

Words Matter
Deuteronomy 30:15-20 and Matthew 5:21-37
Wauwatosa United Methodist Church
February 12, 2017

The Old Testament Lesson today contained the words, “I send before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life.” Well, those are just words – or are they? Words matter for us. “Choose life’ indicates that do indeed have some choices regarding how we do things. Oftentimes, there is an enemy in our lives – that person who annoys or irritates us. We need to have that person because it makes us feel better about ourselves somehow. That person may change throughout our lives; I’ve had lots of them. But we don’t just do this individually. We do it corporately, too.

I want to talk a little bit about the history of the United Methodist church and those we have corporately chosen to be “the other.” As soon as I mention history, there are some eyes that glaze over, but I think this is pretty interesting. We are going to go back to the early 1800s. Up to this time in the US, blacks and whites have worshiped together. By the early 1800s, black people were relegated to sitting up in the balcony. Richard Allen was a qualified preacher who had actually preached from the pulpit of St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore. He was also black. He and a friend arrived a few minutes late for a worship service one Sunday. The preacher started to pray before they could go up to the balcony, so they dropped to their knees in the center aisle for the prayer. The ushers came and threw them out of the church. Richard Allen went on to found the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1844 the Methodist Episcopal Church South split from the Methodist Episcopal Church over the issue of slavery. We could not be together in the same church. They did not reunite until 1939. This did not end the racism in the Methodist Church, however. After the split, we no longer had that “problem,” so we needed a new one.

Later in the 19th century, we, as a church, turned our focus toward the leadership of women in the church. Leadership in the church was handled by men only. In 1888, five lay women, including Frances Willard, were elected as delegates to General Conference. When they arrived, they were turned away and told that women could not be seated within the bar of the conference. It was not until 1922 that women were finally seated as lay delegates to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. We started ordaining women with full clergy rights in 1956, but few were appointed as pastors in the early days.

I want to tell you the story of one of my favorite little United Methodist Churches in Chicago. This church started out in 1894 as part of the Evangelical Association, which later became the Evangelical United Brethren denomination. They marched for women's suffrage in the early 20th century and marched with Dr. King in the 1960s. In the 1970s, after the EUB and Methodist Churches merged, they noticed that women were appointed as Christian educators, but not as pastors in the Northern Illinois Conference. They went to the bishop and told him they wanted a female clergy person. The bishop refused. When they said to him, "Apparently, you didn't hear us. We demand a woman pastor," he threatened to padlock the doors of the church. Eventually, they came to an agreement to accept a male pastor for one year. This male pastor also agreed they should have a woman pastor. The next year the bishop relented. The response of the congregation was, "Too little, too late. We want five women to be appointed as pastors in the conference." The bishop gave in to their demand and now Northern Illinois probably has more female clergy than any other conference. In the 1990s, the church membership dwindled to about eight people. They received a new pastor, Bonnie Beckonchrist, who was charged with either growing the church or closing it. She looked at their Lincoln Park location on Diversey Parkway and the Brown Line, realizing it was the area known as "Boys Town," an area with a large gay and lesbian population. She decided it was important to minister to the neighborhood and they became one of the early reconciling congregations. When they happened she immediately grew the church from eight to six. Yes, one couple left over that decision. As time went on, the church began to grow. It is now a church of about 180 members with many people attending who are not members. It is vibrant, alive, and filled with mostly young adults (you know, the people we wish we had in church, but don't) who are gay, straight, single, married, many with young children.

Now, I want to tell you a story about First United Methodist Church in Kenosha, the last church I served. When I was there, a couple invited me out to dinner and, at that dinner, told me their high-school-age son had just come out to them. They realized that the United Methodist Church has not always been very welcoming to the LGBTQ community. They became part of a new committee called the Reconciling Committee that was looking into the possibility of joining the Reconciling Ministries Network. They wanted their church to be welcoming to all people, including their gay son. About two months before I left, we had the vote and 96% of the congregation voted in favor of becoming a Reconciling Congregation.

In the midst of this work, it became clear that there was a part of the history of the church that still had not been reconciled with the present reality. In the United Methodist Church we are appointed by the bishop. The local church does not hire the pastor and does not have the right to fire. That means, basically, you are stuck with me! In 1982,

there was a popular young associate pastor who was just living into the reality that he was gay. An SPRC member broke a confidence and leaked a private conversation which resulted in the church “firing” this young man. It was devastating for him and tore the church apart. As we were going through the process of education and discernment about becoming a Reconciling Congregation, I called Kevin who is now a UCC pastor in California. In our conversation, I told him that, if he was willing, I would like for him to come back to preach at First Church and to be a part of a healing process that was needed by all involved. It didn’t happen until last Sunday, but he came back and there was a time of official reconciliation during the worship service, and a reading of a document now called The Kenosha Declaration. You may have seen this on the Channel 4 New. There was opportunity for dialogue, fellowship, and healing. It seems that this is the first time a congregation has said “I’m sorry” to a pastor they have driven out due to sexual orientation.

“If you have a difference with your brother or your sister, leave your gift at the altar and go and be reconciled.”

The big news now seems to be about the transgender community. I know that a lot of people really don’t get that. We’ve grown up with forms that have two boxes to check, “male” or “female.” The New York Human Rights Commission recognizes 31 different forms of gender expression. A few weeks ago, we had a transgender person worshipping with us. I’m not sure anyone realized this person was transgender and you were welcoming as you always are. I suspect you also would have been if you had known. This is the latest group of people we separate as “other.”

Sadly, just like in the 19th century when we separated over slavery issues, it looks like the United Methodist Church may separate at our next General Conference over these issues around homosexuality. For young people, this is a total non-issue. In fact, they view the church as homophobic and it is one of the reasons they do not come. The world changes all the time.

We reflect on our political setting right now and how tense things are. There are people who cannot speak to one another – even members of the same family. “If you have a difference with your brother or your sister, leave your gift at the altar and go and be reconciled.”

Sometimes that is hard for us. At times, we need to use the THINK method, and I don’t mean the one from *Music Man*. Is what we have to say TRUE? Is it HELPFUL? Is it INSPIRATIONAL? Is it NECESSARY? Is it KIND? We often can’t hit all of those. I

certainly am not 'inspirational' too often. On the other hand, sometime we tell the truth – the cold, hard truth – when it is not necessary or kind. We wield the truth like a knife.

How are we going to move forward in our own every day, individual lives? How are we going to move forward as a church? Can Tosa Avenue UMC be a light? Can we do this differently than our denomination does it? Can we do it differently than some of the churches in our own city do it? Can we, rather than being judge and jury, reconcile with those we see as 'different'?

All of us are God's children. All of us are loved by God. Can we love one another? Can we choose life and blessing rather than death and curse? It's a challenge every time I hear someone who disagrees with me. How do we usually handle disagreement? We start talking, trying to talk louder than the other person with the notion that we will somehow change their mind. We need to think. Is what we say true, helpful, inspirational, necessary, and kind? That doesn't mean that we bury things. It means we learn how to listen as well as talk.

One more time I say, "I send before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life." "If you have a difference with your brother or your sister, leave your gift at the altar and go and be reconciled." Amen.