

WGUMC June 25, 2017  
Luke 10:25-28

"the holy catholic church"

At Annual Conference this week, we got a report from one of the members of the Commission on A Way Forward, the group that was called together by last General Conference to figure out a way to get beyond the impasse over sexuality in the United Methodist Church. The commission members represent all factions and regions of the Church and meet every six weeks to work on a recommendation to present to a special General Conference called for 2019. They are praying together, listening and getting to know one another. According to the report, people who are on opposite sides of the issue are finding out that they love each other.

That sounds hopeful, but even if they do come to some kind of agreement on a way forward, the delegates to General Conference who will have to vote on that plan will not have had that same experience of praying together, listening and getting to know one another and learning to love each other. So there

is no guarantee that they won't just reject all the Commission's hard work. It's been done before, many times.

In these times, we have to ask, what does it mean to believe in "the holy, catholic church" as it says in the Apostles' Creed? In what sense can we say that our church is holy? Or catholic?

If I say the Church is holy, you'll say, "Really???" And I will concede that the Church has been corrupted, coopted, and scandalized many times, and it has left bloody footprints across our history. But none of us would be here if we didn't believe that somehow the essence of the Church, the heart of that much abused Body of Christ, has somehow managed to survive somewhere, maybe here.

How can we be holy? The word *holy* literally means "set apart." God wanted the people of Israel to be holy, to be set apart from the injustice and the idolatry in the land they were living in. They only got into trouble when they caved and went

along with the surrounding culture. Likewise, ever since Constantine made Christianity a state religion, the Church has gotten into trouble by going along with the culture, by getting coopted by the powers that be, by some prince or political party.

But there are more subtle ways that the Church caves to the culture every day. I see Christians do it all the time. I catch myself doing it. Whenever we say in church that we can't offer this class or no one will want to come to that event because this is Silicon Valley and people are busy and parents are stressed out and Sunday is a day for soccer and being Christian isn't cool, what we are saying is that we are not willing to set ourselves apart. We are not willing to be a little crazy or uncool for Christ. In other words, we are not willing to be holy people, let alone a holy church.

Going with the Gospel of Jesus Christ means going against the grain of the culture. Being holy means having different

values, setting different priorities, living a different lifestyle, spending our time and money in different ways. Can anyone by looking or listening tell that you are a Christian?

At Conference I heard about the Watsonville First United Methodist Church that is going against the grain in a big way. They recently sold a piece of property and decided to tithe the proceeds of the sale to ministry outside of their walls. So my friend and colleague, Robin Matthews-Johnson, along with some of her parishioners, gave to the bishop two checks for \$100,000 a piece. One check goes to Africa University, the pan-African University in Zimbabwe that was started 25 years ago this year by United Methodists who were going against the grain. The other \$100,000 is going to our Conference to support ministry initiatives in Cal-Nevada.

The conventional wisdom would have been to keep that money at home. Goodness knows the church could use it. But no, the Methodists in Wastonville have accepted the

inconvenient truth that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about radical love. Following Jesus is extreme discipleship.

If this church were caving to the culture we wouldn't have hosted the Village House shelter for five weeks this spring. But that can't be the only time we testify to God's love this year. What difference does Christ make in our lives for the other 47 weeks in the year?

Our youth just came home from their mission trip and in another month, we'll send some families off to Mexico. We will set them apart and then send them off. Out there in the dust and the heat and the sweat, they will experience church and it will be holy. But there is a danger of going on a mission trip and it isn't drinking the water or getting a sunburn. The danger is coming down from that mountain, getting back home and falling right back into our valley ways. It's too easy to let the culture make the rules for us, to let the cost of living make all

the decisions for us. And if we're not careful, we will let this valley take our souls from us.

So I say: do whatever you have to do to keep that from happening. It may take getting a different job, a different place to live, having a different attitude or set of expectations, finding a new resolve, making a new commitment to Christ, or picking up a new spiritual practice. But whatever it takes, we have to find a way to set ourselves apart in Silicon Valley. We have to be holy or life here is going to be hell.

OK. That's what it means for the church to be holy. But what does it mean to be "catholic"? The word means "universal." The true Church of Jesus Christ is universal. That doesn't mean that our church or any church has to be The Church for everyone. It means that Christ is for everyone. Christ loves everyone. And for a church to be universal, it must love everyone, too.

That's easy to say and believe in the abstract, but much harder to do in the concrete. Christians can't even love their own kind, much less everyone else. There are divisions between Roman Catholics and the Orthodox, between Catholics and Protestants. And don't even get me started on the Protestants. If we Christians are, as Paul says, all members of one body, the Body of Christ, then we Protestants have pretty nearly dismembered that Body. [1 Cor 12]

When will we admit that we need every different part of the body? Methodists need Baptists because even though we can read, we don't read our Bibles and we need Baptists to shame us into doing it, if only for our own defense. Methodists need Lutherans because we tend to talk so much about grace that we forget about sin, which is the reason why we need grace in the first place. Methodists need Catholics because they have most of the saints and martyrs who gave their lives for love and show the rest of us how to live and because they

now have an awesome pope! And the Methodists need the Orthodox because they counter our western obsession with the suffering and death of Jesus with an eastern emphasis on the resurrection and ongoing life of Christ. And all those other churches need us.

The thing we Methodists have to give to the world, the thing we can crow about is also the thing we fight about. In the UMC, we have conservatives and liberals, and we squabble like siblings. But the fact is that both camps desperately need each other. Someone at Conference said "you need two wings to fly a plane." So we need the Jesus folks and the justice folks. How else can we maintain the vital connection between personal holiness and social holiness, between converting hearts *to* Christ and transforming the world *for* Christ? Wesley always said and Methodists have always believed that you can't have one without the other. Methodists bear that witness to the world and that's why the Church needs us.



And I would add that the United Methodist Church needs the California-Nevada Annual Conference. The UMC is a worldwide church. Our membership crosses national, racial, cultural and socioeconomic boundaries. But there are some boundaries we haven't crossed yet, and Cal-Nevada is at the forefront of making our love and our invitation even more universal.

We have a history of doing that. In 1984, Leontine Kelly served this Conference as the first African American woman bishop in any major Christian denomination. Last year, our own Karen Oliveto, was elected as our denomination's first openly lesbian bishop. And on Friday night, we ordained our denomination's very first Fijian elder. The President of Fiji was there, along with the Queen of Tonga.

I couldn't help but think about how much poorer the Body of Christ would be without all our diversity. And so it is beyond me how any church or group within the church thinks that it

can be the whole Body of Christ all by itself. Only together can we Christians love God with enough heart, enough mind, enough spirit and enough strength to be Christ for the world. The Church is either catholic or it is pathetic.

I, for one, am proud to be part of a church that is holding on to the hope and promise of the Apostles' Creed. As a church, we aren't holy yet, but God is holy and, by grace, we will get there. We aren't fully catholic yet, but Christ's offer is universal. His love is for everyone, and one day ours will be, too.

In that hope and with that promise, let us say together the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.  
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.