

This I Believe
The United Methodist Social Creed
Acts 2:43-47

Call to Worship

A letter written by an Italian monk and architect named Fra Giovanni, to a friend, early in the 16th century:

I am your friend and my love for you goes deep.
There is nothing I can give you which you have not have:
but there is much, very much
that while I cannot give it, you can take.

No heaven can come to us
unless our hearts find rest in today.
Take heaven!
No peace lies in the future
which is not hidden in this present little instant.
Take peace!
The gloom of the world is but a shadow.
Behind it, yet within reach, is joy.
There is radiance and glory in the darkness, could we but see,
and to see we have only to look.
I beseech you to look!

Life is so generous a giver,
but we, judging its gifts by the covering,
cast them away as ugly, or heavy or hard.
Remove the covering and you will find beneath it
a living splendor,
woven of love, by wisdom, with power.

Welcome it, grasp it,
touch the angel's hand that brings it to you.
Everything we call a trial,
a sorrow, or a duty--that angel's hand is there.
The gift is there, and the wonder
of an overshadowing presence.
Our joys: they, too, conceal diviner gifts.

Life is so full of meaning and purpose,
so full of beauty beneath its covering—
that you will find that earth is just a cloak for heaven.

Courage, then, to claim it, that is all.

Sermon

When I was in seminary, studying for ministry, I heard in a class one sentence that has stuck with me—as much as anything else I learned in that time. It’s a historical explanation for how the Christian church, in those first years after Jesus, became the fastest growing religion in the history of the world. In just a few hundred years, Christianity went from being a small sect of Judaism to being the official religion of the Roman Empire, an empire so big that it spread over what today is many countries—in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and Asia. Historians have documented this: what accounts for the phenomenal growth of the Christian church—the thing people on the outside saw that made a life of following Jesus Christ look terrifically attractive—was the way followers of Jesus loved and cared for one another. “*See how they love one another*” was what people said about the Christian community. That’s what’s described in that passage we just read from the second chapter of Acts:

All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God’s goodness to everyone.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates: “Every meal was a celebration.” That sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? No wonder other people wanted to be a part of this. And the even more compelling thing was: it was a community that welcomed everyone—*anyone*—who wanted to come along. This practice—of inviting people in and then taking care of one another—more than anything else, was what made the Christian Church come alive and stay alive and grow. That’s a historical fact.

I love that. I’ve carried that little factoid—the power of “see how they love one another”—around with me all these years since seminary. It’s like a little treasure in my pocket that I take out to look at from time to time. When I get discouraged about the Church, or lose the thread of why we do the things we do, I remind myself that this is what the Church has been, what it can be, what it *must* be.

So, I was pretty surprised to find, years *after* I graduated, an article in a scholarly journal that said that it’s likely that the practice of sharing property and meals and caring for one another was *not* unique to those early Christians; that they picked it up from some other sects that were already living that way.

I was so disappointed.

Not because what I believed before is untrue—this article didn’t *contradict* the fact that the mark of the early Christians was, “See how they love one another.” What was disappointing was that maybe the way those early Christians lived out their faith wasn’t *unique*. That Christians weren’t the *only* people who lived in that generous, self-giving, deep community way that is so inspiring.

Uniqueness is one of the ways we tend to identify truth. If we find something that’s the best, or the most, or the biggest of something, it’s a sign of value. In western American culture at least, this is something we strive for: to excel in a way that sets us apart from everyone else. It’s part of our competitive make-up. The Guinness Book of World Records has been recording these things for years: the world’s biggest hamburger, the world’s tallest man, the world’s ugliest dog.

Reality TV shows gave everybody a chance to find fame by being the biggest weight loser, the chef who's faced the worst cooking disaster, the family with the most badly behaved children. One clever tweet or Instagram photo goes viral, and it rises above all the rest.

(This is really just an aside, but you know what I think is the most annoying mark of uniqueness in our world today? Passwords. That whole collection of identifiers we have to make up and then remember, so that we can find ourselves online. Some with more than 8 characters; some with at least one capital letter, a number and a symbol; nothing too obvious; nothing you've used recently; nothing you can easily remember. Someday we're going to look back at this time and say, "Remember when we had to use all those ridiculous passwords just to get onto our own accounts")

Passwords aside, we value uniqueness: whatever it is that makes us different from everyone else, gives us a sense of our place in the world. Confidence that we will be seen, known, even in a crowd. There are times in our lives—like middle school—when we work harder at blending in, not being the most *anything*; but for most of our lives, it's our *particular* place and value that we work at. That's what makes falling in love such blissful experience. Someone has seen me—me alone—for who I am, and for what makes me lovable.

"Who am I?" we ask. What is *my* life about? What is my *particular* calling in the world? This *I* believe, I've asked you to imagine in this season of our life together. And the same is true for organizations. When we talk about connection and compassion and courage, we like to think that we've identified something particular about the DNA of this church; that those ways of being make us different from any of a thousand other churches that share similar beliefs.

What makes a *community* work is finding the intersection between what each of us knows and believes for ourselves and the commitments we hold in common. This church can only do its best work when we are 'on the same page,' when what you want and hope for your life is encouraged and given space to grow among the collective of our life together.

But you don't necessarily know that coming in, do you? Few of us research the mission statement of a church before we wander in the first time. Like those early Christians, we are wooed in by the scent of something attractive: *See how they love one another*. Only gradually do we gather the sense that this church—any church—'fits' for us.

Today, as we come close to the end of our series called *This I Believe*, I want to say a word about the unique beliefs of the United Methodist Church. It wouldn't surprise me if you rolled your eyes a little as I said that. These last few years have not been inspiring ones for the people who call themselves Methodist. Most of what we read and hear about our denomination these days is not exactly "See how they love one another." The UMC has been in conflict with itself; we've embarrassed ourselves, and maybe embarrassed God, by failing to step into the call of faithful and courageous unconditional love. (And actually, I think people on both sides of the full inclusion debate might say that same thing.)

We have talked this last year—like many historically Methodist churches have talked—about whether identification with the United Methodist Church reflects *our* beliefs, and our hopes, what we think are God's best hopes for the world. Maybe you have wondered if we should leave, whether this church would thrive more in a different relationship—or no relationship—with this clunky, backward-facing, maybe even *wrong*—United Methodist family we are part of.

I have wondered those things too.

I wonder the same things sometimes about being an American.

But these are my people. Our people. Kind of like family. Life together may not always be pretty, but in some way we are bound together, so much that I don't think we can just trade that commitment in, or move away, or change alliances—like getting rid of a pair of cargo pants hanging in your closet, that you used to think were so cool.

There are so many things I love about being Methodist.

I love it that every time we gather around the communion table we say 'This is the table where *everyone* is invited, without membership or qualification or condition.'

I love it that Methodists use this thing called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral when we want to figure out what God is saying to us—that we don't just read the Bible but we line its words up with other things: the stories of our tradition, our own thoughtful reasoning, the experiences that make us catch our breath in recognition that something beyond us is happening here.

I love what we call 'social holiness'—the truth that none of us finds God alone; that we do it together.

Maybe you love those things too. Those are not things unique to LAUMC. They're beliefs in our bones, inherited from our Methodist tradition.

Here's the thing I love most about being Methodist. Most Christian denominations use in their mission statement Jesus' last words to his disciples: "Go and make disciples." That's what most churches would say they are about: making disciples—followers—of Jesus Christ. The United Methodist Church has added a phrase to that mission statement that, for me, changes everything. This is what makes Methodism the path of Christianity I choose—and maybe you too. The United Methodist Church says that its mission is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ *for the transformation of the world.*" It's the 'why' of everything we do. Whatever we do—preach, do music, teach children, maintain buildings, go to committee meetings, feed people, learn what it means to follow Jesus—we do not to appease an angry God, or to assure ourselves of a secure and blissful afterlife, but so that the *whole world* might be transformed—changed into a place that reflects the visible, generous, inclusive, reconciling love of God.

What that means is that in *this* kind of Christian community, faith—beliefs—aren't complete until they get translated into action, the ways we love one another. And so, in a uniquely Methodist way, the creed of the United Methodist Church is a Social Creed. It's the creed that's printed on the insert in your bulletin today. It says what it means to be a Christian in real life, with other people. It speaks of commitments to the earth, to justice, to peace, to an inclusive stance toward people of every kind of difference. Its final sentence says, "We...*gladly accept our commission to manifest the life of the gospel* (that means the way of Jesus) *in the world.*"

Take that creed home with you today and read it again and again, all week along. But in solidarity with this work, with our best intentions not to be cynical or hopeless, I invite you this morning to join in a Litany that accompanies the United Methodist social creed.

A Companion Litany to Our Social Creed

God in the Spirit revealed in Jesus Christ,
calls us by grace
to be renewed in the image of our Creator,
that we may be one
in divine love for the world.

Today is the day
God cares for the integrity of creation,
wills the healing and wholeness of all life,
weeps at the plunder of earth's goodness.

And so shall we.

Today is the day
God embraces all hues of humanity,
delights in diversity and difference,
favors solidarity transforming strangers into friends.

And so shall we.

Today is the day
God cries with the masses of starving people,
despises growing disparity between rich and poor,
demands justice for workers in the marketplace.

And so shall we.

Today is the day
God deplors violence in our homes and streets,
rebukes the world's warring madness,
humbles the powerful and lifts up the lowly.

And so shall we.

Today is the day
God calls for nations and peoples to live in peace,
celebrates where justice and mercy embrace,
exults when the wolf grazes with the lamb.

And so shall we.

**Today is the day
God brings good news to the poor,
proclaims release to the captives,
gives sight to the blind, and
sets the oppressed free.**

And so shall we.