

All You Need is Love!
(Matthew 5:43-48 and 1 Corinthians 13)

Among my several responsibilities beyond my appointment as your pastor, I serve on the Conference Board of Church and Society. The Board of Church and Society is the arm of the United Methodist Church that actively works for peace and justice. The Board is particularly visible at the time of annual conference when they put forth resolutions calling for the church body to take action on issues they view as important to peace and justice.

We address issues such as immigration, the war in Iraq, homosexuality, and American militarism. For the most part, my voice and vote on the Board is usually in the minority because of my moderate view on most issues. I actually joined the Board thinking that a more moderate personality might balance it.

As I have participated in the debates over the past several years, I came to realize that the Board is a body of like minds. For the most part, the members don't want to hear a moderating voice. Roger Curless, our previous conference lay leader, authored an article that cited a documentary by ABC television. The documentary presented "strong evidence that the more people gravitate to people of like minds, the more we tend to move to extremes." As I read Roger's article I wondered if he had been a fly on the wall during some of the Board of Church and Society's deliberations.

I realized that the evidence Roger cited is being lived out in our ministry of peace with justice here in the Northern Illinois Conference. In the name of peace with justice – in the name of Jesus Christ – it seems that the members of the Board have gravitated toward one purpose. They think with one mind, they speak with one voice, and they act with one mind. This seems wrong to me, like something is missing.

The unfortunate consequence of like-mindedness is that people of different minds are effectively silenced. I often wonder about our United Methodist mantra of Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors. If open minds open hearts, then closed minds must close hearts. What is missing in a community of like-minded people is open hearts. What is missing is love. Please pray with me.

God of Love, open our minds and our hearts this morning. Teach us through the scripture read and your word proclaimed. Make my words your words. Teach us the true meaning of love. Assure us once again that love is all we need. Through Jesus the Christ we pray. Amen.

The New Testament reading this morning is a familiar one. Paul is writing to the church at Corinth. He is explaining to them the role that love must play in their community of faith. He tells them the many things that love

is *not*. Love is not envious or arrogant or proud. Love is not selfish or rude. Love is not angry. Love does not keep track of our sins. And Paul would agree, I believe, that love is not singled minded.

My experiences on the Board of Church and Society make me wonder what happened to cause it to lose sight of Jesus' command to love our enemies as well as our neighbors. I wonder if we, as Christians, really understand what Jesus meant when he said "love your enemies as well as your neighbors."

There is a bumper sticker that reads, "When Jesus said, 'love your enemy,' he probably meant don't kill him." While I can't disagree with this interpretation, I believe that we tend to misinterpret what Jesus was trying to communicate about love – God's love. First of all, we need to realize that love is a gift from God. Love is not about a human emotion. It is a gift in the sense that it is freely given. It is a gift in the sense that we are not asked for anything in return. And most importantly, it's a gift because there is nothing we can do to earn it. Remember Paul's words to the Corinthians – love does not keep track of our sins. Likewise, love doesn't count the good things we do. God's love is unconditional.

The other thing we need to understand about God's love is that it is not a human emotion that is felt. The Greeks had a word for that kind of love – *eros*. The love Jesus speaks of is not a romantic notion that everything in the world is hunky dory. Hunky dory, by the way, is a theological term that means "just fine." In fact, I believe Jesus would agree that while we are commanded to love each other – including our enemies – we don't necessarily have to like someone in order to love them.

The story is told about early attempts to ship fresh North Atlantic cod from Boston to San Francisco during the 19th century. At that time the only way to ship the fish to the West Coast was to sail around the South American continent – a trip that took months. As you can imagine, the first attempts to dress the cod in Boston and pack them in ice failed miserably. By the time they reached California, the fish weren't fit to eat.

In a second attempt, live cod were placed in holding tanks full of water, shipped to California alive, and dressed there. The results were less than satisfactory. The fish didn't get much exercise during the trip, and as a result they were pasty and relatively tasteless.

Finally, someone hit upon a different idea. "Why don't we put some catfish in with the cod?" Now you may ask why the addition of catfish might be a solution. Well, it seems that catfish are a natural enemy of cod. Putting a few catfish in those tanks kept the cod alert and on the move. This time, when the fish reached San Francisco, they were in perfect shape.

The catfish and cod are natural enemies, but that didn't mean they couldn't coexist in the same environment – an environment that contributed to the well-being of the cod even though it was in conflict with the natural instincts of the catfish.¹

Theologian Frederick Buechner subscribes to my theological understanding of love. Buechner believes that Jesus' command to love our neighbors and our enemies means

¹ Bill Myers and David Wimbish, *The Dark Side of the Supernatural* (Bethany House, 1999)

we must be willing to “work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being.”² This means that we can love our enemies as well as our neighbors without necessarily liking them.

Think about that. Can you imagine loving a person without liking that person? When I first studied Buechner’s theology, I was startled by the profoundness of thought it provoked in me. Buechner affirms a most radical understanding – you can love someone without liking them.

The love Jesus preached was a self-sacrificing, unconditional love. The love Jesus commanded us to show is the same unconditional love that God has for us. Think about that for a minute. Does that mean that God loves us all – unconditionally – but may not necessarily like each and every one of us? I don’t know. But it’s something to consider. When I think about some of the stupid things we, as human beings, do it makes sense to me that God could love us without liking some of us.

Another story is told about a Chinese Christian who owned a rice paddy next to one owned by a communist. The Christian irrigated his paddy by pumping water out of a canal, using one of those leg-operated pumps that make the user look like he is pedaling a bicycle. Every day, after the Christian had pumped enough water to fill his field, the communist would come out, remove some boards that kept the water in the Christian’s field and let all the water flow down into his own field. That way, he didn’t have to do any work.

This continued day after day. Finally, the Christian prayed, “Lord, if

this keeps up, I’m going to lose all my rice, maybe even my field. I’ve got a family to care for. What can I do?”

In answer to his request, the Lord put a thought in his mind. So, the next morning he arose much earlier, in the predawn hours of darkness, and started pumping water into the field of his communist neighbor. Then he replaced the boards and pumped water into his own rice paddy. In a few weeks both fields of rice were doing well—and the communist was converted.³

This is a perfect illustration of Christian love, the love Jesus spoke of when he commanded us to love our enemies as well as our neighbors. Come to think of it, the story is also a perfect illustration of evangelism.

John Wesley once said – and I am loosely paraphrasing – we don’t all have to be of the same mind, but it is important for us to all be of the same heart.

When I reflect on my experiences on the Board of Church and Society and what is going on across our nation, it is disappointing to realize that we have don’t have the same heart. It is even more disappointing to realize that our United Methodist denomination has lost or is in danger of losing a fundamental Wesleyan value – Christian love – the ability to be a people of many minds but one heart.

That fundamental value is disappearing because we continue to gravitate to people who think and act like us. In the balance we move to one extreme or the other and become one-minded. We fracture our hearts and the heart of the church. Today, we are a nation of “blue states and red states” but

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seekers ABC* (Harper Collins, 1973, 1993)

³ Paul Faulkner, *Making Things Right When Things Go Wrong* (Howard, 1996)

unfortunately, we are not a nation of one heart.

As a nation, state, community, and church, we need to stop gravitating toward those people who think and act like us. As a nation with pockets of like-minded thinkers we will continue to fail at being a people of one heart. It makes no difference if we are Christian or Jew, Muslim or Hindu, Buddhist or Jain. We are still one nation.

John Lennon, the infamous Beatle, once wrote a song professing *All You Need is Love*. Now he may have been an atheist, and he may have been very unconventional, and he may have had the totally wrong conception of the Christian love of which Jesus speaks. But he was right about one thing. All you need is love.