

THE WAY FORWARD FOR OUR CHURCH
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, March 3, 2019
based on Acts 10:44–48; 15:1–11

Today's sermon is the conclusion of a sermon series entitled, "The Way Forward: What God Says to the Church on Human Sexuality." This past Tuesday in St. Louis, our United Methodist Church completed a special session of General Conference focused entirely on the question of our church's stance on human sexuality. Our Bishop, Tracy Malone, remarked to me prior to the General Conference that she was praying for a fresh movement of the Holy Spirit to be at work among the more than 800 delegates, twelve of whom were from our East Ohio Conference. But the Holy Spirit can be blowing as strong as the wind was blowing this past week, and it is still possible to shut the window.

Our bishops were promoting a plan designed to uphold the unity of our church. Called the One Church Plan, it would have removed all of the language in our Discipline, our church rule book, that pertains to same-sex relationships, and allowed local churches and Conferences to make their own decisions about gay marriage or ordination. It was a grace-filled plan that allowed different regions and different churches to be in different places. Our African churches, who are traditionally conservative on this issue, and many of our southern churches and other traditionalist churches could have stayed where they are, while our progressive churches in America and Europe could freely be fully open and affirming. That plan was defeated.

Instead, the General Conference approved the so-called Traditional Plan, which keeps all the current language in the Discipline, and creates enforcement and punishments for pastors or churches or bishops who flout those rules. It also provides an exit path for those who do not like the rules. That plan was approved by a vote of 53% to 47%, which was even narrower than how the General Conference has voted on the issue in years past. The plan essentially says: If you do not agree with the narrow majority of General Conference delegates, there is the door. This General Conference action has elicited more disappointment and more outrage than any General Conference decision during my history in the ministry, which is a long time.

The last Methodist schism was in 1844, over the issue of slavery. Methodists finally got back together in 1939. Another major schism is now possible, and that has been a common theme in the media; but since two-thirds of United Methodists nationwide want their church to be open and inclusive, a fact reflected in the vote of two-thirds of the U.S. delegates in favor of the One Church Plan—the General Conference vote was tilted by our traditionally conservative African churches, who constituted 30% of the vote—there is much more to come in terms of the steps that churches will choose to take. Suffice it to say we are in interesting times.

All this means that every local church has some decisions to make about how we will position ourselves with regard to the General Conference action. Some churches will agree with the action and just flow with it. Others will choose to self-differentiate—to declare that we are a fully welcoming church, in spite of how General Conference voted. So hang to your seat, because our ride in this journey has much further to go.

To find out more about the specifics of all this, I invite you to come to a seminar that I will be presenting on two different occasions in the coming weeks. The seminar will be entitled, “What Happened at General Conference and What Comes Next.” The first seminar will be next Sunday, March 10, which is Youth Sunday in our church, when our senior high and middle school youth present the entire worship service. Youth Sunday is always a very dynamic and uplifting service utilizing drama, visuals, special music, and messages from two of our high school seniors. Because of the nature of the service, there are two worship hours next Sunday, at 8:30 and 10:30, both in the sanctuary. During the 9:30 hour next Sunday, I will be offering the seminar, for the first time, in the gymnasium. Keep in mind it is also clock-ahead Sunday.

The other opportunity to come to the seminar will be on the following Wednesday. As noted in our announcements today, this Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, and we have a Service of Ashes in the sanctuary at 7:30. The following Wednesday, March 13, will be the beginning of our Wednesday Lenten series, when we have a program each evening from 7:00 to 8:00 in the gymnasium, preceded by the Lenten potluck in Pierson Hall. On Wednesday, March 13, for the first Lenten program, I will offer a repeat of the seminar that I will be presenting on Sunday, March 10, plus some additional items. So you are invited to come on either or both days.

Today we are looking at a time when the early church faced a question very similar to the question that has been facing the United Methodist Church. In the passage we heard from the book of Acts, early church leaders responded by coming together in a council in Jerusalem in order to seek God’s direction together and chart the future course of the church. I noted in the first installment of this series that that Jerusalem Council is the Biblical model for the council we call the General Conference, although the way the Jerusalem Council finally made its decision was in sharp contrast to what our General Conference just did. {prayer}

The United Methodist Church has long been divided on the question of how the church should relate to LGBT people. While everyone has agreed that Christians should extend love and compassion to everyone, the traditionalist view has been that LGBT people can be fully accepted as members and leaders of the church only if they do not practice their sexuality. On the other hand, many United Methodists have been arguing that the church should fully accept LGBT people as they are, their sexuality included, which would mean that the church would celebrate weddings for everyone and ordain anyone with the gifts for ministry.

I can understand the different perspectives, and I know that people on both sides of the issue are seeking to follow the Bible and be faithful to God. I know that personally because I have been on both sides of the issue myself. If you listen very long to the preaching from this pulpit, you know that I am a pastor who takes God's Word seriously. I believe that the Bible is, as II Timothy says, "inspired by God, and suitable for teaching, for correction, and for training in righteousness." [II Timothy 3:16] Early in my ministry, I had not yet done any in-depth study of the passages we have considered during this sermon series; so I did not know most of what I have presented over these past weeks. But as I read what little in the Bible that there is about same-sex relations, in light of the culture in which I grew up, it seemed to me that the Bible was decidedly negative on the practice of homosexuality. So in my earlier years in ministry I agreed with the United Methodist Church stance—a stance that the church has had since 1972—when it said that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.

Then God changed my mind, and it happened during Disciple Bible Study. I had led Disciple for years, going back into when I was the pastor of my former church in Howland. But, you know, every time you read the Bible, God can speak to you in fresh ways. We were in the book of Acts, and our readings included what we heard in the Scripture reading this morning.

The issue facing the early church was the question of how the church should relate to Gentiles—that is, non-Jews—who were coming to faith in Jesus. Keep in mind that in the earliest years of the church, everybody in the church was Jewish. Christianity was a movement within Judaism, as people of Jewish faith accepted Jesus as the Messiah, the One who was the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures.

But as the gospel spread, Gentiles began responding to the gospel message. Gentiles were not keeping the Jewish Law—all the Jewish rules about circumcision and the Sabbath and what you can eat and so forth. Gentiles were traditionally seen by Jews as unacceptable to God, unless they converted to Judaism. So a basic question for the early church was: Do Gentiles need to become Jewish—do they need to adopt the whole Jewish Law—in order to become part of the church?

Most church leaders in response to that question said, "Absolutely yes! In order to follow God and God's Messiah, you have to follow God's Law as laid down in the Scriptures." The Scriptures for the early church were the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and nothing in those Scriptures seemed to indicate that the Law might not be permanent. Moreover, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount said, "I came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. Therefore whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:17,19). Based on a straightforward reading of Scripture, and words of Jesus, it seemed quite obvious to church leaders that faithfulness to God required following the Jewish

commandments. Their conclusion was that Gentiles needed to conform to Judaism in order to follow Jesus.

But a few leaders in the church began to proclaim that the way God was working through Jesus was much bigger than the Old Testament law—that ever since Abraham God had promised that through a descendant of Abraham the whole world would be saved, that the Law was intended as a temporary guide for the Jewish people until the coming of the Messiah, that Jesus had in fact not abolished the Law but had fulfilled its demands by offering his life for us on the cross, and that all people now can find salvation not by means of the Old Testament law but through faith in Jesus Christ. The apostle Peter had gotten a vision from God along this line; and the apostle Paul was especially proclaiming the message that Gentiles do not need to become Jewish in order to accept and follow Jesus as Savior.

So there were two different sides in the church, who could not agree on the conditions for membership in the church. It was very similar to the situation in the church today, as United Methodists are disagreeing about the conditions under which LGBT people can be welcomed into the church. At the Jerusalem Council, as well as in our United Methodist church today, people on both sides looked to the Scriptures, but people had very different understandings of how to interpret the Scriptures. Some took a traditionalist stance, tending to read the Scriptures literally, while others were arguing that the Scriptures needed to be understood more broadly, with the total context and shape of God's mission in mind. How could there be an agreement in those circumstances?

It is highly significant what the Jerusalem Council did. Church leaders did not take a vote, in which everybody simply voted what they were already thinking, to see which side would win. Instead, they looked at the working the Holy Spirit, to see what God was doing.

We heard about this in our Scripture passage this morning. Peter said to the assembly, "God, who knows the heart, bore witness to the Gentiles, giving them the Holy Spirit just as God did to us." (Acts 15:8) There are earlier stories in the book of Acts that provide examples of this, how the Holy Spirit was moving Gentiles to faith and was bestowing upon them the gifts of the Spirit. On one such occasion (which we heard in the first Scripture reading) Peter had said, "Can anyone forbid baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47) The council concluded that the working of the Holy Spirit was clearly evident in the Gentiles—they were coming to faith and they were evidencing the gifts of the Spirit—and if God was filling them with the Holy Spirit, it was obvious that God was accepting them as they were. Therefore the church needed to do the same.

One year, while reading through all this in Disciple Bible Study, it struck me that this story parallels exactly what is happening in the church in the present time on the issue of human sexuality. In the early church, traditionalists had argued that Gentiles could come into the church only if they became Jewish, adopting Jewish practice, and it seems

to many traditionalists today that LGBT people can come into the church only if they “become straight,” as it were—if they deny and repress their own sexuality. But the deciding question for the New Testament church became this: Is the Holy Spirit already working in them, as they are? I knew a number of LGBT Christians at the time who had a deep faith, who evidenced the working of the Holy Spirit just as powerfully as anyone else, and who showed for a love for others and a commitment to God just as fully as anyone else in the church. Obviously, God was working in them; God was accepting them as they are and calling them to discipleship. How could the church not do the same? The words of Peter echo today—Can anyone forbid welcoming people who have received the Holy Spirit just as the rest of us have?

This realization propelled me to follow another Scriptural admonition which has been a theme verse for this sermon series: “Study to show yourself approved unto God, that you may rightly explain the word of truth.” (II Timothy 2:15) I began to study in depth those Biblical passages which people have often understood to exclude LGBT people from the church. You have been hearing in this sermon series what that sort of Biblical study reveals—that these passages have a message quite different from what many people (including myself) have often imagined them to say.

In the end, the early church was inspired by the Holy Spirit to fully welcome Gentiles without expecting them to turn into Jews. This is why you and I do not have kosher kitchens. Surely the Holy Spirit today would likewise move the church to fully welcome LGBT people as they are.

This past week, one traditionalist delegate to General Conference was quoted as saying, “We love LGBTQ people, and welcome them into the church!” A wonderful sentiment. At the same time, he had just voted to strengthen the statement, along with the accompanying rules, that “the church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers the practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” So that is like saying, “We love Spanish-speaking people and welcome them into our church, as long as they do not speak Spanish.” The Holy Spirit moved the early church to something quite different from that—to be a church where people of all sorts, Jews and Gentiles, would come in all their diversity to be the body of Christ.

The General Conference in its very divisive action may have slammed the window on the Holy Spirit, but we can choose to throw it open. Our bishops had hoped to find a way forward; the General Conference took a step back—but God is at work in all this, and God’s Spirit is yet moving today. We can let the Holy Spirit fill us with grace and an acceptance of one another, and we let the Spirit empower us to become the church we are meant to be—the body of Christ that shows God’s grace to all.