

Go and Do Likewise—Love

Michigan Annual Conference

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Luke 10:25-37

It was 1968.

Diana Ross and the Supremes had hit the billboard charts with the song, “*I’m Gonna Make You Love Me.*” Stevie Wonder had lit up the airwaves with, “For once in my life I’ve got someone who needs me, I’m not alone anymore.” And Rev. Credence Clearwater Revival was making waves with their version of *Suzie Q*. “Oh Suzie Q, baby I love you, Oh Suzie Q.”

It was the time of love songs—songs that had to have been about more than just romance. I can’t help but believe these songs were in fact a kind of protest in the face of the divisions and the anger that were fracturing our society.

Because you see, it was 1968.

And it was a time of social unrest and great division. A time of violence and great turmoil. There was a war in Vietnam. Protests roiled our streets. Racial strife was ascendant. Black people were fighting for their civil rights, and the backlash was so corrosive, that the world witnessed, that year, the assassination of a great prophet.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968 while standing on a balcony at a motel in Memphis, Tennessee. He was preparing to lead a march for working class people—for poor people—when he was struck down in the prime of his life and ministry.

And, less than two months later, violence struck again. Presidential candidate and U.S. Senator Bobby Kennedy was shot down in Los Angeles. Maybe, it was in the face of this kind of social strife—this kind of violence—this kind of national pain that people felt compelled to sing about love—to hope for love—to long for love. Remember the song recorded by Dione Warwick, “What the World Needs Now is Love Sweet Love. It’s the Only Thing That there’s just too little of.”

There was too little love in 1968.

And so it seems surprising and indeed startling, even shocking that in that year—despite the odds—despite the division and strife—Methodists and United Brethren—met at a convention center in Dallas, Texas, and they got hitched. We are the children of that union. You know that we are celebrating our 50th birthday. You should know that because we all had the birthday cake on Thursday night.

Fifty years ago, amidst great division in our nation and our world, The United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church came together. And in the process, they affirmed full clergy rights for women and they ended the Central Jurisdiction, a jurisdictional structure designed to enshrine Jim Crow segregation in the church. And so The United Methodist Church was born, and we began to try to live out together God’s greatest commandments to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and soul and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Rev. David N. Field, who the Bishop also quoted in his sermon earlier, has a book out that is called “*Our Purpose is Love: the Wesleyan Way to be the Church.*” In his book he reflects on a Wesleyan understanding of love. This is what he says, “Love is a deep commitment to the well-being of others.”¹

Love is not about being right or about winning an argument. Love is a deep commitment to the well-being of others. Love is not about personal power, or position or our politics. Love is a deep commitment to the well-being of others.

That is what Jesus was trying to teach the young lawyer in the story from the Book of Luke. You are to love your neighbor through a deep commitment to your neighbor’s wellbeing. And that commitment should be lived out in

¹ Our Purpose is Love, David N. Field, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2018, p.37

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concrete ways. When you see your neighbor fallen by the side of the road—when you see your neighbor kicked to the curb by life—you are to have a deep commitment to your neighbor’s wellbeing. You are to remember the story of the Samaritan. You are to go and do likewise.

That is friends what the church is about. It is about a deep commitment to our neighbor’s well-being. And that commitment is expressed most authentically in The United Methodist Church through its mission and ministry. Indeed, at that Uniting Conference in 1968, Rev. Dr. Albert Outler preached. He called this new United Methodist Church evidence of God’s love in the world expressed through mission. He said:

“The church is called to mission, and her mission is both her message and the demonstration of that message in her corporate life. Her message is not herself...it is her witness to the Christian Evangel: to the scandal and folly of Christ incarnate, Christ crucified, Christ resurrected, Christ transforming human life and culture, Christ in the world, Christ for the world; Christ in us, our hope of glory!”²

Outler was talking about Christ as the incarnate—en-fleshed love of God. And he was talking about the Church as the Body of Christ—the body of the Christ who calls and commands his body to love neighbors in concrete ways through our mission and ministry.

Friends, you know our church is worldwide. We have nearly 14 million members in conferences in Africa, the Philippines, the United States, and Europe. There are United Methodists throughout Asia and in Central and South America. We are from different cultures. We speak different languages. We look and dress differently. We have differing understandings of theology and of the Bible. But we have some things in common. We all seek to love God and our neighbor through concrete acts of mission and ministry.

In the Massinga District of Southeastern Mozambique, there are women who have been cast out of their homes because they have been accused of witchcraft. These women are elderly, and they are widows. In that culture, a woman is sometimes blamed for the death of her husband-- accused of casting a spell that caused his death. And these widows, accused of being witches are cast out. They are the ones who are kicked to the curb and found lying by the side of the road.

But United Methodists have created and support a mission in the Massinga District to care for these women. Because of our commitment to loving our neighbors through the mission and ministry of the church, these women have homes and community and help and healing. *Love is caring about the well-being of these women.*

You all realize, that we are in the midst of a worldwide global migration crisis. And governments are not dealing with this crisis well. At our borders, children are being separated from their parents. Some of these children are infants and toddlers. Some of them have been separated from parents for as long as 8 months. This is being done as a way of discouraging people from trying to enter our country, and it is happening even to people who are legal asylum seekers.

In January, I was at a gathering of our General Secretaries of our General Boards and agencies at one of our only missions located at the border. We met in El Paso, Texas. El Paso sits at the confluence of borders. It is at the border between Texas and New Mexico and between the United States and Mexico.

We were visiting the Lydia Patterson Institute, which is a school that was started more than a hundred years ago by a United Methodist woman for whom the school was named. She started that school to teach young Mexican children English. That school now educates more than 400 children a year. Many of these children come from devastating poverty. But, the Lydia Patterson Institute is educating them, and teaching them about Christ, and giving them hope for the future. Indeed, ninety five percent of these children go on to college. This is The United Methodist Church in mission--loving our neighbors in concrete ways—caring about the well-being of our neighbors.

This is happening all over the world and even in our communities. You know that we have an addiction crisis in this country. I have a friend who works as a United Methodist Chaplin at a hospital in Florida. Within the last two months, she has done funerals for six people all under the age of 35. All have died because of alcoholism and addiction to opioids. The most recent was a young mother just 32 years old who left behind four children. My friend and so

² Albert C. Outler, “Visions and Dreams,” Uniting Conference Sermon, April 23, 1968, ADCA, p. 999

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many others who help addicted people and their families are living out the commandment to love—by helping the person who has fallen by the side of the road--by caring for the wellbeing of others.

This is who we are. This is what we do. Yet, we find ourselves at a crossroads in the life and mission of The United Methodist Church. We are struggling to figure out how we will be in ministry with our sisters and brothers—with our children and grandchildren—with our neighbors and friends who happen to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer.

In February of 2019 we will have the Special Session of the General Conference where we will consider a proposal from our bishops designed to get us past our impasse. At that Special Session we will have to decide who we are, and what we will become? Will we stay together, united in mission? Will we open our doors wider despite our differing beliefs? Or will we come apart at the seams over our differences?

I don't know what will happen at that special session, but this is what I do know. I know that the day after the Special Session is over, the needs of the world will still be the same. There will still be racism that tears at the fabric of societies. There will still be women cast out of their homes. There will still be young people who feel disconnected and dispossessed by the church because of our struggles with sexuality. There will still be people dying too soon in hospital beds or in the streets because of addiction. There will still be desperate people stranded at the borders seeking asylum. There will still be young immigrants desperate to learn.

And, I can absolutely guarantee you something else. I guarantee you that there will still be a United Methodist Church. I don't know what it will look like, but you can be sure that there will still be a United Methodist Church, and God will still be calling our church to be in mission in the world *and to love*.

That means that no matter what happens in our internal struggles, God is still calling our church to love. No matter what we decide about legislative proposals, God is still calling our church to love. No matter how many amendments we make to the amendment, God is still calling us to love by offering radical hospitality—by living out our discipleship by welcoming more people, younger people, more diverse people—and yes, all people despite immigration status or race or gender or gender identity or orientation. No matter what, God is still calling The United Methodist Church to be a place for grace and transformation and healing and hope and love for the world. God is still calling us to help somebody who has been kicked to the curb and left for dead by the side of the road.

As you all know the purpose of the Connectional Table is to discern and articulate the vision for our worldwide church in collaboration with the Council of Bishops and to be stewards of the mission, ministry and resources of our denomination. At our April meeting we made a statement to the denomination which we entitled The Mission is Yet Alive. It is an affirmation of our faith and it reads in part:

“The MISSION is yet alive, and we believe....

Despite the uncertainty of our times, God is still calling us to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Our central mission is to join in God's work in the world. No matter what, we are still invited into the mission of God.

We must take faithful steps to live as a worldwide church in mission to the world.

No matter the challenges we face, God is still calling The United Methodist Church...

- To engage in ministry with the poor*
- To improve global health*
- To develop principled Christian leaders*
- To create new and renewed congregations*

Each morning, we wake up in a world mired in the sins of violence, racism, war, and more. Children go without food, families lose their homes, young and old struggle with addictions. The world is in need of the saving love of Jesus

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*Christ, and The United Methodist Church has always been an effective witness of Christ's love. It is vitally important that we continue to be so now. Therefore, today and every day, the mission is yet alive.*³

What a gift that at this time that our church is struggling over divisions, West Michigan and Detroit are singing love songs to one another. And we are getting hitched. We are coming together—not because we are all alike, not because we believe alike, but because we love alike. We care alike about the wellbeing of others and about the mission and ministry of our worldwide church. What the world needs now friends is a little more of that kind of love. Amen.

³ Full statement posted on CT website