

**“MAY WE NOT LOVE ALIKE?”**  
**1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30**  
**A Sermon by John Thomason**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**February 3, 2019**

A recent *Peanuts* cartoon shows Charlie Brown’s sister Sally sitting at her school desk reacting to an announcement made by her teacher: “A field trip? Tomorrow? Oh, I hate field trips. I always get sick on the bus. Why do we have to go on field trips? Why can’t we just stay in school and mind our own business? Why should we bother with the outside world?”

If you know Sally at all, you know she is an escapist and a ne’re-do-well by nature; but in this instance, I have some sympathy for her. Living as we do in a nation that is both bitterly cold and bitterly divided, the only field trip I would want to take today is to an isolated tropical island in the Caribbean. The real world surrounding us is full of things we don’t want to see or talk about. We’re confronted with people and issues that make us uncomfortable. Sometimes these issues are highly personal and therefore awkward to discuss; sometimes they are also controversial and lead to conflict, so it becomes all the more tempting to avoid them.

Two such issues, of course, are sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. Many of us have questions, concerns, and convictions about same-sex relationships, but we tend to keep our thoughts to ourselves. Perhaps we consider sexual expression to be a private matter; or maybe we are afraid of disclosing our views and being branded either as a homophobe or a libertine; or maybe we’re just reluctant to stir up trouble with our family members and friends. Whatever the reason, we remain silent about this subject.

Especially in the Church, homosexuality is the elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about. But today, the elephant can no longer be ignored. You and I don’t need to take a field trip to Greenwich Village to be exposed to this issue. In every corner of our land, gay people are more visible and vocal than ever before, both in society at large and in communities of faith. Today, homosexuality is a hot topic in the United Methodist Church. The reality is, it has been a hot topic for decades, whether we’ve noticed it or not. And so now, at the end of this month, our discussion and debate will culminate in a Special Session of General Conference in St. Louis, Missouri. This session is being convened because United Methodists hold a wide variety of views on homosexuality, some of which are in direct conflict with each other. We disagree among ourselves about whether homosexuality is a sin, and about whether gays should be ordained or married in the Church. This called General Conference is a last-ditch effort to find some common ground on church policy and practice, lest we be torn asunder as a denomination.

Our natural inclination here in Woodbury, Connecticut, is to avoid the field trip to St. Louis, Missouri. Some of us would prefer to tune out these proceedings altogether or merely watch them from afar. But mark my words: what happens in St. Louis will not stay in St. Louis. The outcome of this meeting will have a ripple effect on both regional conferences and local congregations. Depending on the policy changes that are made, our own church may be forced to declare itself to be either gay-friendly or gay-resistant, or somewhere in between. So the time has come for the Woodbury United Methodist Church to have an honest conversation about

homosexuality. What do we know about same-sex attraction, what do we believe about it, and how are we going to respond to it?

To that end, I'll be leading a 4-part mid-week study in February entitled "Homosexuality and the Church." You'll find the class schedule and the outline of subjects on the back page of your worship bulletin. I realize that for some of us, attending this class would be like joining Sally Brown on an unwanted field trip. We would prefer just to stay in school, mind our own business, and not bother with the outside world. But I want not just to encourage you, but to urge you, to be a part of this discussion. To some degree, the future shape of the United Methodist Church and the future shape of our own church are hanging in the balance. What will be shared over these four weeks truly matters, because you and I will concern ourselves not only with the policies of a religious institution, but with the lives of real people.

Over these four weeks, I will share pertinent information as well as my own views on homosexuality, and you will be given the opportunity to share your views. When this happens, it is not just probable but certain that there will be disagreements among us. The Woodbury United Methodist Church is probably a microcosm of the United Methodist Church as a whole. Some of us are gay-friendly; others of us are gay-resistant; and some of us are on middle ground or still undecided.

So the question is not, "Will we disagree?" The question is, "How will we express and handle our disagreements?" My earnest prayer is that you and I will voice our views in ways that are consistent with biblical guidelines and the best of Methodist tradition.

Looking to the Scriptures, it's important to recognize that the New Testament Church is rife with disagreements. First generation Christians don't see eye-to-eye on a whole host of matters – and not just organizational issues like the role of women in the Church, but also basic doctrinal issues such as who Jesus is and what his life, death, and resurrection have accomplished. To make things even more challenging, the New Testament is written at a time before formal creeds and institutional rules have been put into place. The boundaries of orthodox belief and correct church practice are still fluid. At this point, the apostle Paul can accuse other apostles of being false teachers, but in the absence of official guidelines, it is really his word against theirs.

So how do the New Testament writers regard and respond to disagreements within the Church? Well, one type of response they rule out categorically – there is no room in God's household for disagreements that turn nasty or even violent. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth, where he preaches a message that his old neighbors and friends don't want to hear. They not only squirm in their seats; they get up out of their seats, seize Jesus, and try to throw him off a cliff! Now, it is one thing for a prophet to be "without honor in his own country" (Luke 4:24). Prophets often say things that are controversial and provocative, and are especially so to a hometown crowd. But it is another thing for a disagreement to become destructive – in this case, personally and physically destructive. Here, Jesus himself is the target of abuse; and it is he, you'll remember, who counsels us to "love our enemies." When he speaks of enemies, he is surely referring not just to hostile unbelievers outside the Church, but also to fierce adversaries within the Church. "You may regard a Christian brother or sister as an enemy, but love them anyway," says Jesus. Why else would he

repeatedly command his followers to “love one another” (John 15:12), and why else would he pray fervently that “they would be all be one” (John 17:11)?

This brings us to the man who stirs up so much controversy and conflict in the early Church; who often attacks others for their errant beliefs and practices; and who, at the same time, tries to broker peace among warring factions in the Body of Christ. I’m speaking, of course, of the apostle Paul. Over and over again, Paul’s watchwords to the Church echo the watchwords of Jesus: “In spite of our differences, we must remain united; and we can remain united only by practicing love. Without love, we can never hope to be on the same page and accomplish our common mission. The true litmus test of Christian faithfulness is not orthodoxy, but love.” Or, to use Paul’s exact words from 1 Corinthians 13: “I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains – but if I have no love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:3b).

Now, when Paul talks about love, he’s clearly not referring to a sloppy sentimentality that glosses over differences or succumbs to the philosophy that “anything goes.” Paul doesn’t hesitate to draw a line in the sand and challenge others who cross that line. But neither does he draw a circle in the sand around himself and declare his own views to be infallible. For Paul, love for others begins with humility about one’s self. “What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror,” he says. “What I know now is only partial” (v. 12). For a man who is so opinionated and outspoken, this is a remarkable thing to say! Paul recognizes immaturity and error in some of his former ways of thinking, and he actually changes his mind on many issues. These changes are rooted first and foremost in the Word of God – the “old, old story” which he hears and heeds in new ways. But these changes are also rooted in the witness of other people whose understanding of God’s Word is different and, frankly, better than his.

This brings us finally to consider what love might actually look like in discussing a controversial issue like homosexuality. In Paul’s own words, “Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail” (vv. 4-7). In other words, love is not self-centered, but other-centered. Love respects others, refuses to judge others, listens to others, and learns from others. Loving others doesn’t necessarily mean liking others or agreeing with them; it does mean relating to them as God relates to all of us – with patience, mercy, and compassion.

In one of my former churches, I once participated in an informal conversation which turned to the matter of homosexuality. One could feel the tension mount as people began to sound off. Two exchanges occurred during that free-for-all dialogue that made it something less than a dialogue. I mean, how can you call a discussion a true dialogue if people interrupt each other and move quickly to rebut what the previous speaker has just said?

In the first instance, one person commented, “I believe what the Scripture teaches, that homosexuality is a sin.” And another person shot back, “You’re just homophobic!”, and tempers flared. Now let me ask you: Can you think of a more loving way of responding to someone who claims to base his views about homosexuality on Scriptural authority? How about, “I respect your commitment to biblical teaching and would never write you off as homophobic. You and I believe in the same Bible; I just read the Bible in another way than you read it.”

In the second exchange, a person started from the other side of the issue: “I believe homosexuals are just different, but not sinful.” Another person retorted, “That’s only your opinion. The only opinion that really matters is God’s opinion, and God clearly condemns homosexuality.” Then the first person, who had a wounded look on her face, replied firmly: “My son is a homosexual. I love him unconditionally and accept him for who he is.” At that point, the person who made the first comment blushed with embarrassment and wanted to disappear under the table; the mother who made the very personal revelation about her son looked both ashamed and angry; and all the people around the table fell silent. The damage had already been done. But the damage might have been avoided if the dialogue had unfolded in a more loving way. The first person says, “I believe homosexuals are just different, but not sinful.” Now, suppose the second person had responded: “I’m truly interested – what is it in your reading of Scripture or your personal experience that led you to this conclusion?” If that question had been asked, the doorway might have been opened to a loving dialogue.

Two and a half centuries ago, our spiritual forebear, John Wesley, acted the part of Jesus and the apostle Paul. He challenged the tradition of his ancestors and contemporaries, and in the process, incited controversy at every turn. He lambasted the apathy and inertia of the Church of England and instigated a revival and reform movement which came to be called “Methodism.” But he couldn’t even get his own followers to agree on key matters of faith and practice. They argued; they pouted; they threatened to leave the movement. And so, one day John Wesley preached a sermon that included these words: “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.”

So let it be.