

"Love Unconditionally" Luke 10:25-28; Colossians 3:12-15
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 4, 2016

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Call to Worship Luke 10:25-28 (Common English Version)

A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to gain eternal life?" Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?"

He responded, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live."

PRAYER OF INVITATION

O extravagant God. In this ripening, red-tinged autumn, waken us in a sense of joy in just being alive, **joy for nothing in general except everything in particular;**

joy in sun and rain mating with earth to birth a harvest; **joy in the beating of a thousand wings mysteriously knowing which way is warm;**

joy in the taste of bread and juice shared with the world this day; **joy in having what I cannot live without – other people to hold and cry and laugh with;**

joy in love, in you; **and that all at first and last is grace. Amen.**

THE WORD Colossians 3:12-15 (Common English Bible)

Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

The peace of Christ must control your hearts—a peace into which you were called in one body. And be thankful people.

Living the Word

In the Call to worship this morning, from the book of Luke, a lawyer asks "What must I do to gain eternal life?" In the time of Jesus' life, lawyers were also called scribes or 'doctors of the law.' Their business was threefold: (1) to study and interpret the law; (2) to instruct the Hebrew youth in the law; (3) to decide questions of the law. All of these three led to gradually developing a large amount of common law and as a result the Hebrew law had become a very complicated science.

Those lawyers were very suspicious of Jesus as he traveled around, not getting caught up in all of the details that they had added as a swirl around God's law. Jesus, knowing the slyness of some of the lawyers of his time, answered back with another question (Jesus often did that...) "What does the law say?" The lawyer now recites the most important Hebrew law: to love God with heart mind soul and strength and your neighbor as yourself. Jesus basically says "Good answer."

What does this short exchange of words tell us about the lawyer? He knows the Hebrew law; he knows enough about God to yearn for heaven some day; and he is either trying to trick Jesus or respects who Jesus is enough as an authority to ask the question.

What does it say about Jesus? He did not come to get rid of the laws, but to give them meaning for all generations through time; it tells us that he was a clever teacher of the Hebrew ways and an encourager to those who were willing to accept him.

What does it tell us about God? That no matter the frame of mind in which we approach God, if we are willing to learn and accept, God will guide us. God wants to be first in our lives, and then everything else will fit into place. God sent his son, Jesus to help us see who God really was and is: a loving parent for all people. What does it say about the relationship between God and us? God wants us to work through our questions by asking, not thinking that we have all of the answers already.

Colossians 3:12-15 invites us – challenges us to *"put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience."* What does it mean to 'put them on ourselves'? It is easy to say the words, it takes some processing and work to wear them as our attitudes.

Four years ago this time of October, I had a wonderful week with my two brothers and my two sisters, as we shared in the end of our mother's life. Mom continued to teach us right to the end of her life, as she looked forward to what was ahead of her without fear. But it had been emotionally tiring and draining. One morning, after not enough sleep, a conversation led to me saying something hurtful to one of my brothers. He left the table and said he was going for a walk.

As soon as the words came out of my mouth, my heart sank. I was so sorry. We all know how quickly those words can go out of our mouths and how much it takes to heal the wound. In today's technological world it only took me a short time to speed dial his cell phone, but he didn't answer. I left him an apology voice mail and awaited his return, apprehensive of what he would say to me.

Sometime later, he asked to be buzzed into mom's secure apartment building and I watched for him to come down the hall. He walked sure and steady as I walked out to meet him with a second, sincere "I'm sorry" His quick response was "There is no need to apologize, we are just different in how we think and approach things." That is grace! Unconditional Love.

The Apostle Paul also invites us to *"be tolerant with each other and forgive each other. Over all put on love in order to have a perfect bond of unity."* The peace of Christ must control our hearts. 'Living peace' with everyone in all that we do. Well, I for one am still moving on to perfection...These verses end with: "And be thankful people."

I am thankful for my family and especially who my mom and dad were. Dad taught me to be tolerant of every person, and to never hate. And mom...You know those moments in time that get forever stuck in your head and heart forever?

I was age twelve, standing by mom and dad's bed. Their example for us was of a very loving relationship, so when the question popped into my head, I just blurted it out! "Mom, who do you love more, dad or God? I was sure that it was dad, with God a close second. I was wrong... mom said "I love your dad, but God always comes first!" Mom had clothed herself with God.

It might be easy to love and forgive those we love, even if we are different. But what about those we have decided not to like? We are in the thick of politics right now and someone shared an 'unconditional love' kind of political story with me this week. It was at a church luncheon in a neighboring community. When they got their plate of food, they went and found a spot at the tables by whomever to eat.

They sat down next to a person and had a wonderful conversation, getting to know and like their table mate in a short time. Afterward they found out that they had been conversing with a state senator...from 'the other side.' They shared with me that they already had pre-formed ideas of who that person must be, but now knew it wasn't a true picture until they met, shared a table over some food.

If we could extend the boundaries of beloved community to everyone, and God means everyone, how might we as the children of God, transform the world? It is more than just being neighborly, we need to think greater! We need to treat all others with the love we have found with those beloved in our lives. Can we treat them with the same respect and love as those we are close to?

When new people come to church, we are good at greeting them, but do we offer them the same love as those we already know? It is easier to love those we already know, so we need to work at getting to know those we aren't sure how to love.

Do you love God with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength? God loves you that much. Or are you just giving lip service? or are you somewhere in between? Can you love God with an affection even greater than you love all else? As with people, the better we know who God is, the easier it is to love God.

I challenge you to choose a Bible story this week. Yes, you can pick any one of them: Jonah and the Big Fish; the Little Boy with the Five Loaves and Two Fish; Noah and the Ark; any one of them. Read it through more than once, at least a couple of times and ask yourself these three questions: What does the story say to you about God? What does it say to you about who we are as humans? What does it say about the relationship between God and you?

In order to love unconditionally, you have to read those stories and process them enough to realize that the whole book is about an unconditional love that we are offered and are invited to share with God and others. Our attitudes improve when we realize that we are only human, we will slip out of a good attitude occasionally, but we need to keep working at loving and forgiving. Then and only then will we be ready to start transforming the world around us.

As United Methodists we are a people that say we are connectional. Through that system, we share pastors, resources, missions, education, and caring so that all of the ministries are ongoing to the church and to the world. Once a year we come together at an Annual Conference and share Holy Communion, where we are reminded that we are greater than just one church.

Today is World Communion Sunday. In 1936, for the first time, the first Sunday in October was celebrated as World Communion Sunday. After a few years, the idea was welcomed by the wider Christian community as an opportunity to move beyond historical and theological differences and worship together. Christian Churches all over the earth will share in this banquet of love for all, through Christ, in the midst of a world still in need of the reconciling unity.

Though not a specific day on the calendar of the Christian year, the unity of the church is a theme that needs constant attention. In a day of embarrassing fractures, congregations must step back from their own local concerns and highlight the unity of the body for which Jesus himself prayed (John 17:20-21). Such observances also give the church an opportunity to recommit itself to a life of unity.

The unity of the church needs to be observed and valued on several levels. Local unity sees worshipers of a local community experiencing their oneness in Christ without regard to their diverse experiences, ethnicity, opinions, or gender. Generational unity sees worshipers of all age levels sharing their oneness in Christ and encouraging one another.

Historical unity sees the worshipers of today affirming their oneness with those who have gone before, perhaps many centuries before. Global unity sees God's people of a variety of cultures and traditions affirming one another's value, praying for one another, and joining in service together. Each of these dimensions demonstrates that unity does not imply uniformity.

Worldwide Communion Sunday in October gives local churches the opportunity to come to the Lord's table with the awareness of brothers and sisters of many churches and cultures who are doing the same.

Just think, Catholics and Baptists and Lutherans and Presbyterians, your neighbors, your co-workers and much farther beyond - all are sharing Communion today, some of them at the same moments that we will. Just like what happens with the lights of the sky moving around the world as daylight comes, the light of Christ will shine, unseen by us, but known in our hearts as the gentle movement of the earth turns this day.