**When Faith Meets Life: The Nurturing Community**

**Ephesians 4:25-32**

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 Do you know why the artist was thrown into jail? He had a brush with the law.

 Do you know what Salvador Dali had for breakfast? Surreal.

 There just aren’t that many good jokes about artists. So why even try? I ran across a piece that Glenn Wagner did on the Nurturing Community. Glenn is a retired United Methodist clergy in the West Michigan Annual Conference, (and, not to throw Glenn under the bus, but those were his jokes). The Nurturing Community is the second of the social principles of the United Methodist Church. We are in the midst of looking at our social principles. There are six categories of Social Principles. They are: The Natural World, The Nurturing Community, The Social Community, The Economic Community, The Political Community, and The World Community, although we are not taking them in order.

 The social principles are a living document in the United Methodist Church and meant to be instructive and persuasive in the best prophetic spirit. It is meant to help us bring faith to life and to help us have faithful dialogue in context of real life issues.

 It is interesting, because in the booklet you can buy through Cokesbury to study the social principles, the introduction says this:

*Many people, even life-long United Methodists, become defensive when a new idea seems in conflict with a principle they hold. Other United Methodists are overjoyed that what their conscience and experience has taught are in accord with the social principles. As you read the Social Principles, you may find yourself nodding in agreement with some and responding negatively to others, or you might be surprised to find an issue that you had not thought that much about and are now more open to explore.*

 So here is what Glenn Wagner said: The Social Principles are like an artist’s painting. He lifted up his favorite artist Claude Monet who lived in the late 1800’s and the beginning of the 1900’s and started a revolution in art called impressionism. Up until Monet’s time, artists prided themselves on the realistic character of their art. They painted as if they were capturing a photograph, trying through shape and color to correlate the painting with life the way we could see it through our eyes. Monet did it differently. He just wanted to create an ideal impression of what he saw through his artist’s eyes with color and form. You might recall his famous paintings of his water lily pond. He often did paintings of the same thing at different times of the day or in different seasons to capture how the impression changed with lighting and color.

 Wagner said that Monet may be the first to tell you that these paintings of his lily pond are just a picture. It is an idealized picture. You don’t see any mosquitoes in the paintings. You don’t see any Ash Bore beetles making their way through the trees. You don’t see the work that it took to care for his garden and the pond. You just see a snapshot in time, a particular moment.

 I like the way Glenn Wagner uses this imagery prefacing the reading of the Social Principles, and particularly this principle on the Nurturing Community, which we are covering today. This document, he says, describes what life in an ideal world might look like. He also says that this social principle on the nurturing community, which covers nine pages in the Book of Discipline, may be the most controversial. I may differ with him on that after last week’s sermon on the political community.

 But in this idealized world, nobody gets divorced. In this idealized world, marriage is “until death do you part.” When it comes to human sexuality, in an idealized world our sexuality in our Christian faith is only seen in the context of marriage. In this idealized world every child is loved and marriage is only between a man and a woman. In this idealized world can you see where some might have issues? Because if you are divorced and remarried, in this idealized picture you wonder, “Where do I fit?" If you grow up in a single parent family, if you have members in your family say, “Hey, I am gay,” this idealized picture creates all kinds of issues.

 But if we can see it as a piece of art that can encourage us and inspire us to move and to love each other as God loves us? What if we see it as a piece of art and try to honor God with our life and our community? Then we can openly dialogue and debate with some of the specifics, knowing that it is calling us to an ideal while we live in a world that is less than ideal. That being said we should not shy away from the controversy that the principles may cause, but to be in loving community with our differences.

 The nurturing community is only one of six social principles, and in so being addresses some specific issues. But being a nurturing community to me is central to our very existence and calling as Christians. In spite of the fact that much of our identity derives from our culture with its history, traditions, and experiences, our primary identity is as children of God. Or as the Nurturing Community Principle states: “Primary for us is the gospel understanding that all persons are important – because they are human beings created by God and loved through and by Jesus Christ.”

 The Social Principle on the Nurturing Community speaks much to our humanity and how that is best lived out in our relationships especially as family. It speaks to marriage and divorce and sexuality and abuse and harassment and abortion and adoption and dying and suicide and pornography and bullying. Some of the statements and stances you and I will agree with, and some we will disagree. But how do we view it as a painting and have it inspire us?

 Let me quote some statements from the nurturing community and see how they resonate with you and how they might lead us to live out the command to be one with each other and to love one another as Christ loved us.

 *We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment and shared fidelity between a man and a woman. We reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage. We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.* That last statement is a little outdated for the U.S., since the law now allows marriage between two men or two women as well. But remember that this is a document for United Methodist throughout the world. It also quickly points to the fact that while the Social Principles is our best prophetic foot forward, there are disagreements. This church as already taken a position that marriage does not need to be confined between a man and a woman, but supports sane gendered marriages as well.

Divorce: *God’s plan is for lifelong, faithful marriage. However, when a married couple is estranged beyond all reconciliation, divorce is a regrettable alternative in the midst of brokenness.*  It goes on to say that divorce does not preclude remarriage. The statement also calls on the two adults who divorced to remain highly attentive and nurturing to the children. It also goes on to say, and this is a very loose paraphrasing, that more work needs to go into a marriage. There are very good reason for divorce, but it has become almost too easy. In a throwaway society it almost seems we have put marriage in that category of easily disposable.

Women and Men: The Social Principle on The Nurturing Community says, *We affirm with Scripture the common humanity of male and female, both having equal worth… We reject the erroneous notion that one gender is superior to another.* This sets us apart from many Christian communities that prescribe limited roles for women and a rigid separation of duties for men and women.

Violence and Abuse: As I hope you would assume, we are against it. As the principle says, *We recognize that family violence and abuse – in all of its forms – verbal, psychological, sexual – is detrimental to the covenant of the human community.* It encourages the church to provide a safe environment, counsel, and support. And it recognizes that both the victim and the abuser need the love of the church.

 The principle also talks about sexual harassment. We are going to get to the rubric of human sexuality in a bit where we identify our sexuality as a gift from God, but there are ways to abuse that good gift, and sexual harassment is one of those. Sexual harassment is defined as any unwanted sexual comment, advance, or demand, either verbal or physical, and is best understood as an exploitation of a power relationship rather than as an exclusively sexual issue. Here’s the issue: Sexual harassment undermines the social goal of equal opportunity and the climate of mutual respect, and outright interferes with the moral mission of the Church.

 There is a statement on abortion, which says we are very slow and reluctant to approve abortion. However, we also recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion Therefore; a legal option for safe, medical procedures is a must. And we must support the real and viable option of adoption without judgment on the birth parents. Especially because it is such a blessing to couples whose hope and dream is to have children, but biologically cannot.

 There are statements on suicide that express it is not the way a human life should end, but also we deplore the condemnation of people who complete suicide and the unjust stigma that often falls on the surviving family and friends.

 We deplore bullying in any form and see it as a growing problem in our society that denies the humanity of the other and encourage churches to have a zero tolerance for bullying.

 There is a statement on sexual assault and a statement on pornography. Both, you can guess, we understand as a corruption and abuse of the gift of our human sexuality. And that is the rubric I saved for last.

Human Sexuality: Here is where the fun begins, although it has already been alluded to. The Social Principles say, *We affirm that sexuality is God’s good gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift.*  How many of you, with me, are old enough to remember that “sex” was basically a dirty word. You weren’t supposed to talk about it or think about it. I was part of a community committee for the Marquette Public Schools so they could have feedback on their sex education courses. We were always hearing from people who didn’t think sex education belonged in school because if you talk about it, they will do it. Here’s the thing: they were doing it. It is better to educate how to enjoy this gift responsibly, which the principle says is in the covenant of a monogamous marriage.

 Actually it says a monogamous, heterosexual marriage; because the principle also goes on to say that the United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality. Again, this congregation has taken a stance contrary to this, as have many United Methodists. And most of you are aware that our denomination is in a very tense time trying to figure out how to move forward on this issue. This is not the sermon to go into that now, but the principle goes on to say that: *We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.*

 I don’t know if you have been catching the rhythm of these issues under the Social Principle the Nurturing Community. It is an attempt to express as a church how we best see our families and our human family living out this gift and blessing of God’s called life. It is a snap shot, a picture in time of our best collective understanding of an idealized world. And it comes down pretty specifically on issues that confront us. And that will change as we learn more, know more, and grow more in the spirit of God as it has for the last 100 years of social principles.

 But if you noticed, almost every rubric also gave space for differences of opinion, for victim and perpetrator, for straight and gay, understanding that just because a person doesn’t fit our understanding, doesn’t mean that they are void of God’s grace and love, and also need our love.

 So our Social Principles take stands on contemporary issues, but does so in the spirit of our Scripture that we read from Ephesians: *Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*

 I pray it be so in your life and in mine. Amen.