

**9** As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. **10** If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. **11** I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. **12** "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. **13** No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. **14** You are my friends if you do what I command you. **15** I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. **16** You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. **17** I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

I appreciate how many of you have shared how Bishop's Carter's sermon touched your heart. I spent the week thinking about his challenge to reflect upon how we became a Christian and, particularly, how we became a United Methodist Christian. As he said, I think it is important that we revisit those stories once in a while. As our faith deepens, our story takes on new significance and we find a new perspective on the tides that carried us to the places we now find ourselves.

My story begins like many of yours. I didn't necessarily "become" a Christian as much as I was born into Christianity, practiced in various Baptist churches throughout my childhood. I remember making the "decision" to be Baptized and join the church, but it never occurred to me to do otherwise...to question my church or my faith or my belief in God. My church nurtured me, loved me, shaped the person I would become, and instilled in me a sense of wanting to serve God. My church bore good fruit...until I became hungry for more and they said no.

My church convinced me that service to God was the highest standard and then said I was unable to attain it because I was a woman. My church convinced me that Jesus was love but then it dished out such scathing judgment that I couldn't feel loved, I could only feel shame. My church convinced me that God's greatest expectation was obedience and then modeled for me such a legalistic interpretation of scriptural obedience that adherence to rules became more important than anything else...more important than love, than compassion, than empathy, than hospitality...more important than me and my faith journey.

Thanks to my husband, a life-long United Methodist, I found a place where I could be the kind of Christian that made sense to me. I found a church that emphasized grace over guilt and sanctification over shame. I found a church which viewed obedience to God, not as blind adherence to rules but in the spirit of John 15:9-17: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you...You are my friends if you do what I command you." If the command of Jesus is to love as he loves...then wouldn't the strict adherence to obedience that had wounded, alienated, limited, and shamed me and so many of my neighbors be counterintuitive or, dare I say, incompatible with Scripture? Maybe I didn't understand how Jesus loves...so I decided to learn.

While my childhood church taught me Jesus loves me, it was The United Methodist Church that taught me that Jesus loves all people *intentionally*. I learned about how Jesus sought out people that others said he should shun – adulterers, sinners, women, gentiles, lepers, the mentally ill, and demon

possessed – and Jesus showed them love. Jesus felt welcome at their tables, and when he was the one who set the table, it was the fragile and fallible that sat there and broke bread with him.

It was in my childhood Church that I was taught that Jesus loves **sacrificially**, but it was in The United Methodist Church that I learned that laying down my life for another didn't always mean a willingness to die to save someone, but it also meant to give up my own selfish desires for the greater good of others. It sometimes meant laying down my own sense of judgment for the sake of loving others and living as neighbors.

It was in The United Methodist Church that I was taught that Jesus loves **unconditionally** and preveniently – meaning that Jesus loves us before we can even fathom that love or have a sense of desiring to earn that love, or the ability to be worthy of his love.

In The United Methodist Church God's intentional, sacrificial, unconditional love was modeled in a way that ultimately empowered me to hear God's call to serve the church as an ordained minister.

The past two weeks, the General Conference of The United Methodist Church has been meeting in Charlotte and as you have no doubt seen on the news, they made history with some very bold decisions.

The thing that strikes me about that is yesterday marked the 68<sup>th</sup> anniversary of another bold decision in United Methodist Church history. Even though John Wesley allowed women to preach back in the 1700's, and women were ordained as early as the 1800's, it was May 4, 1956, before a bold General Conference delegation actually voted and approved the full rights of clergy women.

Even though there are one or two scriptures that seem to prohibit women from preaching in the church, The United Methodist Church boldly said, we see evidence of God's call upon women. The Spirit has fallen on them as well as the men. They voted to push past a few verses and allow God the freedom to direct God's call upon whoever God chose, regardless of gender.

I am grateful for the brave delegates that were willing to lean instead toward scriptures like Paul's, "In Christ there is no Greek or Jew, no slave nor free, no male or female, for we are one with Christ." And I can tell you, I have seen first hand how that witness can change people.

The first church I was appointed to serve was a small United Methodist church outside an old mill village in a rural community filled with Baptist Churches. I was their first female pastor, which was met by much trepidation from the church members and much ridicule by the community members who attended churches that prohibited such "new-fangled" ideas. My church wondered why they stopped being invited to community church events but soon understood that I was the cause. No one knew what to do with a "woman pastor."

After a few years, I had settled comfortably in the role and most people had learned to love me or tolerate me. One day, I received a call that one of our church members, who I loved and was close to, had been rushed to the hospital in cardiac arrest. I got to the hospital and found she had died. We were all shocked and saddened. I gathered with her family in the parking lot, and we held each other and wept and comforted and prayed. The whole time there was a firefighter standing off to the side watching. I was told he had been the first on the scene and had tried to help. As I finally headed to my car, he approached me and introduced himself. Much to my surprise I found out he was a Baptist minister in my community. He spoke of how obvious it was that I loved my church family, and they loved me. He offered kind words and prayer, not just for the family but for me, as their pastor.

On the day of her funeral, I was in my office preparing myself when there was a knock on the door, it was the Baptist pastor. He said, "I know this is going to be a very hard funeral for you. I'd like to help. I want you to tell me where your eye most naturally falls in the congregation. I will sit there. When you start to speak and emotion overwhelms you, when you get to a point where you aren't sure you can get the next word out, I want you to look at me. I'm going to be praying for you. I'll nod at you so you know that you are prayed for, and God will get you through this." It was the kindest and most unexpected gift. I told him where to sit. When the funeral started, I stepped into the pulpit and my throat wanted to just close up, I wasn't sure how to preach in the midst of my own grief. Then I remembered him, I looked, and there he sat, exactly where I had asked him to sit...and not just him but two other Baptist pastors I recognized. All three of them nodded at me.

The thing is, I know they all went back and faithfully served their churches where women were prohibited from speaking, but they also had witnessed fruitfulness in my ministry and that day they were willing to let go of their judgements and strict obedience and let God's call live freely in me...even if they didn't agree with it.

I will be first to tell you that The United Methodist Church is not perfect. It has not always gotten every decision right...but I do believe it works to get right...to err on the side of bearing the fruit of love and limiting the pain and damage that is inflicted by strict judgments that lack understanding and discernment. I do believe we try to provide a witness that opens people's eyes to God's possibilities to work beyond our limiting judgements.

Bishop Carter issued a letter this week about the bold decisions that were made by our General Conference delegates. I would like to read it to you:

*Today, the General Conference took historic action to remove paragraph 304.3 from our Book of Discipline. This action was affirmed by more than 93% of the worldwide body. There are two important implications for us in this.*

*The most significant change adopted by the General Conference thus far is the removal of discriminatory language against LGBTQ+ persons ... This language was introduced to our church fifty-two years ago when homosexuality was understood to be a disorder and a disease by the medical and psychiatric communities in the United States. These sentences have done great harm to many of our people in virtually every local church and have become an obstacle to our mission. Today's action was a positive next step toward a future of "open hearts, open minds, and open doors."*

### ***We are a Church of Traditionalists, Moderates and Progressives.***

*While these labels are not always helpful, the statement is true. Even after a five-year period of disaffiliations, we are blessed with people who have a core belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior (grace), a desire to live together in fellowship (connection) and an additional desire to grow in love with God and our neighbors (holiness).*

***What does this mean?*** *Candidates for ministry who are LGTBQ+ will continue to be welcomed. Some of our churches, if they feel so led, may have same-gender weddings. There is no prohibition against either.*

*At the same time, churches that are more traditional in conviction—the Book of Discipline identifies this, and our Cabinet practices this—will not receive appointed clergy or conduct services that do not align with their convictions ... We are a "purple" church, the recent Duke Endowment research disclosed, and we are a "worldwide" church...*

*United Methodist churches will have the freedom to respond to God's call to ministry in ways that are best for their contextual and missional communities. We will do this anchored in the grace of Jesus Christ, in connection with each other, and in our desire to grow in love with God and our neighbor.*

*The Peace of the Lord,  
+Bishop Ken Carter*

Not everyone will agree with the removal of this language, not everyone will be comfortable with dismissing these few verses of scripture. I will argue that we are not dismissing, but that we are discerning relevance and context. This isn't unprecedented. We have learned to look beyond scriptures forbidding women to speak, scriptures that uphold slavery, that advocate for stoning our children to death when they are disobedient, beating our wives, wearing mixed fabrics, eating shellfish...the list could go on for miles. We let go of these scriptures because we are able to see and experience God in ways that make these rules too small to matter or too archaic to be relevant.

When we look at the whole of scripture and embrace the love of Christ that pushed him to the cross and pulled him from the tomb...we find that no one should ever be deemed incompatible with that love....no service that bears the fruitful witness of God's love, kindness, mercy, grace, and peace should be deemed incompatible.

Now, we have a chance to be a church that is more authentically inclusive, and radically loving. For those of us who have waited for this, we are filled with joy. For those who are uncomfortable with it, I would ask you to take the lead of my Baptist friends...do not rush to condemn or judge but keep open to watch for the fruit that this decision will bear. The truth is, you have already seen such fruitfulness in your midst. So, keep looking. Watch to see what God does...look and see who God loves...and love as God loves. This is what we are commanded. And when we can do that...we find joy...complete joy...in Christ and in one another.