



Wisconsin Conference
of The United Methodist Church



"Let No One Tear Apart"

April 26, 2021

'All things are lawful', but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful', but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of others. (1 Corinthians 10:23-24)

Much conversation and preparation in The United Methodist Church today is focused on separation and disaffiliation. Disaffiliation is the fancy word for leaving the denomination. Primarily over the issue of human sexual identity, our historic and prophetic denomination is embroiled in discussion over schism and division. As with so many things worldly, a driving concern is over money and property, what we call our "trust clause" – church property, facilities, and furnishings belong to the Annual Conference, held in trust by the local congregations. As some congregations contemplate leaving United Methodism, they wish to take their property and buildings with them.

This saddens me deeply. I hold a very solid theology of unity in the faith; believing it is God's will that we be "one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world," bound and empowered by God's Holy Spirit (as our traditional communion liturgy explains). I also believe we developed the United Methodist trust clause is a theologically grounded covenant relationship in our faith communion. Even though fractionalization, denominationalism, and schism are part of our church history, I do believe these things have been on the human side of the equation rather than God's. God's covenant is with all God's people; it is we who break covenant with God and each other on an all-to-

frequent basis.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, he noted a crisis bordering on division and dissolution around food – meat dedicated and sacrificed to idols. In the Gentile world, such practices carried over into the Jewish and emerging Christian communities as people converted and joined. Traditionalists were appalled and outraged (in both Hellenistic Judaism and the fledgling Way of Jesus Christ) and sought to ostracize and deny those who ate meat offered to idols. For many of us today, this may sound ridiculous and inconsequential, but in its time and context, it was a much bigger issue than inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons is today. This threatened the very will of God for unity within the growing body of Christ.

Paul's advice in this situation was simple. To paraphrase, Paul told the members of the church of Corinth, "Grow up and get over yourselves!" He freely confessed that the Law was important, that the Law was good, that the Law could be used to speak to just about any situation, but that legalism would not fulfill the will of God. The point was to build up, to build bridges, to find connections, to forgive, to extend grace. Not every person who is Christian will believe exactly the same things that others believe, act in exactly the same ways, and agree on everything. The history of the Jewish people proved that Law could only do so much and take people so far. The new law, the New Covenant, was Jesus Christ – and the Spirit of Christ in us superseded all legalisms and the divisive judgments by which we seek to exclude others. Such negative opinions and viewpoints are irrelevant. Judgment belongs to God; what we own is the responsibility to share God's love with everyone we meet and to extend the grace God has shown us to others.

We need to pay attention to this message as we journey forward – together or apart. We are focused on the worldly "food" of our days – mammon in the form of property and facilities. We are making our future about our "stuff" instead of the best way to honor and glorify God in all we say and do. We have forgotten and forsaken our witness to the world. Those outside the church are confirmed in their opinion that the church is no different from any other organization on the earth – human beings gripped in senseless arguments about who is right and who is wrong, who is good and who is bad, who will win and who will lose. Our credibility, reputation, and dignity are not only compromised, they are being destroyed. And we are all too concerned with who gets the property. It is similar to a divorce where the mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the family is ignored while the couple fight over who gets the house and car and pension.

In my regular and constant prayer, I lift the heritage, the tradition, the theological integrity of our Methodist, Evangelical, and United Brethren histories. We are a people of mission, guided by a desire to serve others. We are a people of relational evangelism, proclaiming

God's unconditional love and unmerited grace for all people. We are a people of social justice, aligning all of our resources and energy and effort to create Beloved Community for every human being, whether they agree with us or believe like us or not. We are not here to have our own way and to make our own rules. We are followers of a very simple "law" – to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. When we make our life together about anything less, we lose our way.

A line comes to mind from one of our marriage litanies: "What God has joined together, let no human tear apart." I acknowledge that our blessed denomination is likely headed for separation – I am not so idealistic to believe we will remain together. But I am a person of faith, and of hope, and of love. And so I continue to proclaim a gospel of unity and connection as one body of Christ. I believe this is our call through the teachings of Jesus, Paul, and the other authors of our Christian Way. But as we find our way through the difficult journey of division, my deepest prayer is that we will continue to love one another, and part with the greatest possible grace and mercy. We may not be able to stop what is happening, but we can navigate it in the very kindest, careful, and compassionate way possible.