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Catch Your Breath in Times of Division

We all know what it feels like when we don't see eye to eye with someone we care about... it's hard to feel divided on topics, especially the hot button issues that hit close to home for so many.

I have a pastor friend who I served with in ministry a number of years back, that no matter how hard we try, we never seem to be able to talk about human sexuality and our denominational stance on ordination and marriage, without ending in an argument and incredibly frustrated with one another. He knows that this is an important justice battle for me, especially because I have people in my family who have experienced exclusion and been judged within the church for being gay. I know that he is more conservative than I am, and while he doesn't agree with the recently approved punitive rules that were adopted at the Special Session of General Conference in February, he definitely reads scripture differently than I do and is struggling with how to think through LGBTQ inclusion in the church. Needless to say, we have clashed heads MANY times, and it never ends well. I am so tired of fighting with him on this topic that it's hard to engage with him in conversation at all, since I'm always just wondering when he's going to bring this topic up, throwing us into another row. Rather than subjecting myself to another round of fights, it would be so much easier to simply disconnect, to end our friendship, if that's what you'd call it, and agree to go our separate ways.

I'd guess that you know exactly what I'm talking about... and whether you have had experiences like this with people over LGBTQ inclusion, or politics, or any of the other hot button issues, we know the challenge of remaining connected with those who think, believe, and live differently than we do. It's easier to remain in our bubble of like-minded people – to talk and associate with people who share similar beliefs and political persuasions. And that's often what we end up doing... we are living in an incredibly segregated society... we cluster ourselves with others around politics, nationalities, religions, race, educational and class-based divisions. It feels better, and life is just plain easier when we resonate with those we associate with.

It is into this reality that we read our text from the Gospel of John this morning... a scripture where Jesus is calling us to live into a spirit of unity... to know the blessing of being

united with other people of faith, just as Jesus is blessed by the unity with God. Jesus prays in vs. 21 that “they” meaning all who believe in him, will be one. Our Trinitarian understanding is that Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit are inseparably one. Jesus prays that we will be united in the same way. And there is a powerful SO THAT statement in verse 21! Jesus prays that we will be one SO THAT the world may believe that Christ is Lord.

When we are serving in mission at the Appalachian Service Project, I have felt the power of these words in action. ASP is a community service ministry that is open to people of all faith traditions, but it is a Christian organization. On the weeks that our youth group goes to serve, we are there with youth groups from a variety of other denominations, but when we are working on someone's home, repairing a floor or a roof, re-siding a house or painting a bedroom, our differences don't matter... All that matters is that we are serving in Christ's name, to share the love of God with our neighbors, near and far, helping to make their homes safer, warmer, and dryer. Despite the differences that usually keep us apart, we are united in service, and together we help people better see and experience the love of Christ.

Jesus goes further and says in verse 22 and 23 that our unity is not only so that the world will believe, it also brings glory to God and is a testimony of our understanding of God's love for us. Our unity mattered to Jesus and it should matter to us.

BUT, as important as unity is to me and to our representation of God's love in the world, I have come to believe that unity for the wrong reasons can be more harmful than it can be helpful. When unity is preached for unity's sake, I'm afraid we've missed the point of Jesus' teaching. While scripture does suggest that it is God's desire for there to be unity within the body of Christ, unfortunately what is often overlooked is what we are to be united by and for. In both John's gospel and in our reading from Ephesians, the point is made very clear. Our unity is supposed to be in our faith and the knowledge of Christ. The purpose and goal of unity is not about a religion, not about a denomination, and not about a church. Our unity should be because of who Christ is for us, and how we can help others know the love of God through Jesus.

In the midst of our denominational crisis around full inclusion of our LGBTQ siblings, for too long, progressives have been held back from being FULLY open, affirming, and inclusive of all people, regardless of what gender they fall in love with or identify themselves as. We have been restricted in our witness to the fully inclusive love of God for too long. In the past, all I heard, and spouted myself, was the standard denominational preservation argument... let's wait it out and fight the system from within. What we have seen in the most recent General Conference session is that our system of conferencing is incapable of legislating its way through this justice issue – at least not in our current global structure. I and others believe that the time to wait it out is gone... holding fast to the argument for unity – for unity's sake – for the sake of preserving the United Methodist denomination as we know it today – is not allowing us to be the body of Christ that we are called to be. Unity purchased at the price of a compromised integrity of faith and calling is NOT what Jesus would want for us. I truly believe that it is time and is FAITHFUL for us to pursue new expressions of Methodism – whether that be through different organizational structures or new denominations, I don't know... but what I do know is that I have hope and deep faith that the new organizational structures that are birthed will reflect the heart of Jesus and the heart of our denominational

founder, John Wesley. Both taught an outwardly focused faith that is not concerned solely for the individual's faithfulness and upholding of ancient laws, but for social holiness and living out God's love by serving the last, least, and lost.

As we await the formation of a new Methodist expression, one that embraces, equips, celebrates, and empowers all, I encourage you not to lose faith. At the UMC of Red Bank, we ALREADY live as this kind of church! It is around our faithful living out of the inclusive love of God that we can unite – experiencing God's love for ourselves and helping to point others to the all-embracing love of Jesus.

As we discern our way forward, I invite us to keep in mind and prayer those who find themselves in the uncertain middle... those who would not consider themselves either progressive or traditionalist, who are honestly trying to figure out how God is calling them to be the church, to be faithful to their understanding of God. It is in this space where my pastor friend falls... and as frustrating and painful as it is for me to hash out the justice battle with him over and over, I do believe that is one way that we can live out the spirit of Jesus's call to unity from our text today. Even in the midst of the struggle and the challenging conversations, we are called to do our best to hold onto those things that unite us – the love of God – and to help point others to know and experience the love of Jesus. So, as we go out into our week, may we strive to love others as Christ loves them, to speak with grace and love. Let's refrain from closing ourselves off from others, even when the conversations are hard... but let's work toward building and maintaining a unity of the Spirit and helping others know and experience the love of Christ. Amen.