



Council of Bishops

The United Methodist Church



A Pastoral Letter at Holy Week 2019

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To live by the shape of the liturgy is to see the deeper patterns and practices in the gospels. Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem (Luke 9), he has a triumphal entry (Luke 19). He experiences betrayal and denial by his friends, and criticism and punishment from his enemies (Luke 22-23).

He shares the word and is with them at the table of Passover and Eucharist. He teaches about service (Philippians 2) and struggles with his purpose. He cleanses the temple (Luke 19), forgives his torturers, breaks the cycle of violence and relinquishes control to his Father.

To read the passion narratives of Jesus closely during Holy Week is to lean more deeply into what it means to be one of his disciples. It is the way of the cross. And yet it is also the way that leads to life (John 10).

Holy Week is a complicated series of actions, with every variance of human emotion and failure. Life in a denomination can be complicated, but no more complicated than a local church or a family. The same Jesus who is surrounded with imperfect followers is the one who prays for their unity (John 17).

And yet Holy Week reveals something more. Local churches will enact the washing of feet on Maundy Thursday (John 13), remembering Jesus' command that we love one another (John 15). They will enter into the darkness of Good Friday and the absence of Holy Saturday. And underneath all of this are deep patterns of word and table, petition and forgiveness, humility and trust.

These deep patterns reveal the way of discipleship for us. And the complications of life in a denomination, or a local church, or a family call us to walk as closely as we can to our Lord, in works of piety, and as closely as we can to one another, in works of mercy. Our deep worship flows naturally (but not easily) into a deeper engagement with one another. The conclusion of Lent historically led to readiness for baptism (or new life) and confession of our sin. As United Methodists, we would benefit from a greater capacity to forgive one another, and to ask for this same forgiveness in return. Jesus models this for us, from the cross (Luke 23).

When the disciples are least present to Jesus, he is most clear about his calling. Holy Week is the path to a garden and a cross, and after, an empty tomb and a risen life (Luke 24), and later the promised Holy Spirit that will be poured out on all flesh (Acts 2).