

The Sunday After

Luke 9:28-36

When I am at my computer, if my fingers are moving too fast as I type ‘United Methodist Church’, it sometimes comes out ‘*Untied* Methodist Church’. I think our whole denomination was keyboarding too fast this last week. At the Special General Conference in St. Louis, the Church became untied. It not only unraveled; it lost the thread of what has held us together as Methodist people for more than two hundred years.

No doubt you’ve read and heard news about the General Conference this week. A lot of that news has been confusing, so I want to take a few minutes to clarify the Conference’s decisions. The Bishop will do more of this when she’s here with us this afternoon.

Since 1972, the language in the United Methodist Book of Discipline has declared homosexuality ‘incompatible with Christian teachings.’ And so, our Church’s law has barred same gender-loving persons from begin ordained, and from receiving the Church’s blessing on their marriage. That did not change this week. For many years we have lived under a Church law that many of us believed violated God’s character of grace and love for every person. And so, in many places and many parts of the Church’s work, we—particularly we in the Western Jurisdiction of the U.S.—found ways to disobey a rule that we believed was wrong. In this Conference, the Board of Ordained Ministry’s official policy that it will not ask about a candidate’s sexual orientation or gender identity. Our Bishops have ordained many openly LGBTQ pastors. We elected and consecrated a gay Bishop. This church proudly said, years ago, “We disagree,” and has held same gender weddings in its sanctuary. I have officiated at several such weddings, before and after I came here.

And so, we’ve lived in an uneasy peace with the denomination we love and are family with *and* that we have been quite sure is wrong when it puts boundaries on God’s love. It’s been a compromise. And it worked for a while, but honestly, it is not sustainable. Every four years, when the General Conference gathered, we could see again that we are a Church that recognizes our family resemblance only if we close our eyes halfway.

This year’s specially-called General Conference began by acknowledging that all our best arguments have not changed each other’s minds on this issue. We’ve tried. And the truth is that our disagreement over homosexuality reflects many other differences that shape us. Different cultures reflecting the different places we live. Different beliefs about whether Christians must read the Bible literally, or whether there are other ways to be serious about God’s word. Maybe even more fundamental differences about who God is and even the purpose of religion. Is God’s most important role in human life to help us draw a sharp line between right and wrong, or is the purpose of faith to take our small hearts and grow them until we become instruments of a wider love? All of these differences have gotten wrapped together in the homosexuality debate.

The Traditional Plan for the Church that passed this week in St. Louis re-spoke and reinforced the same language that has been the policy of the Church for almost fifty years. What it would

change is how that policy will be enforced. No disobedience would be tolerated. Every loophole would be closed.

When Bishop Carcaño is here this afternoon, she'll say a lot more about what this decision means, and where our California-Nevada Conference will go from here. But here are a few things I want you to know this morning:

- There was no decision that the United Methodist Church should split or will split. Newspaper and on-line reports that say this simply do not understand how the Church works.
- There is no change in effect immediately. The Plan that was passed has been challenged under the United Methodist Constitution, and the Church's Judicial Council (Supreme Court) will consider it when it meets in April. There's a good likelihood is that much or all of the plan will be declared unconstitutional.
- You know who this church is. We love Rev. Sam. She will continue to be our pastor. We will continue to be a church that welcomes and honors all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. We also will be a church that honors and welcomes people who genuinely believe differently about this issue. In this church, homosexuality is not the question that establishes our identity or our faith or whether we can love each other well.
- LAUMC is not the only United Methodist church that believes the way we do. I am absolutely sure that we will not stand alone, apart from the California-Nevada Conference, when all this shakes out. We will not lose our property; we will not have to strike out on our own. The full body of Bishops of the Western Jurisdiction announced this week: *"We will continue to be a home for all God's people...We are not going anywhere...We have committed ourselves to working in coalition with others to find a way to live our faith with integrity."*

We're going to be OK.

Rev Sam was at the General Conference this week. I want you to hear from her.

Rev. Sam Blewis:

And that pretty well captures what happened at General Conference, but it doesn't quite capture what it was like to be at General Conference. What it was like to be at General Conference was very different. It was getting to see dozens of friends from Kansas, Louisiana, D.C., South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Florida. It was being in this ridiculous spectacle of a retired NFL stadium, sitting in the 100 seats in the end zone surrounded by the kinds of friends you can count on having the rest of your life; crying one day, and eating nachos the next day while you watch the moderates of the United Methodist Church find and claim their voice. It was absurd and awful and amazingly beautiful all at once.

It was like having the most beautiful family reunion and having someone belittle family members in the middle of it.

It was awful to watch our denomination behave the way that it did in St. Louis. But I hold on to the words that Rev. Brian Adkins spoke in that space and I claim them as my own, "I am an openly gay pastor, a clergy person, and as a pastor I have to offer a message to my people, to the LGBTQ people in this room and who are watching and who are in United Methodist Churches

around the world. You are beloved of God. No matter what happens in this room or anywhere else, there is a place for you at God's table and no one can take it from you. Claim it." And I remember and claim the words of J.J. Warren, a young adult delegate from New York, "As someone who is gay and goes to the least religious college in the US, my evangelism on campus has grown, we have brought people to Jesus, because they said they have not heard this message before, they didn't know God could love them because their churches said God didn't. And so if we can be a church which brings Jesus to people who are told [they] can't be loved that's what I want our church to be and that's the Methodist Church that I love and I want to be a pastor in one day."

*Remember, Los Altos United Methodist Church, what the good news of Jesus tells us is that the worst word is **never** the last word.*

I hope you know that Kristi and I are doing alright. We are so grateful to be a part of this wonderful community and we are fully aware of how very much we are loved. And it's going to take a whole heck of a lot more than 53.28% of a General Conference vote to get rid of us.

And as for this church... as long as there are little queer children running around, we know you'll keep making a space for them. As long as there is a table to be spread, we know you'll keep helping people claim their place at the table. As long as there is a circle to be drawn, we know you'll draw it wider still.

And God is with us. Now and always.

On the Church's calendar, this Sunday, the Sunday before Lent begins is called *Transfiguration Sunday*. Every year the reading for this day is the story you heard a few minutes ago, about Jesus going up a mountain and being enveloped in a vision that placed him next to Moses and Elijah, the two heroes of his tradition, people whose stories in the Hebrew Bible made them God's conversation partners.

This story is mysterious, even a little weird. It's supposed to be. It happens just after Jesus has been telling his disciples that he's going to die, that already he can see that *this* story—that's about healing and teaching and God coming to save people from their oppression—is going to end badly. The disciples want to talk about a strategy to stave off this result. 'I need to pray,' Jesus says to his friends. 'Come with me.'

They go up a mountain. (In the Bible, God always hangs out on mountains.) Jesus goes off by himself for a bit, and suddenly something shifts. The air gets heavier. The light is different. There's a flash that looks almost like lightning. Two figures take shape next to Jesus. Moses and Elijah, as clearly identifiable as if Washington and Lincoln climbed down from Mt. Rushmore to stand on the White House steps. It looks like they're talking to Jesus, heads tipped in, important stuff. It was glorious, and scary, and like nothing those disciples had ever seen before. This had to mean something important, but what? And this moment was completely overwhelming.

Their minds were racing. Maybe Peter's especially, because that's who he was. Always two steps ahead of everybody else, thinking faster, sizing up the situation, strategizing next steps. That's what leaders do, right? 'I've got it,' he said, before the vision had even faded out of sight. 'I don't know exactly what this means, but I know what to do. Three shrines, right here. One for you, Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah. We'll put them in a triangle, facing the mountain, as if they're standing at attention to God. Granite, with a little bit of obsidian detailing, dignified but not too ostentatious. I think this will work. People will love it. Now they'll get who you are, Jesus. What do you think?'

A voice interrupted him. 'Peter, shut up.' (Those aren't the Bible's exact words, but I'm pretty sure that's what God was thinking.)

A cloud came over them, the text says. Darkness.
'This is my son,' the voice from the cloud said. 'Listen to him.'

And you know, one of the odd, interesting things about this story is that Jesus never says anything. It's not like that God-voice from the cloud was an introduction to a speech. It was an introduction to...silence. They just had to sit still for a moment, try to take in what had just happened.

No monument, no structure, no *institution* could capture and enclose the power of God they had just witnessed. This moment, this sudden, mysterious clarity about who Jesus was and the authority that God—*God!*—had given him—this was too big and too important to be held anywhere but inside of them.

I think this is our Transfiguration moment, Church. Our moment of clarity. There is a freedom in speaking the truth, and even in hearing it. We got shellacked at General Conference, punched in the gut. But this week I am absolutely clear about who is this God we serve—as clear as if a flash of lightning lit up the sky for a moment. We've been enveloped in a dark cloud that muddies up the landscape we thought we knew. But we can still hear the voice that tells us who we are, that it's Jesus' voice we must listen for—even if there are some necessary moments of silence first. There is no building or shrine that confines this God. This God is alive and moving—not in an institution, but in us. Already at work, setting a fresh table of love and grace where everyone is welcome. A table where even the Church can be fed and healed and made new.