

Sermon 2019.10.06**The Methodist Way**

(Matthew 5:21-24; sermon 1 of 4 in “The Methodist Way” on Reconciling)

0. Preface: sermons no one wants. Before I begin to share the message this morning, let me preface it by saying – there are times when preaching is terrifying and thrilling. There are times when God nudges pastors to be prophetic in the Old Testament sense of speaking hard truth to resistant power.

These are sermons no one wants, and we pastors respond with all the enthusiasm of the prophets of old... Nuh-uh, God! Not me! I’m a stutterer, I’m not worthy, my lips are unclean! I have pre-existing plans for a trip to Tarshish.

Spoiler alert: God usually gets what God wants. Oh, snap.

In my first appointment as a student pastor in North Carolina, I confronted a racist situation about a segregated pool. I didn’t want to talk about it and make people mad. I was just going to finesse the situation. Then the lectionary list of standard readings tossed up James 2: “How can you claim to be Christian if you treat some people differently than others?” Oh, snap. Dang it, God! I had to preach on racism in a southern church.

There’s a YouTube video called the Honest Preacher that summarizes the feeling of many preachers when confronted with these prophetic moments...

[[play video...](https://youtu.be/6mcXtontujA) <https://youtu.be/6mcXtontujA>]

Lately, for me and for many United Methodist pastors, the sermon we don’t want to preach is on LGBTQ inclusion in the church. This is topic many people have strong feelings about, one way or the other. Nobody – including pastors – like to get yelled at. So we tend not to preach these sermons that nobody wants to hear.

1. By popular demand? But then General Conference 2019 happened, and instead of choosing the recommended more flexible Way Forward, a slight majority of global delegates doubled down on our traditional language excluding LGBTQ people. Paragraph 161G of our guiding *Book of Discipline* says, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” GC2019 added harsh penalties for pastors who violated the prohibitions on marrying or ordaining LGBTQ people.



At Onalaska UMC, we had an instant revolt. On Facebook and other social messaging apps, in phone calls and emails, many of our members – especially our youth and young adults – were in disbelief. “My church said this? I can’t be a part of a church that says this.”

In response, our church council voted unanimously to emphasize our vision statement that we “Love all people unconditionally,” and at the next meeting voted to begin the Reconciling process to help our members think through the issue. This is also in keeping with the *Book of Discipline*, where the same paragraph 161G says, “We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God... We affirm that God’s grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian or gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.” We have some folks who don’t like this, either.

Whew! Crisis averted, thinks your humble pastor. I don’t have to preach on this.

Then we did the Reconciling survey, asking what you know and what you want to learn about and how you want to learn it. The full results are available on our website under Resources > Reports. We offered many learning options: small groups, videos, bible studies, discussions, etc.

But a majority of you said the main thing you wanted was sermons and God Moments... Oh, snap...

And so, by popular *or* unpopular demand, depending on who you ask, we begin our October series on Reconciling and how we as United Methodists and people of God can think about coming to peace with each other and our LGBTQ sisters and brothers.

2. We’ve got to talk. But it turns out the call for reconciliation goes right back to scripture. The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 is perhaps Jesus’ most famous sermon. And there it is right there in today’s scripture reading: Jesus says, “If you are on your way to the altar with your gift, and you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift and go; first be *reconciled* to your brother or sister, and then come to the altar” (Matthew 5:23-24 paraphrase).



You may not realize it, but this is the origin of churches passing the peace at the beginning of worship. Passing the peace isn’t just a friendly time for fist-bumping your pew buddies. It is supposed to be a moment when we cross the sanctuary to the person we are struggling to love, unburden our hearts, and seek and offer forgiveness.

Jesus commands us to be reconciled. We've got to talk about how we include our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, and how we struggle with our hearts and with those with whom we disagree. And we do this *before* we come to the altar with our gifts, before we come to the altar to encounter Christ in communion with our brothers and sisters... Oh, snap.

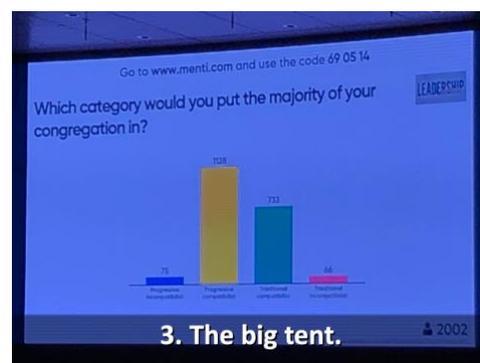
3. The big tent. United Methodists have been fighting about LGBTQ inclusion for a long, long time. Our denomination was created in 1968. The line about “incompatibility” was added to the *Discipline* in 1972, and we've been playing tug-of-war ever since.



Methodists today fall roughly into four camps, depending on whether they prefer a traditional or progressive approach to including LGBTQ people, and whether they can live with folks who disagree in the same church (compatibilist), or can't live with folks who disagree (incompatibilist).

So you might be a traditionalist-incompatibilist, who feels that homosexuality is against God's will and can't live in the same church as folks who disagree. Or you might be a progressive-incompatibilist, who feels that homosexuality in a committed, married relationship is not a sin, and can't live in the same church as folks who disagree. Or you might hold traditionalist or progressive views, but be a compatibilist who is okay sharing a church with folks who disagree.

Jessica and I attended a meeting of 1300+ UMC churches two weeks ago at Church of the Resurrection. They did a live poll of the people gathered, and the results reflected the same bell curve as most other surveys of the UMC: 10-20% of Methodists are incompatibilists, either progressive or traditional, at either end of the bell curve. These folks can't get along. But the majority of Methodists, 80-90%, are compatibilists who fall in the fat middle of the curve. We can get along with each other, even if we don't agree on this subject.



It turns out this is very Methodist. Think of the bell curve as a big tent. Methodists have traditionally been a big tent church. We bring together folks who don't agree on everything, but do agree on loving Jesus and loving neighbors, on an active, practical, heartfelt, and intelligent faith.

4. The Methodist way. So this month we're going to take a look at LGBTQ inclusion from the perspective of the Methodist way. We are going right back to our roots in the teachings of John Wesley, and of Jesus Christ. In particular, we're looking at three things...



Big Tent

1 2 3

Three General Rules



Quadrilateral

4. The Methodist way.

- Our big-tent tradition, what John Wesley called “A Catholic (Universal) Spirit.”
- The three general rules of Methodism: do no harm, do all the good you can, and stay in love with God. These will frame the next three weeks.
- Using the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, a tool for interpreting scripture. Is the Holy Spirit leading us to a new understanding of ancient words in the bible about homosexuality?

5. (Re?) Interpreting scripture. Let me address that last point specifically because it is the root of our trials and tribulations over homosexuality. There are only six passages in the bible about homosexuality, three in the Old Testament and three in the New Testament. They are sometimes called the clobber verses, because anti-gay people have used them to clobber LGBTQ people and condemn them. They are listed on the screen – but we'll talk more about them this month. For comparison to the six clobber verses, Jesus never talks about homosexuality, but he talks about money in 11 of his 40 parables. (Don't worry – next month's sermon series is on money.)

The “clobber” verses:

- Genesis 19
- Leviticus 18:22
- Leviticus 20:13
- Romans 1:26-27
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-10
- 1 Timothy 1:8-10

5. (Re)interpreting scripture?

Traditionalists sometimes say, “The Bible is the Word of God, literally. It means the same thing now as when it was written. If you don't read these verses and see that homosexuality is a sin, you aren't taking the Bible seriously.”

Progressives respond, “Reading the Bible seriously means thinking about its context, who it was written for, and how the Spirit guides us in interpreting it now.”

It turns out that John Wesley offered us four tools for interpreting and reinterpreting scripture...

- Scripture – we read different passages and compare them to get the big picture
- Tradition – how has the Church traditionally read this?
- Reason – we can use our brains to think critically and evaluate
- Experience – is our understanding confirmed by our experience of the world?

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

- Scripture
- Tradition
- Reason
- Experience



5. (Re)interpreting scripture?

We will apply these this month to our reading of scripture. And for those who feel that scripture means what it means and can't be reinterpreted, note that that's exactly what Jesus is doing in the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment..." (5:21-22).

6. A reconciling heart. Friends, this will be a month to stretch all of us, whatever side of this discussion you find yourselves on. Whether you are a traditionalist or a progressive, does Jesus call you to be more loving and forgiving and understanding of those with whom you disagree? "Leave your gift on the way to the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother or sister." ... Oh, snap.

The Honest Pastor puts it this way: "You guys! You're supposed to love each other! Being mad is bad! Stop it!"

Or as John Wesley put it in his sermon "On a Catholic (Universal) Spirit," the sermon that established Methodism as a big tent... "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works... If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand."

This is a difficult conversation. But I urge you – Jesus commands you! – stay with us. Be reconciled. Let us love one another as we love our forgiving and reconciling Lord.

- Amen.

