

PEOPLE HELPING PEOPLE

Rev Luke Ham

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I believe it is important to address the fact that the United Methodist Church was in the headlines this week and that you may have friends or family who knowing that you attend a Methodist Church ask you questions about these events. So I just want to make sure you are up-to-date as much as possible in regards to what is happening in the life of our larger church

As many of you may or may not know, our Judicial Council...basically our versions of the Supreme Court met to decide whether it is legal for the church to have an openly LGBT bishop in leadership. This issue arose when the Western Jurisdiction elected Rev. Karen Oliveto who was serving at Glide Memorial UMC in San Francisco to become our newest Bishop.

Deliberations happened throughout the week and a ruling was released on Friday. The spokesperson for the Western Jurisdiction, Bishop Elaine Stanovsky released a statement explaining the outcome and in attempt for us so we can understand what has and hasn't happened.

Hear now these words from Bishop Stan-OV-sky...

"The Judicial Council ruled Friday on challenges to the election of an out gay bishop in The United Methodist Church. The ruling is long and complicated, reinforcing the reality that the church is not of one mind about inclusion of [all] people.

Karen Oliveto, is still a bishop of The United Methodist Church, assigned to the Mountain Sky Area, with all the rights, privileges, responsibilities and protections that every clergy person enjoys.

On the other hand, the Judicial Council expanded the definition of "self-avowed practicing homosexual," making it clear that the church is still not open to full

LGBT inclusion... (and that Bishop Oliveto is in violation of church law and can face a trial to remove her from that position).

...The Western Jurisdiction is already in the process of responding complaints that were filed after her election. This process will continue according to the provisions of our Book of Discipline.

We will have more to say about this ruling as the Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops gathers this week during the Council of Bishops meeting. We will be in prayer, conversation, and consultation with leaders of the Western Jurisdiction and the Council of Bishops.”

I understand that this may be a lot to process....

And we will be getting more details about what exactly this all means and what will be happening next in the coming weeks....

But Ron and I want to affirm as the Pastors of this congregation that no matter what the outcome of all of this...

We adamantly stand on the side of welcoming all people into the life of this congregation and affirm God's love of all people and families of every shape, color and make-up.

We want to say that we both know Bishop Karen personally, in fact she was a seminary professor of mine...and we affirm that she has the gifts and graces to continue to carry out her work in the church.

And I believe that Pastor Steve Garnas-Holmes who I know many in our congregation follow through his blog and devotionals...and who I understand will be leading the next SRVUMC women's retreat said it best in a Facebook status that he posted on Friday evening.

He wrote: *“There are two religions in the world; the religion of being right and the religion of being in love. They are mutually exclusive. Every moment of your life you must choose. Whichever you practice, you will by necessity deny the other. Jesus said “you cannot serve two masters.” You know which one Jesus choose, right? You notice how many rules he broke to love people...)* so...practice your religion,

whichever it is, without apology. Either love everybody and make no bones about breaking rules to do it, or follow all the rules and don't lie about being loving or Christ-like." Well said, Pastor Steve...

We continue this morning in our 3 week series on the social principles of the United Methodist Church.

To remind you, These Social Principles are not binding law...you are not kicked out of the church if you have a different view....

These are simply the church's best attempt to articulate what we collectively see as living out Christ's teaching in the world.

This series isn't meant to be about Pastor Ron or I telling you what we as United Methodists you HAVE to believe....these are guidelines.

It is meant to begin a conversation. To give us a starting point to dive deeper into God's word....deeper into prayer....deeper in relationship with one another as we all discern how we take our faith with us when we leave the walls of the church.

Finally, please remember that I did not write the Social Principles of the UMC...so if there is something that is stated in one of them that you really dislike or don't agree with and want to talk about with me, that's great...but at the same time try to remember the old adage...don't kill the messenger.

It is appropriate that one of the sections of our Social Principles I am preaching on this morning is entitled our Social Community and opens in this way:

We affirm all persons as equally valuable in the sight of God. We therefore work toward societies in which each person's value is recognized, maintained, and strengthened. We support the basic rights of all persons to equal access to housing, education, communication, employment, medical care, legal redress for grievances, and physical protection.

We deplore acts of hate or violence against groups or persons based on race, color, national origin, ethnicity, age, gender, disability, status, economic condition, sexual orientation, gender identity, or religious affiliation.

As we see in our scripture passages this morning...one from the Jewish Torah...the beginning of our sacred text....the bedrock for the Jewish faith....as well as from the Book of Acts....the story of the Early Christian church....how we as a church fundamentally started.... The idea of not only including....but sharing with and taking care of one another is one of the most clear and consistent messages the Bible offers us.

Instead of adding my own words this morning...I was tempted to just read every Bible verse that clearly states our job as God's beloved to take care of other people.....but of course that would keep us here all morning long...

Because the Bible has so much to say about this.

“When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow...”

One of my favorite modern Christian writers is Rob Bell.

And it reflecting on this verse from Deuteronomy he writes:

“It isn't fair.

It's my vineyard....it's my field.

Why should I let these people come onto my property and take what I've worked so hard to produce? That's not fair..... (Pause)

Exactly.

Because being rescued from slavery in Egypt wasn't fair.

Liberation isn't fair. Redemption isn't fair. Grace isn't fair.

God isn't fair."

Wow.....think about that statement for a moment..... Grace isn't fair....

God isn't fair....

My son Caleb turned 2 on Friday...and one thing I know that will begin to happen in the next year or two is that I will be consistently hearing the statement "that isn't fair" from him.

And I am learning that many times, being a good and loving parent doesn't always mean being fair.....sometimes you need to hold things back...sometimes you need to extend forgiveness and grace....

We don't do this because we are exerting our power....we do this to teach our children about life.....we do this because we love our children.

When I read our Social Principles.... Especially those addressing our Society and our Economic System....I do not see them simply rules or regulations or guidelines...I see them as instructions on how to love other people....A guidebook for People Helping People

And while there are far too many topics to cover in this section of the Social Principles, I just wanted to highlight a few of the principles in the Social and Economic sections and show how they are really written in a spirit of love towards the other...

So let's start out with one of our principles entitled: Rights of the Aging.

This principle states:

In a society that places primary emphasis upon youth, those growing old in years are frequently isolated from the mainstream of social existence. We support social policies that integrate the aging into the life of the total community, including sufficient incomes, increased and nondiscriminatory employment opportunities, educational and service

opportunities, and adequate medical care and housing within existing communities.

We urge social policies and programs, with emphasis on the unique concerns of older women and ethnic persons that ensure to the aging the respect and dignity that is their right as senior members of the human community.

I have to admit that I choose this as one of the principles to highlight this morning because it is one that I have struggled with in the past.

Many times throughout my ministry I have gotten so passionate about our young adults, youth and children that I have neglected to connect with those “more experienced” members of the congregation.

And I have to say that this past year...of transitioning from a Youth focused ministry to an Adult focused ministry has been an incredible experience.

The wisdom....the guidance....the stories of faith and life that the older adults of our community can offer us are extraordinary.

On Thursday evening, by the invitation of Quentin Alexander and Skip George I got to offer the invocation at a ceremony honoring all of the Boy Scouts in our area who achieved the rank of Eagle Scout in the last year.

And one of the things they did at that event which was so cool to see was to pair each Eagle with a sponsor who was older and who served in a similar career field to that of which the Eagle was interested in so they could socialize, learn and network with one another.

In a congregation like ours, we have interesting problem that comes from our strong Youth program....and that is that it is so self-sufficient that we often time forget to integrate the generations of our church together.

And that is what, more than anything I think this Principle reminds us to do.... In order to be a strong, loving, inclusive church we need to make sure that we don't stay surrounded by people who are in our own age category.

Just as there is a principle on those who are older....there are also principles on Youth and Children and at the core of them all is inclusion and integration.

So, I encourage us all to engage with...take a few minutes to say hello to someone of a different generation than yourself....we might be surprised to find out how much we have to learn from one another....

To not steer away from the potentially controversial let's look at another topic in this section of the Social Principles: Health Care.

The Principles State:

Health is a condition of physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being. John 10:10b says, "I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest." Stewardship of health is the responsibility of each person to whom health has been entrusted.

Creating the personal, environmental, and social conditions in which health can thrive is a joint responsibility—public and private. We encourage individuals to pursue a healthy lifestyle and affirm the importance of preventive health care, health education, environmental and occupational safety, good nutrition, and secure housing in achieving health. Health care is a basic human right.

I had an old professor who once said.... "Whoever thinks the church should stay out of the healthcare discussion obviously forgot about that guy 2,000 years ago who went around healing people for free..."

Indeed...the work of medical healing is a HUGE part of the Christian story both in the work of Jesus and his disciples.

Also, it is important to note what this social principle does not say...it doesn't say "We believe the government is responsible for all health care..."

It says that it is a joint responsibility both public and private...

Maybe you believe that the government should offer healthcare to everyone.....

Maybe you believe it is the church's responsibility to do that as it did for much of our country's history.... It is no coincidence there are so many hospitals named after Saints....this has been the work of the church since the beginning.

This has been one of the tangible ways we show God's love and grace to others.

So no matter how it is accomplished...publicly through the government or privately through charity...one thing that the scripture and our church tradition tells us is that health care is a basic right for all people regardless of their income level....that is the place where we should be starting the conversation...

How we ultimately get it done is obviously a topic for another day and setting.

Moving to the Economic Section of our Social Principles, let me share what it states about Foreign Workers...

For centuries people have moved across borders in search of work. In our global world this is still a relevant and increasing form of immigration. Improved wages, better working conditions, and jobs available are reasons for immigration due to work opportunities.

Workers from other countries are in many societies an important resource to fill the society's need of workers. But foreign workers too

often meet exploitation, absence of protecting laws, and unreasonable wages and working conditions.

We call upon governments and all employers to ensure for foreign workers the same economic, educational, and social benefits enjoyed by other citizens.

Foreign workers also need a religious fellowship, and we call for the churches to include these in their care and fellowships and to support them in their efforts for better conditions.

I had the opportunity this week to go up to Chico for a couple of days for a retreat on non-violence and spirituality.

This retreat was led by Arun Gandhi....grandson of famous leader Mahatma Gandhi...

And he told us a story from his childhood....when for two years his parents sent him to live and learn from his grandfather.

To drive home the message about the different forms violence takes, the elder Gandhi instructed his grandson to draw a “family tree” of violence, with the branches being physical violence and passive violence.

Arun would chart events that happened every day—showing disrespect, being wasteful, engaging in arguments—and see in what way his actions might have hurt someone. The “tree,” posted in his bedroom, proved to be a very visual learning tool: “It filled up the whole wall,” he said.

His grandfather believed that such introspection on a personal level would help reduce violence on a larger level.

The interesting thing that Arun noticed in doing this was how much more the tree was filled with passive violence rather than physical violence.

Passive Violence being things like throwing away extra food when he knew there were fellow students who were going hungry.

Passive violence like taking more than his fair share of something.

Passive violence such as saying unfair and untrue things about others who were different than he was.

Passive violence such as treating the waiter, waitress or barista poorly and ignoring them as a human being.

And that Passive form of violence is what I think this social principle is really about....

Because whether we like it or not, we need to be careful about what we buy....whether it is clothing brands that are made in sweat shops....or jewelry that funds war lords or dictators...Or food that is farmed and harvested using laborers who aren't fairly compensated.

We need to be thoughtful and hold the companies and governments we support to be accountable to take care of all workers....remembering that our Creation narrative in Genesis says that each and every person...whether a Medical Doctor or a Vineyard worker....Whether a CEO or a Sewer....whether an Engineer or a factory worker all people are made in the image of God...

As Jesus reminds us.... "What you do for the least of these, you do for me."

These are just 3 of the dozens of individual principles we find in the 2 sections we are discussing today...Others include everything from Sustainable Agriculture to Medical Experimentation and Organ Translation and donation. There are views expressed on Alcohol, Gambling, Tobacco, Public Debt, disability rights, mental health...you name....and all are an attempt to give us a starting point of being sensitive for the needs of others.

I have shared with you before that in youth group and youth Sunday school here at SRVUMC we always end our lessons the same way....by sharing the bottom line...a simple statement with a simple sentence or two that encompasses all we are looked at so when parents ask their child what they learned or talked about today they are ready to go with the answer.

So here is the bottom line: We as a church articulate these social principles so that we may, to the best of our ability care, respect and uplift all of God's people...not matter who they are, where they come from, or where they are going.

I will be the first to admit that these principles aren't always laid out perfectly...but they are a starting point for us to work together in partnership with God's Holy Spirit to bring about Justice, Equality and Love in our world.

May the conversation not stop....May we continue to strive to help one another anchored in God's unfair Grace and Love.

Amen.