

***1** We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— **2** this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— **3** we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. **4** We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. **5** This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. **6** If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; **7** but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. **8** If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **10** If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. **1** My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; **2** and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*

It seems like every time I've turned on the news this week there is footage of destruction: tornado, earthquake, fire, or war. Most footage shows people sifting through the wreckage and preparing for recovery. There is always a challenge in rebuilding something that has collapsed or fallen apart. There is debris to untangle, materials to salvage and damaged pieces to be thrown out or repurposed. Whether it is a physical building damaged by outside forces, or an organization damaged by internal conflict, unclear vision, or economic difficulty...rebuilding can be challenging work.

As much as we celebrate the glory of Easter, we forget that for the disciples, while the resurrection was exciting and wonderful news, it also created the challenge of rebuilding. Everything they thought they knew seemed to come crashing down around them and Easter didn't erase the collapse. It gave hope and promise for rebuilding their community of faith...to salvage what they knew to be true, to repurpose what they had misunderstood and could now get right, to rebuild what they had into something stronger and more visionary than what they had been capable of before...but none of that would come without conflict and challenges.

Even 100 years later, John writes to encourages the early church to always walk in the light of Christ because it is the only way to remain in loving fellowship with God and with

one another. We need that encouragement because being in fellowship, living as Easter people, doesn't make us immune from conflict or impervious to collapse.

The book of Acts tells us the story of the Disciples rebuilding their faith, lived out in this beautiful thing we call Church. Today, a lot of people are suspicious of institutions and organized religion, and it is true that the institution of the church has not always gotten it right. We have had failures and caused hurt. But when we look back to the original blueprints...the first disciples who tried so hard, in light of their Easter experience, to come out of hiding and uncertainty and get it right...we can learn some lessons that I think help us rediscover how Easter People are called to live together in the world. We see how we are called to move from uncertainty to unity. Here is what Acts 4:32-33 says: 32 Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. 33 With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

Wow, that's a powerful example of unity, right? The very people who couldn't stand together when their leader was being arrested, tortured, and murdered, now share a common bank account and live in the grace of mercy and shared resources: one heart, one soul. Are we to believe for a minute that this was easily accomplished? That peace prevailed and there were no disagreements and conflicts among them? Nope. As a matter of fact, if I had read on just one more verse, we would have seen the first conflict...someone didn't trust the process...something didn't want to hold all things in common...so they lied. And if we keep reading Acts, we find other conflicts arise. In truth, 77% of the New Testament are letters written by leaders to churches experiencing conflict and division. After the Gospels, the book of Acts, and Revelation, the rest of the New Testament is dealing with the consequences of life after Easter...of how we live a life of unified faith.

Now, what we often don't understand is there is a difference between unity and uniformity. We assume that being one heart and one soul means that we all have the same vision, the same calling, the same expressions of faith, the same beliefs, and that we hold all things in common. But when we read the story of the early church, we can clearly see that this isn't a true picture of Christian unity. What we find is a church built more around unity in diversity than a church designed with sameness in mind.

When we read the Acts and the letters, we find a community of people devoted to faith in Jesus Christ, but we also find a community of people who are at times conflicted on what life after Easter should look like. Conflict would soon arise as to whether Christians should uphold Jewish laws or be allowed some latitude in how they lived their faith. Should kosher diets be mandates? Should all male believers be circumcised? Not everyone agreed whose laws and customs should be followed once Jews and Gentiles began to mingle into this new thing called Christianity. It wasn't long until a council had

to be established to deal with the conflict; a group who would listen to reasoning and determine if it was an acceptable path forward or not...was God in the situation or not. When the council found evidence of God's presence, even in situations they would normally have condemned, they learned to rejoice and let God do new things among them. The early church learned quickly how to be contextual in its practice of ministry. It learned how to hold tight to the essentials of their faith and how to give God room to do new things by holding the non-essentials loosely. It wasn't an "anything goes" faith, they thought deeply about their decisions and trusted God to lead them, but they were not afraid to let new understandings and new expressions become a part of the church.

Most of you are aware that The United Methodist Church recently went through its own challenges, resulting in many leaving our denomination, most to become independent churches and some forming a new denomination. While nothing has recently changed in The United Methodist Church, most left because they fear change is coming. For many, they found themselves locked away with their fears, uncertain about the future.

This month, all interested eyes turn to Charlotte where The United Methodist Church will hold our first General Conference since 2016. Simply put, the General Conference is the only body that can make changes to our Discipline – our governing document for the church. The Discipline holds the essential beliefs and doctrine of our faith. Those essentials cannot be changed, even though rumors abound that we will change them. However, the Discipline also hold beliefs that are non-essential and can be changed – some of our polity and organization structure, for example. Our Social principles, what we say about debt, human trafficking, abortion, human sexuality, climate change, etc... are often updated or contextualized for the church that operates in the given age.

Now, we find ourselves a worldwide church trying to function under one discipline, despite the fact that our contexts are vastly different. The American church has vastly different needs than the African church. When it comes to essentials, doctrine, and belief, we need to be unified, but when it comes to the non-essentials, we need to consider unity in diversity. The proposal to General Conference calls this "Regionalization." It is the hope, like the examples we find in Scripture, that we can be one heart and one soul and yet still allow God to move in fresh, spirit-filled diverse ways.

Some may wonder what this will look like...so...look around you. If this legislation passes, I hope it will be to create a church that looks much like you, Wilkesboro UMC. I hope it will allow a church that is centered in God's love and Christ's mercy; a church focused on loving God and loving neighbor...these are our essentials. The truth is, we do this despite the fact that we are not unified in all things. We are natives and we are transplants, we are republicans and we are democrats, we are a tangled mixture of conservative, centrist, and progressive, we are rich and we are poor, we are all the things that could be divisive and conflicted...we are diverse...yet we are united in love.

This is what it means to embrace life after Easter...to stand on the firm foundation of the risen Christ and at the same time not be afraid to let the fresh breath of the Spirit drive us out from uncertainty to unity...from fear to faithfulness...from hiding to hallelujah.