**What Do Christian Denominations Have in Common (and Not)?**

**1 Corinthians 12:12-19**

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 As many of you know, at the end of November, our bishop, Bishop David Bard, was here to talk with us and United Methodists from many congregations about the upcoming General Conference when, hopefully, our denomination will finally reach a decision concerning the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in the church.  The Bishop shared with us that the Council of Bishops hopes to see the denomination stay united. In response, a member of our congregation asked a question that I think cuts to the heart of this issue for many of us. At what point is unity more or less important than doing what is right?

In the passage we just heard from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, Paul emphasizes both the unity and the diversity of the body of Christ. Yet, we know that throughout its history, the Christian church has struggled with this.  What unites us and what divides us as Christians? And what, really, is most important?

A couple of weeks ago, we started our FAQ’s sermon series - a series on answers to the most commonly-asked questions you turned in to us on Christmas Eve.  We had a lot of questions about the relationships between religious groups. One set was about how Christianity is similar and different to other world religions.  After some thought, Nick and I decided that really is a sermon series of its own. So, we will put together a World Religions series sometime in the coming months. However, there were also several questions about what Christian denominations have in common, how United Methodism is similar or different to other denominations, and how our congregation compares to other United Methodist churches.

These questions, of course, lead directly to what unites us and what divides us and why it can be so difficult for Christians to agree! As Paul says, we are all baptized into one body.  As Christians, we share a common set of beliefs across the denominations.

According to our Book of Discipline, here are the traditional doctrines that United Methodists share with all Christians. Christians believe in a triune God - there is one God in three persons - the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  All three are God, and God is the creator of the universe and of life as we know it. Jesus was the living incarnation of God and, therefore, was fully human and fully divine. His life, death, and resurrection demonstrate God’s love for us and teach us how we can be in relationship with God.  The Holy Spirit is God at work in our lives and in the world. When we sense God is calling us to do something or is challenging us or is comforting or healing us that is the Holy Spirit.

 Christians also believe that humanity was made in the image of God.  We have the capacity to love and care, to communicate, and to create like God does.  God always seeks to be in relationship with us. While we can choose whether or not to be in relationship with God, we are not fully human without that relationship.

God continues to share God’s love through the Church, which is meant to be the living, breathing extension of Jesus’ ministry across time.  We believe that the reign of God, or the kingdom of God, began with Christ’s resurrection and is embodied by the Church. As Christ’s body, we, the Church, continue his work teaching love and upholding justice until he comes again and God’s kingdom is fully realized.   Finally, Christians believe that the Bible is the word of God and is our primary authority for faith and practice.

So, those are the basic doctrines of Christian - they are what make Christianity, Christianity.  Of course, it all gets more complicated when you begin to interpret those doctrines. They are dense, sometimes hard to understand or accept, and open to all kinds of interpretations.  It is usually either a difference in interpretation or a difference in practice that has led to the development of a new denomination.

So, what is different about United Methodist beliefs from other Christian denominations?  Probably the biggest thing is the emphasis we put on grace. Unlike denominations that believe in predestination - the idea that salvation is only for God’s elect people - we believe that we are saved by God’s grace and that grace is available to all people. We also believe that salvation is a process rather than a onetime event.  God’s grace works in our lives throughout our lives to keep bringing us back into relationship with God and to prompt our growth in faith.

Another characteristic of United Methodism is the importance of good works.  John Wesley taught that there are two aspects of faith - works of piety and works of mercy.  Our works of piety - like prayer, reading scripture, participating in small groups - help us grow in faith.  Our works of mercy are the ways we live our faith in ministry and mission to the world. For Methodists, Christian faith and Christian service are absolutely intertwined, so we have always been active in feeding the hungry, assisting the poor, starting hospitals and schools, and going on mission trips.  The purpose of the Church is to nurture the faith of those in the church community and to reach out in love and service to anyone who is in need.

 Another important characteristic of United Methodism is what has come to be known as the Wesley Quadrilateral.  Basically, it is the way that Wesley taught us to think about spiritual and ethical questions. There are four lenses we can use - scripture, reason, experience, and tradition.  Scripture is always considered the primary lens. Tradition is the source of those doctrines that define what Christianity is. However, Methodists have also always emphasized using our intellect, our logic and reason, as well as our personal experience.  All four can help us discern what is the ethical or faithful way to solve a problem or respond to a dilemma.

So, those are some of the characteristics of United Methodism that make us different from other denominations. There are practices that differentiate us, as well. For example, while some denominations have several sacraments, we have only two - Holy Communion and Baptism -because those are the two that Jesus commands.  Unlike our Catholic brothers and sisters, we have an open Communion table meaning anyone can take Communion. And unlike our Baptist brothers and sisters, we believe in infant baptism rather than believer baptism. We believe God loves us from before we are born and baptism is a celebration of that love and grace.

 Confirmation is when we publicly declare our faith for ourselves - a bit like a believer does at their baptism in the Baptist church. Finally, though we think of the first apostles as saints, usually when we talk about the saints, we mean the people of faith who have gone before us - those from whom we have learned what it means to be faithful Christians.  We don’t venerate the saints nor is there a process for becoming a saint.

While these differences in interpretation and practice are part of why we have so much diversity within the body of Christ, they serve to unify United Methodists. These are beliefs all United Methodists share.  But, there are many places where even within United Methodism we are divided, as well. Exploring some of those may help us answer the question of how this church, First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor, is different from other Methodist churches.

United Methodism is the largest Protestant denomination in the world, and we have a very wide umbrella in terms of conservative or traditional theology versus liberal or progressive theology.  There are Methodist churches of all ilks in this country alone, and we become even more diverse in theology when you begin to look at the churches in Africa or Asia.

There are United Methodists who believe in biblical literalism while there are others who see the Bible as a book of truths rather than facts.  There are United Methodists who believe that our relationship to Jesus is defined by his death for our sins and others who believe his teaching and resurrection are more significant than his death.  And there are United Methodists who believe that homosexuality is a sin and those who believe that Jesus loved and embraced everyone so no one should be excluded.

I think that one of the things that differentiates our church from many other United Methodist churches is that we have worked hard to understand who we are around these issues.  We don’t all agree, but we have talked enough to pass a welcoming statement that says that all people are welcome here. We’ve talked enough to know that it’s okay to doubt and question here.  We’ve talked enough to believe God is at work here.

There are certainly other characteristics of our church that stand out - we have exceptionally gifted lay people, a wonderful Christian education program for all ages, and a deep commitment to mission and service, for example.  Still, the courage and integrity it has taken for our congregation to tackle the question of LGBTQ+ inclusion and make inclusion part of who we are is probably our biggest defining characteristic. It reflects our willingness to ask questions like when is unity more or less important than doing the right thing?  We may not have the answer, but we are willing to ask the question.

I don’t know whether the part of the body of Christ that is United Methodism will stay whole or if we will divide into still new parts within the whole.  But my prayer is that for us, for our church, it doesn’t matter. That our congregation will continue to be here- one finger or toe in the body - loving people, helping people, accepting people, teaching love, serving others, being the church - because that is who we are and always will be.

May it be so. Amen.