

[BLANK] [PRAYER] I am very grateful to be with you today, after a very challenging week. The people of The United Methodist Church worked hard at our Special Conference last week to resolve issues of human sexuality that divide many people in our church. The short story is that they failed to resolve our differences. While a plan was passed by a majority of conference voters, many parts of the plan violate our church’s constitution. Our bishop’s message, which I can share with you after worship, affirms his earlier forecast: based on likely rulings of our church judicial branch, we will continue as we are, for now, as we seek to resolve these issues.

Yet, unity is the mission of The United Methodist Church. God asks us to come together, in God’s living presence, to seek that unity. The more types of people, and the more types of views that we have, the more likely we are to be obeying God’s command of love, to God’s standards. For many people, though, being united means being united with people like themselves. Some people do it in tribes like themselves, nations like themselves, or clubs like themselves. The United Methodist Church is not a tribe, or a nation or a club. The United Methodist Church is a global society of Christian disciples, who make new disciples, to transform God’s world into the image of God’s love, for everyone. Everyone. Absolutely everyone.

Why everyone? Why can’t our mission as United Methodist Christians stop with those who we like, or those who are like us, or those who think like us? Our mission as United Methodists goes higher, wider, and deeper, and further, because that’s where God’s love wants to go. In spite of how we limit our love, God died for us on a cross and rose from the dead, so that we could all be like God, as much as we can, for as many as we can, as often as we can, wherever we can, with all that we can, for as long as we can. That’s the reflection of God’s love for us that God wants in God’s world as The United Methodist Church.

That’s a very high, standard, isn’t it? It seems about as high and as amazing a challenge as when the disciples of Jesus saw him transformed on a mountaintop. [MOUNTAIN] As Jesus was transformed there, shining in a brilliant light, the prophets Moses, and Elijah, appeared, and spoke with Jesus. A disciple named Peter was there, and he was way outside his comfort zone. He tried to speak to Jesus in terms of what he knew - that Jesus was a great prophet of Israel, and Israel’s savior. But God sent away Moses and Elijah, and assured Peter, and the other followers of Jesus, that Jesus was God’s Son. Listen to Jesus, God said, because Jesus is God, and reveals everything who makes God, God. [BLANK]

Jesus is our standard for the world. Not because he was a man, not because he was straight, or gay, or white, or black, or Asian, or a Jew, or wise, or powerful, or anything that we use as standards as humans. Jesus is our standard, because his love reflects the mountaintop standard of love that God offers us, and by which God judges us. All the laws of the world can judge us, our own sense of who or what is right can judge us, but the ultimate standard for judging who we are, and how we are, is the love of God. Be. Like. God. Be like God, in Jesus Christ.

And the only way that we can do that is together, reflecting the diversity of God’s love for us. It includes people who are really outside of our comfort zone. It includes, often, people who have hurt us, sometimes deeply. It is never God’s will to have us hurt people for the sake of our own power and satisfaction. Sometimes, people who we are meant to love must stay apart for a time, to allow them to heal, and to grow. Sometimes, we need to grieve over our wounds, with Jesus and others, to find a way forward. But Christian discipleship is meant to give us a higher, deeper, wider, and longer lasting power of God’s love in us, so that we can all turn to God together, and learn to do together things greater and all we could ask or imagine.

We can say these things, and we can even try doing things, but then, sometimes, we don’t realize just how much we’ve been saying them or doing them well inside our comfort zones. We have, sometimes, a sense of privilege about who we are, and how we are, that lubricates our relationships with the world. Take away our privileges, and the challenges of following Jesus Christ are more clear.

Before I became a pastor here, I worked as an assistant at First United Methodist Church in Middletown. One day, I received a message from a mother of a student in a local college. Her child, born a boy, had told her that he was actually a woman, and wanted to change her sex. Her mother was heartbroken. She came from a very traditional culture in another country. She was very religious, and wanted guidance and strength, and communications with her child. Her child, a young adult, was heartbroken, because she wanted only to be who she heard her heart telling her who God had made her. She wanted to end communications with her parents. Both were grieving, and very hurt. And yet, God loved them both, just as they were.

Our culture, and our conformity to our culture, offer us privileges. When our conformity changes, our privileges change, very often. But conformity to culture is not God’s priority. God’s priority is love, for all, as God loves us. When we claim that priority, when we step out of the comfort zone of our culture that protects us, into God’s zone of comfort, we are vulnerable. This mother was vulnerable to the judgment of her culture, and her expectations of herself in her culture. Her child was vulnerable from more angles that we can possibly imagine, uncertain about how any culture could accept her, just as she believed God meant her to be.

My sisters, and my brothers, and my siblings of indeterminate and ambiguous sexual identity, all of us, seeking to be in Christ, we are all meant to be together, in Christ. We are all sinners, and have fallen short, and need to humble ourselves in the sight of our saving God, as the disciples of Jesus did on that shining mountaintop. We all need the saving love of God, in Christ. But none of us are sin itself, because of who God has made us. We all need to remove the veil between us and the God who wants to save us all, together, and proclaim the truth of who we are, to the world, in Christ - saved together, in the love of Christ.

Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, an early church in Corinth, reveals changes in that community. This church has grown in their discipleship. They had put aside their

differences. They had let go of sins, and affirmed their strength, in their diversity. They had come to love one another, in Christ. And so, speaking to these more mature Christians, he asked them to come out, to announce in public who they were, in Christ. Because until we can proclaim in public who we really are, we really don't have the privilege to be who we are. Until we come out as who we are, as children of God, we are less than who we are as God's children, captives to our shame, and our secrets.

Like that church in Corinth, we have started real growth together as Christian disciples. Some have you have crossed our “From now on” line, literally, and spiritually, into a journey of real Christian discipleship. We need not be ashamed of ourselves, or one another, when we do this. We will all have our faults. But as we purify our minds and hearts, and bodies, together, as we become more like God, together, we can start to come out as who we are in public, and to proclaim, in words and in deeds, who we really are, in Christ: people who try to be like God together, for the sake of everyone in God's world, in Christ - even, and sometimes, especially, when we lose our privileges.

This is a time for the public declaration of the good news of Jesus Christ. Some people want to frighten us if we do not conform to their expectations of who we should be in human culture. Christ invites us not to give in to that fear, even if we lose our privileges. And, as United Methodists, we don't have to give in, through the extraordinary discipleship that we can offer to God's world. [PIN] I have some pins like this on the side table going into our fellowship hall. I can get more if you want them. I challenge you to wear them, in public. Be grateful for your church in public, with or without this pin. Be your church, in public, with or without this pin. But most of all, I challenge you to let people know who you really are, in public. A United Methodist Christian. And if they ask you, “What's that?” your answer is simple: “We are people who love Jesus, and who love you, no matter who you are.” Because, that is who we are. Come out. Tell the world who you are, in Christ Jesus. Claim who you are, as a United Methodist Christian. It is our privilege from God to be one. Amen. [BLANK]