

[BLANK] [PRAYER] Welcome to our Summer holy conferencing! It's great to see you all here, and great to be a part of a church that is learning to grow in God's grace. We are a growing church, a healing church, a learning church, a church that honors and loves the roots of our history, and our beliefs, but that also seeks out new ways and new directions to honor and serve our saving God. Our holy conferencing is a part of that growth. It encourages us to remember that part of worshiping God is our willingness to be the church in God's living presence, seeking out God's saving path for our congregation, in service to our community, and to God's world.

My new sermon series about "A Saving Faith" is raising questions, in our faith groups, and elsewhere. People are asking questions like, "Do I really need a saving faith?" Or, "I want a saving faith, but I just don't know how to find it." I am glad that these sermons, and our study guide, are raising questions. Keep asking them! In our Methodist traditions, faith is not blind; faith is not just repeating words we're told to say; and faith is not, in our Methodist traditions, just about feeling good about God, ourselves, and our friends. No, in Methodism, faith is what we do in our walk with God, and towards God, in God's world. We seek a saving faith so that our faith walk will be rewarding, with the riches of faith, but also to make it an effective walk in faith.

You see, a saving faith is a faith that knows that what we do in life matters. We all come to God equally in faith - rich, poor, people of all backgrounds, all traditions - because nothing that we do apart from a life in a saving faith will matter, now, or in the end, if it is not meant to bring us, and God's world, into a better place. God gives everyone the offer of salvation, through faith in Jesus Christ, to destroy every barrier between us and God's love, between the world and God's love. What we do with a saving faith matters, because we are becoming part of God's will, loving all the earth as God loves the earth.

So, to find a saving faith, we must admit that a saving faith means two things. First, we must admit that our rules and regulations for religion, that pass judgment on others, are not the key to a saving faith. We can see this in today's reading from the early Christian letter to the Ephesians. Ephesians were people who lived in the city of Ephesus, the Roman capital of western Turkey in the time of Jesus and early Christians. It was a big seaport city, and in the time of this letter, it might have had as many as two hundred thousand people. It was a rich city, because Rome was rich.

And so, there were many Roman citizens in Ephesus, and many others who wanted to be a part of its thriving economy and culture. Some of these Ephesians were Jews, who had been there for centuries. They worshiped the living God, as we do, but through the years, their rules and regulations for worshiping God had become more important than loving God. Their faith was joyful in its own way, but, again and again, people found that the "if-then" way of worshiping God, passing the judgment of their priests and teachers as to what was holy, was dividing people from God, not uniting them.

So, to find a saving faith, we must first admit that our own efforts to perfect ourselves for God are not only fruitless; they are also dividing us from God, and from

other people, people who God wants to touch with God's saving love. By our nature, we are creations who cannot be as perfect as God, and our separation from others who are not perfect in our eyes can lead us away from the very people who God wants to save through a saving faith. We all sin. I'll say that again, so that we can get over some of our fear of that word that frightens so many people: we all sin. That doesn't make sin right. It just makes us equally in need of salvation from sin and death. How wide is a saving faith? Wide enough for God to offer salvation to the world - including people who think that they've done everything to deserve salvation, and including those who feel that they can never do enough to deserve salvation. We cannot "do" our way into God's offer of salvation, and we cannot "do" our way out of God's offer of salvation, either! A saving faith is trusting in God's offer, no matter what, no matter who, no matter where.

But then comes the second part of what we must do to find a saving faith. Yes, God's offer for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is as wide as Creation itself, but what we do with it matters. Salvation is not a license, a certificate of merit - something that marks us as a member of an exclusive club, with all dues paid. Yes, our lives have been bought and paid for by Jesus on a cross, and through a grave, but with a purpose in mind. A saving faith offers us a way out of religion that is dead, but it also offers us a way out of non-religious ways that are dead. There is no club that will save us, no identity or orientation that will save us. Only God will save us, and only together, as God's people, learning to love together, as God loves, together, with no boundaries for that love.

A saving faith is God's offer for a real, authentic life, a life that grows to be more like Jesus, and helps others to grow to be more like Jesus. And this is the part that the letter to the Ephesians reminds people of gently, but firmly. Yes, the ways of dead religion are useless for salvation, but once we experience this offer, we are called into a new relationship with God and with one another, because of who Jesus is, and how Jesus is.

The letter to the Ephesians offers us two models for that relationship in Jesus. One is citizenship. Citizenship was very important in the Roman world - you didn't have to be from Rome to have it, and so it was a protection that even the Christian apostle Paul had, even though he was born a Jew. To be a citizen was not only to have universal rights within the Roman empire, but also responsibilities. You had power, but also duties. And so it was with Christians. They were to accept the people of many different traditions and orientations - Roman, Jewish, and more - and to become like a nation saved by Jesus, not only honoring their diversity, but honoring their unity, so that we can do for one another as God does for us. Christ is God's one nation, beyond all human nations.

The other model in Ephesians for relationships in a saving faith is that of a Roman household. This "household" was not like your typical American home, with space for one set of parents, their children, and perhaps a grandparent or two. No, a Roman household was sometimes as big as a city block, with not only an extended family living in it, but also servants, merchants, artists, guests, and close friends. They were all

part of the family in one sense or another, each with a different purpose, and bound to care for one another like a family, regardless of blood ties. They were no longer strangers, aliens, refugees - they were all part of a system of trusted and trustworthy relationships. Christ is God's universal household, supreme above all other households.

How wide is a saving faith? As wide as Creation itself. As wide as the amazing diversity of everyone and everything in Creation. God wants everything and everyone to love as Christ loves, to do as Christ does. We cannot legislate this love. We cannot wear this love, or tattoo this love, or earn this love, because God's love is truly universal, truly meant for everyone, everywhere, because everyone, everywhere, is lost without this love. And if we don't live life as if this kind of love is all that really matters, then nothing we do will ever matter.

Our citizenship in this universal love awaits us, through saving faith. Our invitation to be no longer a stranger to God's household is waiting for us, through saving faith. And coming in to our saving faith, we will accept gladly our responsibilities, our duties, and the disciplines that we need to grow our part in God's plan, for the joy of the love that comes to us as a part of God's plan, in saving faith. Be a citizen in Christ. Join the household of Christ. Seek out God's gift of saving faith, for your sake, and for the sake of God's world. Amen.