

Wesley United Methodist Church      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
February 24, 2019  
Title: The Questioning Crowd<sup>1</sup>  
Scripture: Luke 6:27-38

Some of what I feel called to share with you today was influenced by material written by Margaret Ann Crain, a Professor Emerita of Christian Education at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. At the same time, I am extremely conscious of the fact that over 800 delegates from around the world are gathered in St. Louis this weekend for a special session of the United Methodist General Conference. I believe that our Gospel reading today speaks significantly to this.

Margaret Crain began her thoughts by celebrating that the United States is a democracy and that the United Methodist Church was also conceived as a democracy. It has legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The number of delegates to any conference is designed to be an equal number of clergy and lay persons. The Council of Bishops is the executive branch. The legislative branch is the General Conference that typically meets every four years; but is meeting this weekend in a specially called session.

General Conference is the only body that can speak officially on behalf of the United Methodist Church and the only body that sets church law. The Judicial Council is a body that functions much like our Supreme Court. It receives challenges to church law and rules on whether or not they fit within the Book of Discipline; which functions for us, in ways similar to the way the Constitution functions within our national government.

As is true in many religious organizations, despite our name “United Methodist” we have not always been united on many issues. Quite frankly,

that is one thing that I have always celebrated about the United Methodist Church. John Wesley the founder of Methodism was known to follow a time-tested dictum – In Essential Unity; in Non-Essentials Liberty; in all things charity. Because of this we have a large umbrella that includes great diversity. Because of this we are able to be a global church including many different cultures. Today, the United Methodist Church in Africa is growing faster than in any other part of the world. I have always believed that our diversity was a strength of our church.

However, that is currently not true because we have allowed the divisions in matters of sexual orientation to reach a crisis point. At issue is primarily questions of same-sex marriage and ordination. A special<sup>ii</sup> commission was formed to recommend a way forward for us as a denomination. This week our delegates are meeting to act upon their report and recommendations.

A friend and colleague, Thom Blackstone noted that this is a “4 day conversation not to ask what are the correct answers about human sexuality, but rather whether those who come to different answers can live together under one theological ‘roof’.”

There are essentially three or four paths being discussed and they are very different. Often when I try to type “United Methodist Church” it comes out “Untied” rather than “United”. It gives me great pain that this may become a reality. It seems highly likely, that regardless of which path is chosen – if any – there will be individuals as well as a number of churches looking to separate from the denomination.

The possible outcome has been described as a schism, or a divorce and it is making national news. Before the session even began, there were articles in the New York Times, Washington Post, Associated Press and

Wall Street Journal. And those are only the articles that I read. I expect that there will be a lot more news as the next couple of days unfold.

While celebrating the idea that both our nation and our church are set up as democracies, Margaret Crain points out that “democracy creates winners and losers. Winners take all. The losers are expected to accept the decision and wait until the next vote!” She worries that there are a lot of people on the losing side whose voices are not being heard in some very important ways.

It is no secret that our country is becoming increasingly divided and sadly, this is also true of the United Methodist Church. In both cases, the tendency has been to demonize the “other” and to stop listening to one another. As painful as it is that this is true of our country, it is even more painful to me that this is happening within our larger church because we share a Scriptural basis that I believe demands that we do otherwise.

In today’s gospel we hear Jesus speaking to the crowd and challenging them in ways that were counter-cultural then and are even more so now. First Jesus challenges them to listen to him – a hint that what he is about to say will not be easy to hear. “But I say to you that listen: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

Jesus isn’t just telling us to listen to our enemies, but he goes further and tells us to love them. Crain writes, “I can just imagine how the people around him that day must have looked at one another in amazement, shaking their heads at the absurdity of it all. Some must have decided that they were not ‘willing to hear’ and walked away with their heads full of questions. Others began to work on the bargain. Which enemy might they

‘love’ without risking their own position? Others tried to imagine how they could love their enemies.

“Our imaginations can help us to see all the people who were there that day listening to Jesus. Their responses were not all the same. But Jesus does not seem to be asking us to agree. Instead, Jesus asks us to love one another. He is talking about the kingdom of God, where love is the rule, not an eye for an eye.”<sup>iii</sup>

This may sound good in theory, but Jesus doesn’t teach in theory. He teaches in reality and sometimes that reality is really hard. It may challenge and even threaten things that are very important to us. Jesus goes on to give examples of ways that we should be generous and loving, expecting nothing in return. He reminds us that we don’t earn points for being good to those who are good to us, most everyone does that. That’s expected. What is unexpected and raising questions for the crowd and for us is that we are to love our enemies, and do good, not expecting anything in return.

Can’t you hear the people in the crowd asking questions, trying to figure this out? How far do they have to go? Being polite to someone who is rude to us is one thing, “If I love my enemy, I will let down my guard, and the enemy may win. If I love my enemy, that enemy may threaten the well-being of my community or my family. If I am not a ‘winner,” will others suffer too? If I give my coat away, I may be cold. Who will give me a coat when I need it? If I lend money to someone who has no job and no prospect of paying me back, how will I support myself in my retirement?

“Part of the challenge of this teaching is that we are beset by competing values. If I turn my other cheek after being struck, how badly will I be wounded? Will my wound threaten those who depend on me? Will

I lose my position in society because I am shamed? If I give my coat away, how can I pass it on to my child who may be cold? In fact, Jesus asks us to give without expectation of any reward in return. How does this work? Will others be vulnerable because of my sacrifice?”<sup>iv</sup> Those in the crowd, and we, today, have many questions about how this works.

Are we willing to hear? Our Book of Discipline asserts that “The people of God, who are the church made visible in the world, must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced.”<sup>v</sup> So how do we convince the world of the reality of this gospel that Jesus preached?

I’m pretty sure we don’t do it by bullying or demeaning others. Jesus tells us we do not do it by judging or condemning others. We must focus on compassion and love. Crain suggests that this begins with seeing and hearing those who are different from us. She reminds us that this “means that those who voted on the other side should be heard and seen. In the hearing and seeing is the opportunity to love. With hearing and seeing comes understanding and compassion.

“Compassion is to feel or join in the passion with the other. Can we hear and see those with whom we differ? In hearing and seeing them, can we join in their pain? Can we extend love (not control)? Perhaps most importantly, we extend compassionate love, not in order to get something back (like agreement on an issue or gaining power for a political point of view), but simply because that is the gospel message.”

I wonder what would happen if we really listened to those with whom we disagree. What would happen if we extended to them the same consideration and openness to their viewpoints that we want them to have to ours? I think we all wondered if the Congressional Conference

Committee would be able to listen to each other enough to reach an agreement to prevent a second Federal shutdown a few weeks ago. I'm grateful that they were able to find a way to come to an agreement.

I pray that somehow the same thing will happen at the special session of General Conference, but I confess that I am afraid that the lines have been drawn in the sand, or even in concrete, by people on both sides. I think this is true, at least in part, because delegates who are passionate on either side believe that they are correctly interpreting God's will. They think that those with whom they disagree are misunderstanding the Bible and God's will at the very minimum.

I can and do still love those with whom I disagree, and I would not describe them as my enemy. However, when we believe God is on our side, it is almost impossible to really listen to those with whom we disagree, because we believe we cannot possibly be wrong. We may be willing to listen to their words, but we find it difficult or impossible to listen with the possibility that we could be wrong. I often say that as people of faith, we are in the miracle business, but if I am honest, I am afraid that in this case my faith is lacking.

Nevertheless, I continue to pray fervently that the Holy Spirit will work in ways that I cannot even begin to imagine and that we may see miracles take place in St. Louis. Again, if I'm being honest, that means that I pray that those who disagree with my viewpoint will come to agree with me or at least move in that direction. Perhaps this helps to illustrate how really difficult Jesus' teachings can be.

Our Bishops have asked us to pray that God will help us to fulfill the mission of the church and that we will pray to be one in Christ. I pray that the results of General Conference will be ones that proclaim and witness to

God's radically inclusive love. I pray that this General Conference will, in the words of the Book of Discipline, "convince the world of the reality of the gospel" rather than leaving it unconvinced.

Martin L. Smith wrote an article that I found on the Sojourner's Web Site called, "In the Family Business". He notes that Jesus would have learned carpentry from Joseph his earthly father. In Jesus' culture, it was typically expected that children would follow in the footsteps of their parents. Children of farmers worked on the family farm. Sons of fishermen grew up to fish. Sons of merchants became merchants. Daughters became wives and mothers and supported the work of their husbands.

Smith states that we are all children of God, and we are expected to show that we are God's children by working, so to speak, in the family business. He writes that God's "family business is reconciliation, risky solidarity, and love that is unconditional and generous." It is a business that isn't focused on or interested in profit or even in breaking even. Those are the concerns of the world. He says that if we are to be part of the company in "God and Family: Distributors of Unconditional Love" then we need to "get down to business and demonstrate our resemblance to the Creator."<sup>vi</sup>

We can only love our enemies, turn the other cheek and do good to those who hate us because of Jesus. The things that Jesus taught were not new to Judaism. They were part of the first Jewish laws of covenant, of how to live with others. Jews were taught that they were to welcome the stranger, to care for those in need, and to love their neighbor as they would love themselves.

Jesus affirmed these in response to a question from an expert in the law. Hoping to justify himself, the man tried to find a boundary or a limit

with which he could live and asked, “Who is my neighbor?”<sup>vii</sup> Jesus extended the letter and the spirit of the law by telling a story we know as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. He put the man on the spot by telling a story in which the one who acted as a neighbor was the one that would have normally been considered the enemy or at least the outsider, someone with whom a good Jewish man would not intentionally interact. Then Jesus told him to “go and do likewise.”

Michaela Bruzzese says that Jesus’ teachings make no sense in our world. They make no sense without the resurrection. In the resurrection, God turned everything upside down. In the resurrection, life triumphed over death. This is what allows us to take new risks. Bruzzese writes that “With nothing to protect and nothing to fear, not even death, we are free to live like children of the Most High”, like children of God.<sup>viii</sup>

“If we are to convince the world of the reality of the Gospel, we must live the way of love every day and in all parts of our lives. This requires us to see all the people, with their differences and their passions. The way of love, the gospel, is at the heart of our mission in the world. If we act the way children of God act, love is at the center.”<sup>ix</sup>

I pray that as God’s children, we will take the risk. In times when we find it most difficult, I pray that we will seek God’s help to love our enemy and to do to others as we would have them do to us. We are members of God’s family, and I pray that we will be faithful workers in the business of “God and Family: Distributors of Unconditional Love”.

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<sup>i</sup> The title and some thoughts come from General Board of Discipleship “See All The People” worship theme for Epiphany Part II. Margaret Ann Crain

<sup>iii</sup> Blackstone, Thom. Posted on his Face Book page 2/23/19

<sup>iii</sup> Crain

<sup>iv</sup> Crain

<sup>v</sup> Book of Discipline, 2016, paragraph 130.

<sup>vi</sup> Smith, Martin L. “In the Family Business” found in Preaching the Word, Sojourners.

<sup>vii</sup> Luke 10:29. Luke 10:25-37 is the surrounding story – of the story of the Good Samaritan.

<sup>viii</sup> Bruzzese, Michaela “Children of the Most High” found in Preaching the Word, Sojourners.

<sup>ix</sup> Crain