

“Essentials and Non-Essentials”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
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Romans 14:1-6, 10

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. ² Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³ Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. ⁵ Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶ Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. ... ¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your sibling? Or you, why do you despise your sibling? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

Matthew 23:1-4

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; ³ therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. ...

Andrea an active, younger church member. She paused from arranging clothes for the upcoming rummage sale. “I want to help in the work the church women do,” she said, “but it’s hard. I can’t work with the food during church suppers because I don’t arrange things right. I wash dishes, but then Gertrude follows me around, rearranging whatever I put away ‘wrong.’”

Years before that, I’d been lay leader at a church where war broke out between the woman who had provided flowers for 40 years and the pastor who had moved her arrangement from the center to the side of the altar.

The UMC is grappling with a recent General Conference decision. People in churches are either jubilant or grieving. How are we to respond?

Wherever two or more Christians are gathered, there will be differences of belief or opinion. We have contradictory view in theology and in practice. Tension within Christ’s

church is a reality. But it need not rip us apart. There are some truths we need to stick to, and some that we can let go. The one thing we must continue is to live love.

In Paul's time, there was only one church and they still had disagreements. Diversity guaranteed this. Some early Christians were Jewish. They'd been taught not to associate with Gentiles or to eat certain foods. They were raised to keep the Sabbath holy. Others had grown up with a pantheon of gods. In the Gentile world, if you visited the butcher, chances were the meat there had been sacrificed to idols. Some believed that this god entered the sacrifice and whoever ate it, so they avoided it, but other than that treated all food equally. The same with all days.

And the church asked, should Gentile Christians keep the Sabbath? Should Gentiles stop eating bacon or should Jews lighten up?

Paul's answer is simple – love. Work with people and accept them where they are in their own faith. Don't think you have to convert her to your way when she's obviously trying to serve God. And don't look down on people who have different practices. What matters is that we are living for Christ. Let's not argue. Instead, let all our relationships be governed by Christ-like love.

Paul describes a balancing act. Some things are essential, but most are not. We have candles but not incense. Should we argue with those who speak in tongues? We sprinkle for baptism. Shall we fuss that others dunk?

Obviously not.

Today, we continue our sermon series on “Wesley-isms” – words John Wesley may not have said but which have become tied to our understanding of who we are as UMs. Shall we read today's together?

In Essentials, Unity; In Non-Essentials, Liberty; and In All Things, Charity.

These words were actually written by German theologian Rupertus Meldenius in the early 1600s. He meant that the church should have unity in necessary beliefs, flexibility in others, and a charitable attitude in both.

But, what do we mean by unity. Is it unvaried uniformity without diversity? Everyone behaving and talking in a like manner? Or is it the kind Jesus of unity prayed about before he was arrested? ““I'm praying for them... that they will be one just as we are one. ... Keep them safe. ... I pray they will be one, O God, just as you are in me and I am in you. ... Then the world will know... that you have loved them just as you loved me.” (John 17)

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, argued throughout his life against separation from

the Church of England. The Methodism movement was about renewal of the Church of England, not separation. Yet his message was complex, for he argued for a separation if it was demanded by conscience. And, after the Revolution, when Anglican priests had fled and churches closed, it was he who established a U.S. denomination that eventually would become the UMC. Although Wesley remained an Anglican and believed that only a bishop had the authority to ordain or consecrate, he consecrated Thomas Coke as superintendent and sent him to America to lead a new church.

No doubt this was hard for him, but JW had a “practical theology.” And he had a method for helping him to make tough decisions.

You may have heard of the Wesley Quadrilateral. As a reminder, a quadrilateral is an enclosed shape with four sides. In Wesley’s quadrilateral, each side suggests one of four tools for guiding our lives and helping with decision-making.

According to JW, the living core of Christian faith is revealed in Scripture; illumined by Tradition; vivified in Experience; and confirmed by Reason. Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason.

When we are grappling with a problem, we might ask ourselves. “What does scripture say about it?” But when scripture seems quiet, tradition, experience and reason can give a framework to help us to find answers.

Tradition refers to the 2000 years of history between Jesus’ time and now. It asks, “How has the church responded to similar questions?” We might also ask, “What does collective experience – of times past as well as present – have to offer us? What collective wisdom could help?” Lastly, “How do I synthesize this information from scripture, tradition, and experience?” Reason, rather than being about information, is a tool to interpret information.

One aspect of Wesley’s Quadrilateral that I haven’t mentioned is that he considered scripture to be first among equals. For some people, it is first and only. Others consider reason first. Or, personal experience. There are many interpretations. Are they necessarily wrong?

In essentials, unity. The question is, what is essential?

As UMs, we have prided ourselves on our diversity. We might say we are part of a large umbrella, or tent. We discern what truly matters, like “Love God” and “love your neighbor,” and beyond that we live and let live.

Or we have. Now some aren’t so sure. The world is polarized on so many issues. The church has become polarized as well. I planned this sermon series before last month’s Judicial Council ruling. Now, all I have is questions.

In personal as well as group relationships, we experience conflict. When we can accept differences, when we practice love, we can usually come out the other side of whatever divides us.

Are gender identity and sexuality essentials? They are for those who take a literal view of the bible. They're essential also for those who do not fit traditional norms and for their allies. In a generation, the question that would tear our denomination apart will have ceased to matter. Among those 30 and under, and for many even into their 90s, it doesn't matter now. People are people. God loves them all. We are not called to judge or to condemn, we are called to love – through all our words and all our actions. Period.

Some will say, “All that matters is that we know the Lord.” Is this true?

Part of what I love about the UMC is the Wesleyan belief that there is no religion but social religion. No holiness but social holiness. We cannot know God, our faith is just so much noise, if we don't accept and love all our earthly siblings just as God calls us to do.

I regularly say that I'm more interested in leaving people with questions than giving answers. Questions leave us thinking. Answers leave us comfortable. If we are to grow in faith, we cannot stay comfortable.

Though I hesitate to do so, today, I end with questions.

Do we live and let live? Do we just ignore things that are wrong? Like another church's refusal to recognize women as leaders? Or our own denomination's condemning a whole population of God's people?

How do we respond to Christians whose attitudes are so different from ours? Is it right to ignore this when we know that it is causing irreparable harm to others?

We each need to ponder these questions for ourselves. For my part, I cry, “Of course not!” With hearts breaking, with fear and trembling, we must act in love as we seek to find our own way forward – for ourselves, for First Church, for our denomination, and for our world.

May God guide us. Amen.