

“Is There Life After Divorce?”

Psalm 133 John 17:20-24

The core of The United Methodist Church remains solid.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
February 5, 2023

I'm going to talk a little inside baseball today. "Inside baseball" refers to conversation or information that is shared with those inside of a group. Wikipedia defines it as "the minutiae and detailed inner workings of a system that are only interesting to, or appreciated by, experts, insiders, and aficionados."¹ The term grew out of the strategy discussions in the national pastime, but it has most often been applied in a political context—kind of behind-the-scenes talk, if you will. How the sausage is made. But "inside baseball" can apply to any group. So today I'm doing something I usually try not to do. I want to talk about issues that are important to people inside The United Methodist Church who take the inner workings of the church seriously. I know that doesn't even apply to all United Methodists, but if I'm going to do a sermon series on the future of the church, I need to speak to these things.

So inside baseball. As most of you are aware, there is currently a splintering of The United Methodist Church going on. A number of churches—a small number overall—have left or are contemplating leaving the denomination. In Arkansas, this exodus may involve as many as 20% of our churches, but 75% of that 20% are small, rural, family chapel-type churches. The vast majority of our medium to larger churches are staying United Methodist. In some states, the percentage is higher; in some, it's lower, but it will probably average out around 10-15% of United Methodist churches nationwide. So far it's only about 6%.²

The source of the conflict that has led to the division is the disagreement over the rights and privileges of United Methodists who are gay and lesbian. Nobody wants to exclude them totally, but many feel like the covenant of marriage and the calling of ordination should not be extended to the LGBTQ community. Many other people feel that if a person has a sexual orientation that has been stamped into their DNA by God, that they should be given all the rights and privileges extended to any other member of the church—including marriage and ordination. There is disagreement here, and it's been ongoing since 1972,

when language about the practice of homosexuality being “incompatible with Christian teaching” was written into the Book of Discipline, our church law book.

The interesting thing is, nothing has changed yet in the Book of Discipline. Gay marriage and ordination are still prohibited in The United Methodist Church. Yet it is not the people who want the Discipline to change who are leaving. It is the more conservative folks who actually agree with the Book of Discipline who are the ones disaffiliating. In 2019, there was a special called session of our General Conference, the only body who can change the Discipline, to deal only with the issue of homosexuality. Even though the traditionalist viewpoint was affirmed, there was a great pushback from those who thought more open policy should have been adopted. Ever since then, the more conservative churches have been in the process of leaving. A new denomination called the Global Methodist Church was launched to take in the conservative churches, but many of the departing churches are deciding to stay independent and not become part of yet another denomination.

The real problem in all of this is that in order to convince churches to disaffiliate, many folks have said untrue and misinformed things about The United Methodist Church, and there has been a great deal of hurt and pain on both sides. There has been far too much anger and accusations and even lawsuits. It has been hard to tell sometimes that people involved in this process are serving the Lord who extends love and grace to everyone.

Our church—along with most—has stayed out of this fight. We are United Methodist, and our church leaders have voted to stay that way. Sadly, that has caused a handful of people to leave. We have friends in other churches that are being torn apart—both the friends and the churches. We have read and heard some of the terrible things that have been said, and it causes us pain, too.

Many pundits have compared the situation in The United Methodist Church to a divorce. Divorces are painful and frustrating. I know; I’ve been through one. There is no such thing as an “amicable divorce.” Words get said, and feelings get hurt. It’s a process of grief, like a death. You wonder when you are going through a devastating time like that if your life will ever return to normal. You wonder, “Is there life after divorce?” Sometimes you can’t see it in the midst of the mess, but there is life on the other side. You hope that eventually you and your ex-spouse can forgive and be civil and bless each other and want the best for the other. That can happen. But whatever happens, life goes on. God is still good. God works for good even in painful situations. And with the help of God, life may turn out better than you ever expected.

What wisdom do we find in holy Scripture as we go through this denominational divorce in The United Methodist Church? What does God say to us as we look to the future?

The unity of the community of faith is a good thing. The Psalmist wrote a brief but very focused song on the blessedness of unity. Psalm 133 says, “*How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!*”³ The writer then says it’s like oil on your head and running down your beard and onto your clothes, which doesn’t sound very good or pleasant. But it was to them. Then it’s like the dew on a mountain meadow, which does sound a little more pleasant.

The reality is, the people of God have hardly ever experienced unity. Maybe in short bursts, maybe from time to time, but mostly the story of God’s children always involves some sort of conflict. The Psalms are full of references to enemies. The prophets exhort

the people to change their wicked and oppressive ways. Jesus challenges the people to the point of his arrest and execution. Paul's letters are almost all written to churches having issues of division. The dream of unity is aspirational at best.

But unity is the aspiration of Jesus. In John 17, what scholars call the high priestly prayer of Jesus, he prays for the unity of his disciples, "*that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, ...that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one.*"⁴ The followers of Jesus today are split into thousands of different tribes, but we all share in an essential and spiritual unity through the love of Christ. We just have trouble showing that unity sometimes.

John Wesley, our Methodist founder, essentially had a separate church from the Church of England in his day. Many of his Methodists wanted to divide. But Wesley never separated from the church of his childhood, because he considered division to be contrary to the spirit of Christ. In his sermon "On Schism," he said, "[Schism] is evil in itself. To separate ourselves from a body of living Christians, with whom we were before united, is a grievous breach of the law of love. ...It is only when our love grows cold, that we can think of separating from our brethren. ... The pretenses for separation may be innumerable, but want of love is always the real cause; otherwise they would still hold the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."⁵ All these divisions are evidence of our sinful human condition, but the Biblical witness and our Methodist DNA call us to unity—not uniformity, not unanimity, but unity. One of the signs of this unity is the supper we share around the Lord's Table at Communion.

Another Biblical idea that has been applied to our Methodist divorce is the idea of pruning. In the 15th chapter of John, Jesus compares himself to a vine, and his followers are the branches that draw their life from the vine. He says, "*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.*"⁶ Maybe through the division we are experiencing, God is pruning the branches of our church to produce more and better fruit. We have expended lots of time and energy as a denomination on this controversy for 50 years. Maybe with the division, there will be less fighting, less fussing, less hostility. The United Methodist Church, pruned back a little bit, can move forward in fruitfulness and effectiveness for the mission of Christ. And maybe those who leave can do the same. That's the hope of a good divorce, isn't it? It's tragic, and it's not God's original plan, but hopefully everyone gets past it and moves on and does even better in the future. That would be the hope for the church, too.

As we move forward, what can we affirm about The United Methodist Church that gives us cause to celebrate? Mainly we affirm that the United Methodist core is solid. Nothing fundamentally is changing about The United Methodist Church. The core DNA of our theology and ministry is still intact, and I believe it will always be. We have a Biblically grounded, historically orthodox faith, in agreement with the classic creeds of the Christian church. The Bible is the primary source of our faith and practice, interpreted through the lenses of tradition, reason, and experience. That has not changed.

Our theology is a theology of grace: prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. This is inside baseball, but it is the distinctive way that Methodists understand God and salvation.

The Methodist faith is a balance of personal piety and social justice. We love Jesus, and we want to change the world. We want to win souls to Christ, and we want to reach out in mission to serve the human needs of our community. We want to sit and pray with those who are hurting, and we want to march and shout with those who are protesting injustice. Faith is not either/or; it's both/and for United Methodists.

The United Methodist Church has always been a big tent, welcoming all who agree on the fundamentals of faith and encouraging diversity of thought on everything else. One of the bywords of Wesley was "as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think."⁷ Bishop Merrill, in her message to the Arkansas conference this week, compared the church to a "broad, open table."

That means we may not all agree on every single issue, and that's good. That's a healthy church. Bishop Willimon, in the *Don't Look Back* book, writes, "Christ's propensity to congregate his followers, to save and deploy us together, means that you can expect differences and disagreements, arguments and dissensions. Be surprised when you are on the same page about anything other than Jesus. Differences in your congregation can be life-giving. Debate, listen, and expect to be corrected and thereby brought closer to Jesus by a fellow Christian who may not be your type."⁸

What I am seeing happening throughout The United Methodist Church is that people who are dedicated to remain United Methodist are more excited than ever to be who we are. You might expect that; controversy creates commitment sometimes. People in this church have told me that they have never been prouder to be United Methodist. We have been hearing from the churches that disaffiliate, that there are United Methodists who are heartbroken, but they are determined to resurrect a United Methodist presence in their communities. They have been severely pruned, but they are going to bear fruit in ways they never imagined.

In her excellent video this week, which we posted, or you can access at the Arkansas Conference website, our new bishop, Laura Merrill, closed with these words: "It is time to claim the future of our good God in the name of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. If you feel called to remain part of the United Methodist Church, then let's get to work. The divisions of this day are not our home. Our home is at the broad, open table of grace where our work is to prepare plenty to share and then to pull up another seat for a neighbor. You and I know the power of that holy meal, the way Christ shares his own life with us. Now is the time for us to trust that the transforming power of his love will guide our steps on the road ahead."⁹

So I want to invite you to the Table today. It's a big, broad, open table. God's house is a big house. There is room for all at the table, and all means all, not just insiders. This is the vision of Jesus. This is the dream of John Wesley. This is the hope of First United Methodist Church of Fort Smith. Though we are experiencing the pain of divorce today, there is a new day up ahead. There is new life for everyone. Don't look back.

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inside_baseball_\(metaphor\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inside_baseball_(metaphor)).

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/january/umc-churches-leave-global-methodist-denomination-schism.html>.

³ Psalm 133:1.

⁴ John 17:21-23.

⁵ John Wesley, Sermon 75, “On Schism,” [II]:11-12, in Sermons III, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 3 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 64–65. Cf.

<https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8331/applying-what-wesley-taught-about-schism>.

⁶ John 15:1-2.

⁷ John Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist” (1739); in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley in Ten Volumes* (1826), Volume IV, p. 407.

⁸ William Willimon, *Don't Look Back* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2022), 42f.

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjb4LOgsSyc>.