

## 1 Sermon, February 16, 2013

Texts: Acts 11:1-17, Mark 7:24-30

Title: "UM Stuff: Tolerance"

1. Jesus was led to tolerance in an encounter with a woman
2. Peter was led to tolerance in a dream
3. John Wesley spoke of tolerance – but there were limits to tolerance
4. We are tolerant of thinking; not always tolerant of actions
5. We are tolerant of people's race, background, but not always actions
6. We should expect fighting in the church, but not fighting dirty

No anonymous communication, no belittling, no accusing others' motives – because we don't know another person's motives.

### 1. Jesus was led to tolerance in an encounter with a woman

This is the third sermon on the distinctive emphases of the United Methodist Church. Today I want to talk to you about tolerance.

If we look in the New Testament, we can see that Jesus tolerated people who were outcasts, lepers, even hated tax collectors. He tolerated Samaritans, and there was a bad history between Jews and Samaritans.

In the gospel of John, we see that Jesus spoke to a Samaritan woman with questionable morals. All three things would have been avoided by most good Jewish men: speaking to a Samaritan, speaking to a woman not related to you, and speaking to someone who had questionable morals.

Jesus was tolerant of differences in his interactions.

Today's reading from Mark shows Jesus in an interaction with a non-Jewish foreign woman.

Jesus knew she was outside the Jewish covenant. Jesus told her that he was sent to Jewish people (children of Israel) who needed him.

The woman responded in a way that changed Jesus' mind. She told him that, yes, the children of Israel might be fed at the table, but might not she get the scraps that fell to the floor?

She wanted some of God's leftover grace to fall her way and cure her sick daughter.

Jesus was impressed, and cured her daughter.

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Jesus had thought he was sent to his own people, but this woman changed his mind and expanded his mission.

### 2. Peter was led to tolerance in a dream

The early church was divided over who should be included. The first Christians, of course, were Jewish like Jesus. But even in Jesus' own lifetime, non-Jews came to appreciate the ministry and power of Jesus' ministry.

In the years following Jesus' death and resurrection, more and more non-Jews wanted to be part of the Christian community. They said, "See how they love one another." And they asked to be baptized and included in the promises of Jesus Christ.

This was a big controversy. Was the Christian faith just for Jews, who could appreciate Jesus as the messiah for Jewish people? Or was it to include gentiles?

And if gentiles were included, did they need to become Jewish, too? How Jewish did they need to become? Did the men need to be circumcised? Some insisted that, yes, this was the case.

Did these gentile followers need to start observing the Jewish dietary laws? So insisted that, yes, they needed to observe the dietary laws and the other Old Testament commandments.

Peter had been on the Jewish side of things. He did not go into the homes of non-Jews. He kept the Jewish dietary laws.

Until, one day, Peter had a vision. It was a vision of God lowering an enormous sheet down from heaven, with all sorts of animals on it, many of which were not acceptable to the Jewish dietary laws. God spoke to him in the vision, and said, "Peter, kill and eat. What God has made clean you shall not call unclean."

Just then, he was invited into a gentile home, and, on the strength of that vision, Peter did what he had not done before. He entered that non-kosher home and ministered there.

It was a vision of tolerance, and Peter became more tolerant ever after.

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#### 3. John Wesley spoke of tolerance – but there were limits to tolerance

Our spiritual ancestor, John Wesley, was a person who preached tolerance. He didn't want doctrinal differences to stand in the way of working together.

John Wesley said, "You cannot be admitted into the church, or society, of the Presbyterians, Anabaptists, Quakers, or any others, unless you hold the same opinions with them, and adhere to the same mode of worship. The Methodists alone do not insist on your holding this or that opinion; but they think, and let think! Neither do they impose any particular mode of worship..." (John Wesley's journal, May 18, 1788)

Wesley also said,  
The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. His assenting to this or that scheme of Religion, his embracing any particular set of notions, his espousing the judgment of one man or of another, are all quite wide of the point. . . . **But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.** (from "The Character of a Methodist" (1739))

The Pastor of the largest United Methodist church in the US, Adam Hamilton, has written a book titled, "Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White." He points out that the United Methodist Church is a church that has staked out the middle ground, ground that is increasingly disappearing in our culture. We are more and more divided in our nation as to opinions, but the church is called to be a meeting point.

#### 4. We are tolerant of thinking; not always tolerant of actions

So we in the United Methodist Church are tolerant in our thinking. This tolerance is at once our great strength and our great weakness.

It is our strength in that we can often bring people together.

It is our weakness in that a tolerant church is not what many people are looking for.

So many people want to win the arguments on many issues; they want everyone to be like them. They want a church that believes as they do.

Our tolerance attracts some people and loses others.

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##### 5. We are tolerant of people's race, background, but not always actions

We in the United Methodist Church are not only tolerant of opinions, we're tolerant of different types of people.

We welcome those who are of different races, those of differing social classes, we even welcome those who have been convicted of crimes. After all, they need God's grace, too.

John Wesley had an important prison ministry.

We welcome all sorts of people, but we draw the line at behaviors that harm. We have, in our church, a Safe Sanctuaries policy. It is to prevent abuse of children and youth. We take this very seriously.

Our United Methodist Book of Discipline is written with consequences for doing things like: crimes, sexual abuse, racial discrimination, and harassment.

##### 6. We should expect fighting in the church, but not fighting dirty

The Bible tells us that church has been loving from the very beginning. The church has also been quarreling from the very beginning. If you read the New Testament letters, there are 16 different places where Paul or Peter or one of the letter writers urges the church to get along with each other, or speaks against quarreling. The authors of the New Testament letters wouldn't have needed to do that unless they were fighting. In fact, it seems that the church in Corinth was especially prone to arguments, and Paul wrote two letters to that church, mostly to get them to accept each other.

We can expect disagreements in the church, but we need to fight fair, and not fight dirty.

One of the things that is strongly discouraged in the United Methodist Church is anonymous communication; because how can we converse when we don't know who we're conversing with?

Bishop David Lawson once told us at Annual Conference that if we receive an anonymous communication, don't even read it. Just tear it up and throw it away.

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Another thing that we must not do is accuse others of bad motivation. We don't know the motivations of others. We can object to people's actions, but only God knows their motivation.

Luke 16:15 tells us:

He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts."

Another thing we must not do is belittle others. No name calling. Jesus said in Matthew 5 that those who call a brother or sister a fool will be liable to the hell of fire.

Tolerance is not easy.

It's much easier to be right than it is to be compassionate.

It's much easier to insist on one's own way than to listen to others.

It's much easier to feel superior than to question one's own motives.

But the Bible urges us to be accepting, forgive and not quarrel. We are human, but we can rise above our desires to judge and quarrel. If we are open to the Holy Spirit, and if we live a life of prayer, doing no harm and doing good, we can come to embody those fruit of the Spirit that Paul talks about. We can become patient, kind, generous and faithful.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These

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six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.'

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11:1-17, NRSV)

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7:24-30, NRSV)

Jesus left and went to the region near the city of Tyre, where he stayed in someone's home. He did not want people to know he was there, but they found out anyway. A woman whose daughter had an evil spirit in her heard where Jesus was. And right away she came and knelt down at his feet. The woman was Greek and had been born in the part of Syria known as Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to force the demon out of her daughter. But Jesus said, "The children must first be fed! It isn't right to take away their food and feed it to dogs."

28 The woman replied, "Lord, even dogs eat the crumbs that children drop from the table."

29 Jesus answered, "That's true! You may go now. The demon has left your daughter." 30 When the woman got back home, she found her child lying on the bed. The demon had gone. (Mark 7:24-30, CEV)