

[BLANK] [PRAYER] [CONFERENCE] As our delegates assemble at the Special Conference of our United Methodist Church, it has been wonderful to see the reports coming in from our local representatives. There has been a lot of prayer surrounding them for these past several months. Our bishop asked us, laity and clergy alike, to pray for this conference every day, and I have joined millions of United Methodists around the world doing this, every day. I thank you for our prayers as a congregation, and I hope, and pray, that we will pray for the future of our Methodist movement continually, with or without a Special Conference to encourage our prayers. [BLANK]

We will need all the prayers that we can pray, moving forward as a church in Christ. We are fortunate to have a good congregation, welcoming new members today, with people excited to be planning for a bright future. But we can't ignore what we are a part of, as we prepare for our future in South Meriden. We are part of a global community of Christians, in a world with many different cultures and traditions. And, even in our country, traditions both inside and outside of our church differ quite a bit. So, as we welcome our new members this morning into the fellowship of Christ called The United Methodist Church, let's remember: saying, “Yes” to Jesus is not the hardest part of faith. The hardest part of faith is saying, “Yes” to God's world in faith, even when everything inside of us might scream, “No, not that person!”

There is always a “them” that challenges us. There is always a race of people, people of a particular identity or orientation, or people who are more fortunate or less fortunate than us, or with more power or less power than us, or people who we feel have hurt us, and others. Hillary Clinton, in her presidential campaign, called a certain group of people a “basket of deplorables.” Whether she was right or not, or whether you agreed with her, or not, is not the point. The point is that calling people a hated “them” is always tempting, no matter how much power and privilege we might have - and, sometimes, it's even more tempting when we do have that power and privilege.

That brings us to a day in the life of Jesus that we see in today's gospel lesson. Let's remember from last week that Jesus was speaking to people in Luke's gospel who had gathered around Jesus on a plain, a level field. Everyone was on the same level with Jesus - people who knew and loved Jesus, people who were just following Jesus, and people who were just curious about Jesus. Jesus had just laid out a series of lessons about how to be a follower of Jesus - how to find a humble heart following the way of love, and right living, that comes only from God in Jesus.

Jesus said this to everyone, hoping that people will be encouraged to seek a life following God's love in their hearts. But then, Jesus prepared people for the hardest parts of walking in the footsteps of Jesus - the steps of Christian discipleship with the greatest rewards, and the greatest challenges. And Jesus knew that not everyone would like what he would say. He started out by saying, “But I say to you who are willing to hear.” Jesus knew that what we need to hear about God's love is not always what we want to hear about God's love.

We don't really want to hear from God, “Love your enemies.” We don't really

want to hear from God, “Pray for those who hate you.” We don’t really want to hear from God, “If someone hurts you and takes away your human dignity, make yourself vulnerable, and be willing to offer them peace, as God does.” Jesus, kneeling like a humble beggar before everyone, whether they wanted to hear this nor not, was setting the example for them to follow. Jesus kneeled before the world’s hurt and hurting people, asking them to try a deeper kind of love: God’s kind of love.

[MEMORIAL] The Vietnam war that Americans fought in lasted more than twenty years. Some of you may have fought in that war. Many of you no doubt had family members and friends who did. I had a schoolmate, James Egan, who enlisted as a Marine Corps pilot. His plane was shot down, in 1966, not long after his tour of duty started. His body was never found. I thought about Jimmy, when my draft number came up in 1973. It was 22 - which meant that I had a pretty good chance of being drafted.

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I didn’t hate the Vietnamese. I doubt many people really did in that war, in spite of all of the hurt that both sides did to one another. And I didn’t want to die in a war that I doubted, but I loved by country. I was willing to risk being hurt by our enemies to serve those who I loved. So, when it came time to register for the draft, I chose to register as 1A - available for the draft. I left it to God to choose what I should do for my love of country.

I was never drafted. In 1975, the war was over. We lost. That was a big deal back then in America, of course, especially for people who had fought in it. It hurt a lot of people that we had done so much, but come away with so little, and that our veterans had the scar of defeat to bear. Of course, the nation of Vietnam had a different perspective. More bombs were dropped on that small nation by the U.S. war in Vietnam than were dropped on the whole world in all of World War II - including the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. Our nation bore deep spiritual and physical scars from that war. But we were not alone.

[VETS] Forty-four years after the war ended, Vietnam veterans, some near the end of their lives, have become familiar sights in that nation. They visit familiar places, some with fond memories, perhaps, but I am sure many places with hurtful memories of their enemies. They visit a place where they received scars from the hurt of war, and they are guided by the children of families who received scars from the hurt of war. It’s not that the scars don’t matter to them any more. They do. But like a scar on our body, we are more than our scars. We are the people who live under our scars. And so, these former enemies try to celebrate life, not death. Love, not hate. [BLANK]

On the day of his resurrection, Jesus rose from the dead with scars from his crucifixion. He didn’t pay his scars any mind, until the apostle Thomas wanted proof that Jesus was real. The scars didn’t really matter to the risen Jesus, except to let a doubting world know that God’s love is far greater than the hurts of this world that scar us. We all live with scars. We will all die with scars. And, through faith in Jesus Christ, we hope that we, too, will be raised up from death, with scars. And they will be the signs that it wasn’t

the hurt that we received in life that really mattered. What will have really mattered is now much love we gave, in the name of Jesus, in the middle of living with our scars.

Jesus said that day on the plain, “If you love those who love you, why should you be commended? Even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, why should you be commended? Even sinners do that.” It is important to love our families. It is important to love those who love us. But as important as it is to love those who love us, loving those who love us is not really what being a follower of Jesus is all about. Being a follower of Jesus means that we do things that set us apart from other people, not because of our goodness, or their goodness, but because we want to be - like - God. We said it last week, let’s say it again: Be. Like. God. The love that we give, and can only give, through faith in Jesus Christ, in God’s Holy Spirit, is the only mark of a true Christian that will ever matter to God. Nothing more, and nothing less.

I don’t know what kind of United Methodist Church will exist at the end of this day, or any day, really. I only know that The United Methodist Church has a unique opportunity, perhaps more than any other global church, to live up to this one simple idea. Be...like...God. Like someone drafted to fight a war, or grieving for their loved ones lost to bitter enemies in a war, loving our enemies, like God loves everyone, might be the last thing we want to do. But it is the best thing. We cannot do that, unless we all try, together, to be like Jesus, for ourselves, for our world, and for the God who showed us how, in Jesus. I pray that we do it, together, always, through faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.