



**“CAN WE TALK?”**

Luke 6:12-16

Ephesians 2:11-22

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*Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. (Luke 6:12-16 NRSV)*

*So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to God. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Ephesians 2:11-22 NRSV)*

Over the course of time, Margaret noticed that her son seemed to be dragging his feet when it came time to go to church. Finally, there came the morning when the service was less than an hour from starting and Margaret’s son, Kevin, was still in bed.

Margaret knocked on his bedroom door. She went into his room. She shook his shoulder and said, “Kevin, you’ve got to get up. Church starts in less than an hour.”

“But mom,” Kevin replied, “I really don’t want to go.”

“Why? What’s going on?” Margaret asked.

“Well,” Kevin replied, “I’ve got the feeling that the people there really don’t much agree with me. And, to be honest, I am not sure I really agree with them all that much.” “That may be so,” Margaret responded, “but, you really do need to get up now and get going.”

“Are you sure?” Kevin pleaded. “Yes,” Margaret responded, “and I’ll give you two good reasons why: First, you are 42 years old, and, second, you’re the pastor.” (I need to credit that story to our Bishop, who shared it when he was our Endowment dinner speaker a few weeks ago.)

Barbara and I returned last night from Traverse City, where since Thursday morning the Michigan Area of the United Methodist Church has been meeting. This annual gathering of clergy and lay delegates from across our state includes inspiring worship, presentations, reports from area boards and agencies, and legislative action, which is considered, debated, amended, debated, amended, amended, debated and, eventually, acted upon.

For many of us, annual conference is like a family reunion, as we connect with colleagues with whom we are together far too infrequently. For those of us who are clergy, the annual conference functions as the place of our church membership. And, as is the case with any local church, those who attend annual conference are not of one mind on any number of issues facing our church and society.

That the church—our local congregation, our area annual conference, and, yes, our United Methodist Church as a global denomination—may not be of one mind on issues facing our church and society likely does not come as news to many of you. The ongoing controversy in our denomination around issues of human sexuality is not new news. Disagreements in the church are not new news.

In its very earliest days, the church disagreed about whether Gentiles could become Christ followers. Then they argued about circumcision as a requirement for the gospel. Then they argued about eating certain meats. It was during disagreements in the early church that Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians which we read a few minutes ago.

The early church didn’t agree on everything all the time.

So, why should things be any different today?

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Our first scripture reading for today was Luke’s listing of Jesus’ disciples. Have you ever noticed how the persons Jesus called to be his disciples represented a spectrum of likely hostile points of view? Matthew was a tax collector working for the Romans, and by that work, supporting their

rule over Palestine. Simon who, as Luke reports, was called the Zealot, was a member of the Zealots, a political party committed to the overthrow of the Romans and all who collaborated with them. These two individuals were as far apart politically as you could be in first-century Palestine, yet Jesus called both to follow him.<sup>1</sup> **There was room at Jesus' table for both.**

When we keep reading in Luke's gospel, we discover that Luke names more than the twelve disciples as followers of Jesus. Luke tells us that there were a large group of women who were also followers of Jesus. In Chapter 8, we read where Luke lists the women along with the disciples.

*Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women...Mary, called Magdalene, and Joanna, and Susanna, and many others...*

In a patriarchal culture, how uncomfortable might it have been for the named male disciples to have Jesus include women among his followers? Did the women following Jesus make some of the men uncomfortable? Perhaps. Yet, Jesus calls them to follow; **there was room at Jesus' table.**

There is much that I value about being a part of this congregation. Our commitment to honoring God through excellence, our passion for putting love into action, the many ways in which we encourage lifelong spiritual growth and care for one another.

And this: Being a part of this worshipping community means that during any given week, I sit in circles and around tables with persons who voted differently than I did in the last election. In a time in which we are increasingly divided, in a society that is dividing into factions with no common ground, what we do here is as important as it is increasingly rare.

On a regular basis, I worship and study with persons with whom I do not agree on any number of issues. But, nonetheless, we work together. We care for each other. We share challenges and joys. We are vulnerable with each other. We pray for each other. We find a place of connection and community. **It is not always place of agreement; it is a place of grounding from which it is difficult to categorize or label one with whom I disagree as "other."**

In an article published recently in *Reflections*, a magazine published by Yale Divinity School, Chris Coons, a Divinity School graduate and U.S. Senator, describes a meeting that occurs every Wednesday morning in Washington. He writes:

As Americans, we're viewing each other more and more through overly simplified, inadequate, and divisive indicators...

Because of that, we are missing the more difficult, the more complicated, and more accurate pictures of people who aren't just our political allies or enemies, but our fellow citizens.

In the Senate, we've found one small way to try and counteract that... Once a week, a bipartisan group of two-dozen of us get together, pray together, sing together, and most importantly listen to each other at something called the Senate Prayer Breakfast... We talk about who we are beyond the clipped, cable news biographies written about us. We talk about our fears, our hopes, our challenges, and our families, not as legislators or politicians, but as people...<sup>2</sup>

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This week has been annual conference, the statewide gathering of our denomination. Next February, there is a special called session of the General Conference our global United Methodist Church. This is an international gathering with representatives from all countries with United Methodist churches. This special General Conference has been called to address issues of human sexuality about which we are divided as a church. Last month, our Council of Bishops announced the recommendation they would be making to this upcoming special General Conference.

On issues of human sexuality, our bishops will be forwarding three plans to the called General Conference, with a recommendation that the General Conference adopt the plan referred to as the One Church plan. The recommended plan is one that would allow for local and regional bodies of the church to contextualize language and practice around issues of human sexuality.

There are many nuances to the bishops' recommendation. And the final form of it is still being developed. I am looking forward to reading, reviewing, and having conversation about the recommendation from the Council of Bishops when it is released in its final form; this is expected to occur in early July. In the interim, what I want to commend to you this morning is the spirit from which the bishops have offered their recommendation.

In a pastoral letter that Bishop Bard released on May 9, he described this spirit using these words:

...as a Council we have been attempting to live together in a spirit of convicted humility. Convicted humility is "an attitude which combines honesty about the differing convictions which divide us with humility about the way in which each of our views may stand in need of correction. It also involves humble repentance for all the ways in which we have spoken and acted as those seeking to win a fight rather than those called to discern the shape of faithfulness together."<sup>3</sup>

Humility and humanity share a common root: humus. Dirt. Dust. To be humble is to recognize that we are human. Each of us has experiences that are uniquely our own. And while the truth of my experience is something that you may not be able to understand, it is something that you can't deny.

At the same time, as human beings we share a commonality beyond all differences. It is the commonality that we recall on Ash Wednesday, when we are reminded that from dust we have

been made and to dust we shall return. We are not eternal or perfect, but mortal and human. While we may strive to know God's will, we are not God.

Yes, we can, and should, study and pray and work together to discern what we believe to be the path God would have us follow. Yes, we can, and should, use the Wesley quadrilateral—scripture, tradition, reason and experience—to develop and articulate positions of faith. But even when we do this, a quick look at church history tells us that we may not get it right. For how many years was the church wrong on issues of gender and racial inclusion? For how many years was the church too closely aligned with exploitive and oppressive imperialist governments, particularly in the mission field in developing nations?

Given the reality of both our humanness and history, how then do we proceed? Do we forego any attempts at articulating faith positions on critical issues? No. Rather, we need to live faithfully to our convictions, but we need to do so, always, always, with a key ingredient: humility.

Humility doesn't mean a lack of passion or conviction. It does mean that I recognize my limits and therefore maintain openness; I continue to be open to how my experience and understanding may be informed by yours. Such conversation is very different from a culture war, because though we live our understanding, our convictions, with boldness, we do so knowing that we are human, and thus that we've not yet arrived at a perfect understanding.

At annual conference yesterday, I moderated a panel of persons sharing the work in ministry they are doing with schools. (Go figure, that they'd ask me to moderate such a panel.) Panel members represented urban, rural and suburban churches. The persons on the panel are at very different places of belief and understanding on any number of issues, including human sexuality, but they could all sit together and offer powerful testimony to the transforming ministry of their congregations with schools and students.

Paul addressed his letter to the Ephesians to a church and a time divided. In his day, the division in the church was between the Gentile and Jewish followers of Jesus. In addressing both groups, Paul declares that the dividing walls between groups have been broken down, that a new humanity has been created. Have differences disappeared? No. Do different ideas still exist? Yes. **But what distinguishes one group from another does not bring one group closer to God than another.** Rather it is God in Christ who brings us closer to God. Paul tells both groups that no one is a stranger, no one is undocumented, but that they all—ALL—are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, and that this way of being is to be foundational to their life together.

A contemporary book expresses this idea with these words: "The deepest way in which we are right or wrong is in our 'way of being' toward others. I can be right on the surface—in my behavior or positions—while being entirely mistaken beneath, in my way of being."<sup>4</sup>

So, can we talk?

Yes. We can talk. We can share life together. We can pray for one another. We can worship as one. We can share beliefs and convictions, even where we disagree.

Yes. We can talk. And we need to do so deeply. We each need to be more willing to listen than to speak. As we sit with each other, and as we talk with each other, we need to do so in a spirit of humility, open to the reality that we can all learn and grow. And when we speak, we need to do so gently, kindly, reasonably, compassionately and calmly.

Yes. We can talk. And I pray that we will do so in ways that provide a witness and model for holy conversation, of which our church, society and world are desperately in need.

My God, make it so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Hamilton, A. (2018). *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*. New York, New York: Convergent Books.

<sup>2</sup> Coons, C. (2018, Spring). Prayer, Not Politics, On Wednesday Mornings. *Reflections*, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Bard, D. (2018, May 10). *Seeking a Homeland*. Retrieved from United Methodist Insight: <http://um-insight.net/perspectives/seeking-a-homeland/>

<sup>4</sup> The Arbinger Institute. (2015). *Anatomy of Peace, 2nd Edition*. Oakland, California: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.