

**Moving Forward**  
(Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16)

One of the major themes in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus is unity. He begins by talking about how Jesus came to reunite us to God through his death and resurrection. He talks about how the members of the Ephesian church, both Jews and Gentiles, must work together for a common purpose – the building up of God's kingdom – despite their differences. In the chapter we just read, Paul talks about how that unity can be maintained: being humble and patient, practicing forgiveness, working for peace, combining our gifts for ministry, speaking truth, and building up one another in love.

It is a word that is just as relevant and needed this morning as it was 2,000 years ago.

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As many of you know, the United Methodist Church held a Special General Conference last week. I say *many* of you know this not only because we have talked about it, but also because I have had conversations with some of you in the wake of the conference.

The conference voted to support what is called the Traditional Plan. What this means is that the church has elected to maintain the current language of the *Book of Discipline*, which says that while all people are of sacred worth, the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, and self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be ordained as clergy or united in marriage ceremonies in United Methodist churches.

Now, the plan that was passed includes petitions that seek greater enforcement of rules of the *Discipline* regarding this issue, but we won't know exactly what that will look like until after the Judicial Council (which is the Church's Supreme Court) meets in April to rule on the constitutionality of the various petitions. But my guess is that not much will change. We are essentially in the same place we were before the conference. This means that some people are relieved – those who were hoping that nothing would change and the church would continue to hold to its traditional understanding. Others are disappointed and grieving because there was a hope for change, and that hope was not realized. That's true of the wider Church, and from what I have learned during my five years at Trinity, I can say with some confidence that it is true of people sitting in these pews. We find ourselves in different places on this issue. In that way, not much has changed; things are pretty much where they were before the conference.

But not quite. The Conference, which began in civil and holy conversation, degenerated into a verbal melee, with people accusing one another of lacking truth or love or both. With people accusing one another of not following God. It was not pretty. It reminded all of us that we don't agree on these issues. Everyone, on all sides, left the conference hurt and wounded. And the spectacle didn't look very good to the outside world. One of my non-Methodist friends who tuned in to the live stream was so shocked by the caustic backbiting that he texted me to say, "Wow, I think the Methodist Church has a problem." Truth be told, I heard the same from my Methodist friends as well. It was not our best moment.

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Just out of seminary, I was part of a group of pastors who were preparing for ministry in the United Methodist Church. We would occasionally invite older, more seasoned pastors to share their wisdom with our group. I recall one of these pastors quite vividly. He told us that early in his ministry he developed a practice of lighting a candle before every church meeting. It is similar to what we do here in worship. He would light the candle and invite someone to pray that the Holy Spirit would be with them as they discussed the business before them, providing wisdom and direction and a sense of peace. The candle served as a symbol of God's presence.

The pastor said that during one meeting – SPRC or Church Council or some such – the room became tense. There was disagreement over an issue, and the disagreement escalated into an argument. Civility gave way to vitriol, and people began to shout at one another. Insults were hurled, feelings were hurt, and relationships were being damaged. Amidst the cacophony of voices, one of the matriarchs of the church – a gentle, soft-spoken lady who had remained silent as everyone else was yelling – quietly stood, walked over to the candle and put it out. She then turned and announced, “It appears the Holy Spirit has left the room.”

I must admit that as I watched our General Conference this past week, there were times when I wanted to blow out a candle.

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But we are the church. We are the church in the aftermath of an experience that has left us wounded. We are the church that is asking, “How do we move forward? How can we be one though we are different? How can we maintain unity when we seem so divided?”

I knew the Conference was on the horizon, which is why we have been subtly addressing what it means to be in community during worship. I don't know if you picked up on it, but in my sermons over the past several months, we have been talking a lot about interpretive charity, conflict resolution, peacemaking, and civility. It is one reason why we have focused on *The Story*. Because what I have wanted us to do is ask, “What is the foundational story that unites all of us? What is the story that says we were created in the image of God, all of us, we have all broken away through sin, and we are all being called back to God again through the work of Jesus Christ?” I think that is the beginning of our moving forward – remembering that.

In John 17, Jesus prays for unity. He prays that his followers may be one as he and the Father are one. In the chapter right before the one we read this morning, Paul prays for unity, realizing that true unity is possible only if the Spirit of God is at work in our midst.

For the past several months, many of my friends and colleagues on both sides of this issue were talking a lot about it. In newsletter articles, in sermons, in Q&A Sessions, over meals. In some cases, this was their primary focus. Some of them wondered why I was talking more about it. Some of you wondered why I wasn't talking more about it. The reason is that I refuse to allow this or any other issue become the central focus of the church. We are called to love God and love neighbor. We are called to share the love and grace of God with people and invite them into a relationship with God. And I want to make sure that this is our focus.

And I think the way forward is to focus on those important issues that we can work together on – to live out the Great Commandment, which is love God and love neighbor. To carry out the

mission of the Church, which is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. To build one another up in love. Because we are called together by the love of God, by God working in our lives, by God calling us to join him in the work of the kingdom, that which unites us must be stronger than that which divides us.

So how do we move forward? I think this table is a good place to start.

In one of his books, the famed food writer Michael Pollan writes, “*The shared meal is no small thing. It is a foundation of family life, the place where our children learn the art of conversation and acquire the habits of civilization: sharing, listening, taking turns, navigating differences, arguing without offending.*”<sup>1</sup>

He was talking about the family meal at home, but I think the words are even more true of this table and this meal. This meal where we gather together to commune with God and one another. This meal where we confess that none of us has it all together, that we are all broken and need healing and wholeness in our lives. This meal where we are reminded that we receive the love and grace and forgiveness of God, undeservedly, and are called to help others discover that same love and grace and forgiveness. This meal in which we are nourished and strengthened so that we might be, as the liturgy reminds us, the body of Christ for the world and to share with them the good news. Frankly, if that is not enough to draw us together, then I don’t know what is.

Amen.

*Preached: March 3, 2019 at Trinity Spartanburg*

Pastoral Prayer:

God of grace and God of glory,

We come to you as your imperfect children.

None of us has it all together. All of us are broken.

We are in need of your Spirit to empower us and shape us and change us to make us more like you.

Continue to work in our lives that we may bear your image well

and may more faithfully live out and share with everyone your good news of great joy.

This we pray in the name of Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray...

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Pollan, *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* (NY: Penguin, 2013), 8.