

Scriptures: Acts 2:42-47; Matthew 22:34-40

The Ancient Church

Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, records an important truth about the ancient Church in Jerusalem, which we heard this morning. He wrote, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. All the believers were together and had everything in common,” (Acts 2:42, 44). In a way, we saw a bit of that last Sunday, when we had the fellowship meal and Trunk-or-Treat after worship.

For those of you who attended that, wasn’t that awesome? You all did a great job, of bringing food to share, and of helping with the clean up afterwards. I’d love to see us doing that on a monthly basis. To make it happen, we have to continue to pitch in and do, like we did last Sunday. We’re planning another one, kind-of a combination Thanksgiving and Christmas lunch after worship on the first Sunday of December. I hope you all will bring your favorite dishes to share for that as well!

Even more recently than Sunday, several of you were down at the Alpha Center on Tuesday night, doing the same thing. Breaking bread, praying, and praising God. We celebrated the Sacrament of Holy Communion with them. I don’t know how often they do that – as far as I know, we’ve never celebrated Holy Communion with them down there. Afterwards, Justin, the director of the Alpha Center, told me he loved that we brought the elements in, and wished that more churches would do that with the people there.

We serve the meal and lead a worship service down there three, maybe four times a year. Moving forward into 2024, when we go down there we need to plan to provide the spiritual food – the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation, in addition to the meal we prepare for them. Today we’re going to read a passage from the Gospel according to Matthew, that focuses on the fact that we are created for relationships and for communion – with God. And we’ll finish out our worship time by celebrating Holy Communion. If you have your Bible, or Bible app with you, turn to Matthew 22:34-40.

Read Matthew 22:34-40.

They Got Together

As I looked at this text multiple times this week, I kept being drawn back to verse 34. “Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.” I don’t know if you’ve ever experienced people trying to work against you in your life, but sometimes this happens. There’s an old saying, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” See, the Sadducees and Pharisees were dynamic groups in Judea while Jesus was doing His earthly ministry. They were religious leaders, and political leaders. In

those days, people didn't have the separation of church and state the way we do today. In most cases, the religion was the state – even in Rome, where people were made to worship the Emperors. The Jews were the exception to this rule. Instead, they had Roman governors, who allowed the Jewish politico-religious establishment carry on what they were doing, as long as they kept the people calm.

This is one of the reasons the Gospel record gives for Jesus' crucifixion. They told Pilate, "He stirs up the people all over Judea by His teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here," Luke records (23:5). Pilate's primary job as the Roman governor in Judea was to maintain the *Pax Romana* – the Roman Peace. And so we see, at the beginning of our Gospel lesson today, that the team is huddling, trying to come up with a strategy to defeat Jesus in Round 2, since He's whipped the Sadducees in Round 1.

The huddle breaks, and one of the young, aspiring lawyers of Pharisees decides to enter the ring. "One of them, an expert in the law, tested Him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?'" (Matt. 22:35-36). Some Bible translations, like the NIV actually capitalize the word "Law" there, and later in Jesus' statement in verse 40. It's almost like the religious people were so fixated on the pomp, pageantry, and privilege of religion, that they were worshiping that, instead of God Almighty. "We were created for relationships and we flourish when we are in connection with each other. We were created by and for God, and we desire communion with God."¹

Grace Connects Us to Each Other

This is what Jesus was getting at, when He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments," (verses 37-40). What Jesus does here is combine the ancient Hebrew statement of faith, the Shema, found in Deuteronomy 6:4, with a directive found in Leviticus (19:18). As Christians, our understanding of the Trinity shows us the importance of maintaining communion – community – with God and with others.

It's easy for us to be in communion with a god who sees everything in the same way we see them, and in connection with people who love us and give us no reason to not love them. But friends, that's not how the God we serve works. That's not what the United Methodist Church, or John Wesley, or even the teachings of Jesus were about. God's ways are not our ways. There are lots of people in the wider Church that aren't like us. And even John Wesley, George Whitfield, Phillip Otterbein, and Francis Asbury had their flaws, their differences, and their fall-outs with each other.

¹ Kenneth H. Carter, Jr., *Unrelenting Grace: A United Methodist Way of Life*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2023), page 23.

I read somewhere once, that John Wesley believed in an Open Table. When he was in Georgia, before the colonies declared independence, he was celebrating a Communion service, and Native Americans showed up. They received Communion, even though they didn't believe – they only spoke broken English, and couldn't understand the things being said. They received Holy Communion anyhow. Wesley believed that in the receiving of the Sacrament, the process of conversion began to take place. God was pouring His justifying grace into the Native Americans, simply by them eating the bread and drinking the cup. How many in the crowd that day probably left the service mad that Wesley had let “those people” receive the Sacrament? How often do we do this today?

God's Grace is in the Chaos

We think that by compartmentalizing ourselves away from people unlike us, we'll have peace. That seems to be a common human way of thinking, even for people who aren't Christians. Take, for instance, the wars happening between Russia and Ukraine, and Israel and the Palestinians. I suspect if we could talk to every Russian and Ukrainian, the majority of them would want peace between their two countries. If we sat down every Palestinian and Israeli, I think the majority of both those groups would want peace.

Building walls and high border fences to keep threats out doesn't give any of them lasting peace. God's peace doesn't work that way. His ways are higher than ours. Only Jesus gives us lasting peace. Real peace – the Shalom Peace of God – comes from right relationship with God through Jesus Christ. A right relationship with Him always puts us into a right relationship with each other, and we wait patiently for it. Regarding this, the Apostle Peter wrote, “Since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him. Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation,” (2 Pet. 3:14-15).

The chaos in our world, the Church, and our lives, the slowness of making things right is because of God's patience – His prevenient grace being poured out on those most unlike us – so that in the meantime we can use our freedom in His service. We can use our abundance, in whatever configuration that may be – spiritual, financial, physical, mental – as the provision of God's blessing to a world that doesn't yet know Him. We can allow ourselves to be used in our woundedness as instruments of God's healing. Today, across America, Ohio, and even here in Shelby County, there are people who are hurting – who have been deeply hurt – by the Church over the last few years. The end goal for them, for us, for the world – is reconciliation.

God's Grace Calls Us to Reconciliation

We find that through the Church, pointing us always to Jesus Christ. In his book, Bishop Carter writes:

When you live in a small community, no one ever moves in or moves out. You go to school together, you do business with each other, families blend, things happen. We do harm to each other. Other people we know do harm to us. They do harm to people we love. If you live long enough, it happens, even in the best of families. We begin to construct walls, right down the middle between us... [Yet in worship services] We were being called to make things right with each other. So people would come forward, and they would kneel at the altar, and they would make peace with their Creator and with someone – a neighbor, family member, a business partner – they would make peace, and they would leave it there at the altar.²

Earlier this year, during Lent, we studied a book on Wednesday nights I picked up from the District office way back in 2019, *A Perfect Love: Understanding John Wesley's A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. In hindsight, I wish we would have used that as an adult Wednesday night study much sooner. It really puts the things we like to focus on as ordinary human beings into perspective. As Methodists, and people who follow in the heritage that John Wesley left behind, our salvation has holiness as its end. It's the completion – not the starting point.

Wesley's concept of Christian perfection isn't what we think when we hear the words "Christian" and "perfection" together. It's not that we're instantaneously holy and righteous – we don't instantly become living, breathing perfection like Jesus Christ. No human being ever would be able to be, to the extent of Christ, a living, breathing Perfect being – He alone is perfect, and without flaw. That's why we need Him to take our sins away – we can't do it ourselves. The way Wesley used the words, though, were as synonyms for unconditionally loving others.

Loving Neighbor As Self

To Wesley, "Christian perfection" amounted to people doing what Jesus says to do in our Gospel text today – "to love neighbor as self." It means to strive to be closer to Christ today than we were yesterday – to let the sanctifying grace of God work on our lives on a daily basis. We're to be merciful to others, just as Christ has been and continues to be merciful to us. The sad thing which has happened most recently in the Methodist Church, and in churches all across America is that while we read the same Scriptures, we differ in our interpretations. And when our view of Scripture – our interpretation is challenged, and we start to move toward looking at it through the lens of the challenge – it's perceived as betrayal.

To help us understand the stance of the United Methodist Church, our youth and teens for years – at least the last decade – here at New Hope have participated in Confirmation classes around age 12, using the Credo resources which are now out of print. That curriculum outlines several things which are distinctive to United Methodism. They reinforce that the Scriptures contain all things necessary for salvation. Our

² Ibid., 35.

Confession of Faith adds that the Scripture is received through the Holy Spirit as “the true rule and guide for faith and practice.” Scripture is the primary source for doctrine – but it is understood only in relation to tradition, experience, and reason – which our young people may remember as “the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.”

Using the quadrilateral allows us to confer with those with whom we may not have much in common. It provides a framework for us to work through holy conferencing, to hear and to see them where they are, as they are. That’s hard to do though, when folks refuse to engage in the conversation. God, though, overcomes all this, in His own time. He calls us to be peacemakers. In any relationship, there will be times of disagreement. In those situations, we must be willing to search with the people involved for a “third way,” where we understand a person can have a conviction one way, and another may have a conviction in the opposite way.

A Third Way

We do this, and see this, at election time each year. Some of us vote Democrat, while others of us vote Republican, and sometimes, we even vote mixed ticket. This week on Tuesday, we’ll vote on Issue 1. Some people will vote for it, others will vote against it. I’m not telling you how to vote, how I’m going to vote, or what candidates – if any – to vote on.

Here’s what I will say with regards to voting. This applies to any issue and to any candidate: when you get into the voting booth, before you mark anything, close your eyes, and pray. I say something to the effect of: “Holy Spirit, open my eyes to see as You would have me see, and my mind to know what You would have me know. Guide me, that in this action, I would bring You glory and honor. In Jesus’ name, Amen.” And then, read through the ballot, and vote accordingly. I am 100% certain that in voting in that manner, your vote will honor God, and will be the best vote we could possibly cast. After we vote, we come back to community with each other, whether we’ve cast our vote for Donald Trump, Joe Biden, or someone else. All of the political, tribal stuff pales in comparison to the thing that really matters, which is our relationship with God.

The practice of Holy Communion, the virtue of patience, the call to peacemaking and reconciliation, an awareness of how we read Scripture, and a search for a “third way” beyond simplistic divisions are some of the resources for strengthening our connection as United Methodists and as followers of Jesus.³

Prayer: O God, Hear the cries of all who long to be a part of Your great story. Remove our fears and distorted understandings of each other. And give us a renewed vision of every tribe gathered before Your throne and the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.

³ Ibid., 49.