

Love Through a Wide Angle Lens: Stretching the Limits of Compassion
Matthew 5:13-16

This week Pastor Dirk and I were at an event called the Leadership Institute at Church of the Resurrection, just outside Kansas City. Church of the Resurrection is the largest United Methodist Church in the country. It has 22,000 members. At this conference there were about 2500 participants, from 1300 churches all around the country.

The Leadership Institute happens every year, but this year it focused specifically on the crisis that is before the United Methodist Church right now, over whether we can stay together as one denomination. All of this is about the decision this last February, that added to our Book of Discipline strong penalties to enforce the exclusion of LGBTQ clergy and to prohibit churches and clergy from performing same gender weddings.

The people who came to this conference were lay and clergy leaders. They were progressive, and centrist, and there were even a few traditionalist people there—meaning people who support the new ‘Traditionalist’ plan that was passed last February. But mostly, this was a group of people who gathered in favor of a fully inclusive Church.

I don’t think either Dirk or I heard anything that changed our minds about the position LAUMC should be taking with respect to the denomination, or that made either of us feel confident that we know how the current conflict will come out. Right now, all the hopes for change and the fears about splitting apart are focused on the 2020 General Conference, scheduled for next May. (And if that sounds to you eerily like an echo of our national politics...yes, it is.)

There were some wonderfully inspiring moments during the week. We heard from Rev. Junius Dotson, who is General Secretary of the UM General Board of Discipleship. You may remember Junius; he was the founding pastor of Genesis United Methodist Church in Milpitas, a new church that you helped start more than twenty years ago. Junius is one of the bright stars in our denomination. He talked to us this week about the history of racism in the UMC

Specifically, the split in the American Methodist Church in 1860 over slavery—which was a north/south division that mirrored the divide in the U.S. then too. When the Church came back together in 1939 (almost 80 years later), even then racial discrimination was not eliminated. The denomination re-organized itself into five geographic jurisdictions across the U.S., plus one more conference, specifically for black United Methodists. That separate conference remained until 1968. It was a compromise that made re-unification of the church possible. A compromise that institutionalized the racism that was still there, unresolved. A racism that has still not fully been addressed.

Imperfect people could not construct a perfect Church. Junius’ point was this: African Americans knew, even then, that racism persisted in the Church. It didn’t escape their attention. It still hurt. But they didn’t leave. It was their *staying* in a Church whose efforts at racial

reconciliation were flawed, and even half-hearted, that made it possible for Junius to have the position he has now, with full voice, at the very pinnacle of leadership in this denomination.

You may wonder why we were talking about racism at this event, at this moment when the Church is divided not over race, but over full inclusion of LGBTQ persons. I'm glad you asked. One of the real gifts that has come from the current crisis in the Church is a vivid reminder that full inclusion isn't just about sexual orientation and gender differences. There are many ways we are not yet a fully-inclusive Church—across differences of race and culture, gender, physical ability, financial ability, theology—and more. This time our commitment has to be not just to resolve the conflict in front of us, but to be a more open and humble and learning Church, willing to change as we wake up to see the ways we don't yet reflect the fullness of God's love.

There were four major take-aways from this Institute, that Dirk and I wanted to share with you this morning.

- 1) The center of the UM Church in the US has shifted. In all those churches in the middle of the country where people are more divided than we are about full inclusion, it's clear that now the majority favor a unified Church that offers full inclusion to LGBTQ persons.
- 2) We have learned since February that every future for our denomination includes the likelihood that some people and some churches will leave. Every proposal being presented at next May's General Conference includes a provision which would allow anyone who needs to leave the denomination—from either end of the theological spectrum—to leave gracefully and with a blessing.
- 3) *No one* thinks that the best result of this conflict is the Church as it has been. I've been saying for a while that it would be a waste of a good crisis if we don't come out of this with a Church that looks more like a movement for love and justice and *Jesus-following* than it has been before. I heard a lot of other people say the same thing this week. Everyone wants a Church that is different—more faithful, more effective—than the one we have now.
- 4) Finally, while next May's General Conference is a really important moment for the denomination, there's a critical date to watch first. This coming January—January 1, 2020—is the date that the Traditionalist plan goes into effect. This is the legislation that was passed last February, that includes harsh penalties for pastors who dare to do ministry while they're gay, and pastors and churches that perform same-gender weddings. January is when I think we will see the landscape of the Church more clearly. Some reports this last spring suggest that as many as 70% of the Bishops across the Church will exercise ecclesiastical disobedience, and refuse to implement the plan—i.e., they will not process complaints against LGBTQ pastors or clergy who perform same gender weddings. Our Bishop, Minerva Carcaño, is one of those. But almost certainly, in some Conferences there will be 'prosecutions'. I hope we will be watchful for this—not so we can be more critical of our Church, but so that we can think creatively about how we might be called to a faithful ecclesiastical disobedience.

One of the high points of our time in Kansas City was two sessions with New York Times columnist David Brooks. You may already know that David Brooks has turned his writing, in the last few years, in a different direction. He still writes columns and does commentary on politics, but his last two books—*The Road to Character* and *The Second Mountain*—have been about what he calls ‘the quest for a moral life’. And each of them has contained hints about his own, still-in-process transformation.

After the first book came out, I heard Brooks interviewed. The interviewer asked him to talk about his personal spirituality. Brooks declined. ‘It’s too new,’ he said; ‘It’s like little green shoots of grass coming up, and if I make them public too quickly they’ll get trampled.’ Now, he’s more ready to let his faith be seen. ‘I still feel Jewish,’ he says (which is the tradition he was born into), ‘but I can’t let go of what I see when I read the Gospel of Matthew.’ His life has been disrupted by the story of Jesus. The Jesus story that makes sense of the moments when his heart has felt strangely warmed, moments when he felt oddly connected to people he wouldn’t have thought himself inclined to love.

“Everyone has those moments of transcendence,” he said this week. “It’s just that people of faith incorporate those moments into their lives, instead of thinking of them as interruptions.”

Several times over the last few years I’ve read David Brooks’ stuff and thought, ‘That’s what the Church has been saying forever! Why does it just seem new and interesting when you say it?’ But I think there’s something enormously compelling about hearing from someone who is just discovering faith for himself, revealing the beauty of what we’ve been looking at all along because he’s looking at it with fresh eyes.

This was David Brooks’ message to us Methodists:

Everywhere around us, people are hungry for what the Christian story offers: the truth that happiness—flourishing—comes not from your achievements, but from your connection to others. That stretching our hearts and our habits wider, knowing and including more people, is the exercise that makes us more human. That no matter where we have already arrived, we keep getting called into new territory. In his words, “Life is a series of daring adventures from a secure base.”

Bishop Ken Carter, who is President of the Council of Bishops right now, was with us in Kansas City this week. He’s gotten hundreds of letters this year, he said, from people who are upset about what’s happening in the United Methodist Church. Those letters all fall into two categories, he said.

- I want a Church that loves all people
- I want a Church that teaches the Word of God

I don’t think those two things are mutually exclusive. I think we can be a Church that does both.

I was reminded again this week that I do not feel called to the work of perfecting the institution of the United Methodist Church. I don’t think it’s your calling either, or ours together. I think

we have more important work to do, frankly. We are leaving here today to launch Compassion Week, to be agents of God's infinitely wide, unconditional love all over this valley. We are living out our identity as a changemaker church, an inclusive and reconciling congregation, a community committed to living with connection and compassion and courage—*so that all may flourish*. I think our calling, this week and every week, is to live and speak and work and play in a way that stirs in people a curiosity about the God we love, the God who has come and made a home inside of us.