend back to the Father and leave them behind. For Jesus, it is important that the disciples hear from him what they need to focus on as a community going forward. He doesn't want them to hug each other, say their good-byes and scatter to the winds! He intends them to stay together and to continue his work of revealing to the world that he was sent by God to express the love of God. So Jesus needs them to stick together. He tells them to love one another just as he has loved them. He tells them that he is giving them his peace. He lets them know that they will face hardship and struggle, but not to be afraid because Jesus has overcome the world. Everything will be ok. And one day they will see him again, for he will return to bring them to himself.

Now the part we hear this morning is where Jesus has shifted from talking to his disciples to praying to his Father. We don't know if the disciples were listening in to his prayer or if we are in the privileged position of hearing what Jesus was saying about the disciples. At any rate, it's here for us. And it continues the theme of Jesus making the preparations necessary for his departure. It was not enough to give the disciples some instruction and a word of encouragement. Jesus also needed to pray for them. And so he does.

In a dense and repetitive way, Jesus basically affirms that he and the Father are one, joined together in a relationship of total unity. They are on the same page. They can complete each other's sentences. They have the same motives, the same goals, the same thoughts and feelings. When you see Jesus you see God. The two are that united.

Jesus also expresses in his prayer a yearning for those who believe in Jesus to be one with them so that there will be unity. Jesus yearns for his disciples to be of the same mind, to complete Jesus' sentences, to have the same motives, the same goals, the same thoughts and feelings.

He yearns for it to be so that when people see his disciples they see Jesus. And if all the disciples could be unified in this way, then what God desires will be accomplished. The world will come to know through the disciples that Jesus was sent from God and that God loves the world and desires to redeem it. The whole world will be a beloved community as God has desired all along. It would be like the whole world is brand new.

Now all this discourse of Jesus, both the talking to the disciples and the prayer to God, has a general focus on community. Jesus isn't singling people out. He isn't thinking in individualistic terms. For example, look at the love commandment. He didn't say, "I want each of you to work on loving others." No, he simply said, "Love one another." He's not in an individualist mind of thinking. When Jesus is looking out at his disciples, he isn't seeing a collection of individuals. He sees a community, a collective, or, in the words of Paul, one body with many parts. I want to stress this point because we live in an individualistic society. There is a lot of emphasis on self-improvement, of being a better "you", of individual responsibility, of being a self-made person. There is so much focus on the self in our society. But that's not the way things were back in Jesus' time. Society was much more a collective. The individual was less important than the community. It is a shift in focus for us, from the individual to the communal. That's something we need to keep in mind in order to get a sense of where Jesus is coming from and what he is praying for. The focus is not on the individual believer but on the community of believers.

So I want to step back for a minute and talk about what community is and how it is formed. Community is a collection of relationships held together by a common bond. That bond could be geography, a common interest or goal, anything that brings people together in a shared relationship with or to that common bond. For Christians, of course, our common bond is Jesus Christ who we seek to follow and whose gospel we proclaim.

Here is a Methodist Episcopal Church Discipline from 1884. This small book contains the Discipline, resolutions passed at General Conference, and liturgical resources. This is the most recent Book of

Discipline. As you see, it's bigger than the older one. Plus, this does not include any resolutions. The book of resolutions is larger than the Discipline. And there is a separate Book of Worship. Needless to say, the Discipline has evolved over the years. When new situations arose, we have had the practice of expanding the Discipline to be more precise and to deal with new problems. I will say there has been an effort over the past several General Conferences to make our Discipline more permission giving and streamlined. The Discipline is shorter than it used to be. But there is no doubt a lot more structure and rules are in this Discipline than this one from many generations ago.

So my question to you is, which came first? Was it a community of Methodist Christians or the Book of Discipline? Communities come together based on some common bond. Once they have been together long enough, it begins to become evident that some policies and procedures should be written down to keep things organized. Rules and regulations emerge from a gathered community.

The Discipline is a great resource to have, especially when there is conflict. When there are disagreements, or there has been bad behavior, it is necessary to have written down what is the process to deal with these problems so that there is a sense of fairness. Due process is critical when working through conflict. But the Discipline also serves as a teaching function. It reminds us what it means to be a United Methodist. It contains language that communicates our values, our way of doing things, and why we exist. It isn't only rules and regulations. It is a tool that provides for structures and processes that hold us together as a denomination.

But community at its best doesn't need to rely on the Discipline for guidance. Community at its best is bound together by love instead of being bound by rules. I've seen it. I have been at church meetings where, if you see people coming in with a Book of Discipline in their hands, there must be an issue. Most of the time, we can be church together without any need for the Book of Discipline. It's nice to have when necessary. But what really binds us together is not the Discipline. It is our love for Jesus and for each other, our commitment to grow in

discipleship, this is the common bond that holds us together as community.

Jesus did not pray for his disciples to receive divine by-laws. You could say that Moses got divine by-laws when God gave him the Ten Commandments and then all those other laws we read in Leviticus. But that's not what Jesus was about. Jesus didn't give out rules and regulations and did not pray for God to give the disciples rules and regulations. Instead, Jesus prayed for his disciples to receive the love that the Father and the Son have for each other. This is one of the main themes of Jesus' ministry: that love is the fulfillment of the rules and regulations. Following the rules isn't enough for Jesus. Rule following without love falls short. What matters is love and that's what Jesus longs for his disciples to have for him, for God, for each other, and for the world.

John Wesley's reform efforts of the Anglican church began when a few young people came to him asking for help in their struggle against sin. He invited them to meet with him on a regular basis for conversation and prayer. Essentially, John started an accountability small group. From that seed emerged a movement that has, over the past few hundred years, given birth to a number of denominations, from the United Methodist Church, to the Church of the Nazarene, to the Salvation Army. We have seen the creation of universities, hospitals and children's homes. The impact on the world of Christians who follow the Wesleyan tradition is immeasurable. And with all the evolution and expansion over the centuries has been produced a massive amount of rules, policies, procedures and Books of Discipline.

This gets me to wondering a few things. I wonder if all these rules and policies that we have created as a community are sometimes used to harm relationships and break down community instead of maintaining it. It seems to me that in fact there are parts of our rules as United Methodists that continue to cause harm and are threatening to break us apart. Of course, I'm talking about the specific rejection of non-straight people from full inclusion in the life and ministry of the church. What do you do when the rules created by the community contain the seeds of destruction to that community?

I wonder if the moment we find ourselves in as a church is a time to get back to what originally bound us together. Not rules, not processes, not the Book of Discipline, but the bond of love. I don't think rules and policies will save our denomination. Instead, it will require experiencing anew what Jesus prayed for his disciples, and prayed for us. It is a common experience of the same love that the Father and the Son have for each other. Our unity, which is a gift from God, must be claimed and experienced as mutual love to God and to one another. Rules and policies can't do that for us.

So here's some good news. When Jesus finishes talking to his disciples, he goes to God in prayer. And what Jesus is doing is praying that the community of disciples be kept in God's care. He is not leaving the disciples to fend for themselves. He prays for God to watch over them, to dwell with them, to be present. Not only that, coming next Sunday we will celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst. The good news is that we are not left to fend for ourselves. We are not the only actors in this struggle to maintain the spirit of unity in the bond of peace. God is with us! The community of Christ followers, of which we are one small part, will *always* remain, regardless of what polity, format, or name it is given. The church, the body of Christ, is in God's hands. In spite of ourselves, the church will always be in this world until Christ comes back in final victory.

I know many of us are anxious about the future of the United Methodist Church. As we gather for Annual Conference this week and elect delegates to the 2020 General Conference, there is a sense that the stakes are high. For some, it feels like a pitched battle for the soul of the United Methodist Church. Emotions are high and uncertainty hangs like a cloud over everything. What gives me hope is that the community we have is bigger and more durable than any human creation. Whether or not the United Methodist Church survives in its current form, you and I are still believers of Jesus Christ, bound together in love, and protected by the grace of God. So, in the words of Jesus, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."