

Abide in Christ
John 15:1-14
March 3, 2019

This past week the highest legislative body of the United Methodist Church, the General Conference, has made a very difficult and important decision on its position on the issue of homosexuality. It has been the denomination's struggle for last several decades, and the decision is to uphold its original position that homosexuality is not comparable to Christian life. The persons who are self-avowed and practicing homosexuals will not be considered for ordination in the United Methodist Church, and none of the United Methodist Church facilities can be used for the ceremony of homosexual union. Whether this is the right decision or not is something God will determine, but for now, that is the position we have as the United Methodist Church.

I realize that people do have different understanding on the issue. This is true not only for homosexuality but also for many other issues such as euthanasia, abortion, suicide, capital punishment, etc. Not only do people have different opinions, they also read and understand the Bible differently as well. This is one of the reasons why we have so many denominations with their distinctive theological positions.

Even within the same denomination, it is not unusual to find people with serious disagreements on some of the theological issues. Having a sound theological understanding is important. However, determining "what the Bible is really teaching us" is sometimes not as clear as we want it to be, or sometimes, we ourselves are the ones who make it not very clear. It is often the case that people think they have the right understanding and others don't. Whether they are right or not, this arrogance and sometimes stubbornness divide the church.

While all theological debates are important, they may not be the main business of the Church. There is a story about a very good salesman who sold a complicated filing system to a thriving company. Three months later, the salesman visited the company to see if the filing system was working out okay. He asked one of the managers who was in charge of the file system, "Hey, how is the filing system working out?" He said, "Wonderfully! This filing system is absolutely out of this world." The sales person was glad to hear that. And he asked, "By the way, how is the business?" The manager replied, "We had to give up our business to run the filing system."

As ridiculous as it is, that is exactly what we do in the Church sometimes. We give up the main business of growing in Spirit and faith and loving and respecting each other in Christ over petty differences. We try to force others to think, and act like we do in the name of unity. By the way, I am not saying homosexuality is a petty issue. Actually it is a very big issue because it deals with what kind of clergy we will have and what kind of church we will become.

I believe what we did at the General Conference this past week is that we did try to create uniformity in the name of unity. Uniformity is not unity. When we try to force uniformity upon others, instead of creating unity we end up creating division. We may end up with uniformity but not unity. We will end up with a very divided and dysfunctional spirit. More often than not when uniformity is forced upon us, we end up losing unity.

Jesus said, “I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener.”¹ “Abide in me, as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.”² Branches grow in different directions but they are all attached to the same vine. As long as the branches are attached to the same vine, they produce the fruit the vine intended. There is life and unity in the vine. Apart from the vine, the branches will wither and die.

God is like a vine-grower who looks at a branch that has potential to bear fruits and trims it so that it ends up bearing fruit. In the same way God says to us, “You can be fruitful, you can be an agent of unity and love. But arrogance, hardness of hearts, anger, resentment and unrealistic ambitions need to be removed from you in order to produce fruits I desire.”

One thing we notice is that in this passage, Jesus does not demand the branches to bear fruit. The focus is not on bearing fruit. The focus is on abiding in Christ. The fruits that God wants us to bear are the spiritual fruits that Paul talks about: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”³ These are the fruits that will maintain and strengthen the unity in the Church and the unity in our families. These are the fruits God wants us to bear. However, God is not asking us to bear these fruits. He knows that we are incapable of bearing these fruits by ourselves. Instead, he commands us to abide in Christ, and demands us to stand firm on his teaching, because when we remain in him, we can bear these fruits.

¹ John 15:1.

² John 15:4.

³ Galatians 5:22-23.

The word “abide” means more than to “be with,” it also means to “stand with,” to be “faithful to,” to “stand firm,” and “never to leave.” We are to be faithful to the Lord and to stand firm on his teachings.

When all of us stand firm on Jesus’ teaching, then we can maintain unity better. The Bible doesn’t even say that we need to create unity. Rather it tells us to maintain unity. The unity is established by the Lord himself in his sacrifice on the cross, and it is to be fully expressed in Christian life as a result of all of us abiding in Christ.

Paul in Ephesians 2 says the following:

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you (the Gentiles) who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups (the Jews and the Gentiles) into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us... that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

Then in Ephesians 4 Paul says:

¹ I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to MAINTAIN the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

It is the Lord Jesus Christ himself who created the unity in the church by his blood on the cross. And we are to maintain the spirit of unity. In order to maintain the spirit of unity we all need to live “the life worthy of the calling,” the calling of being God’s children. Now, that is for all Christians.

However, when we apply this statement to the life of a clergy, the Bible, the Book of Discipline, and the recent decision of our General Conference demand that the ministers are to live not only the life worthy of being the children of God but also the life worthy of the office. The office of priesthood is worthy of greater moral vigilance, higher character, and the holiness of heart and life. The office of the clergy demands that. Regardless of whether the ministers live that life fully or not, the office demands that. The position of clergy demands that.

What I am saying is that the value of the office should be kept that way. I believe that is meaning of the recent decision of the General Conference. We need to recognize that holiness and sacredness is what is required of the priesthood.

The honor and privilege of being the children of God should shape our lives as Christians. Much more is demanded upon those who seek the office of priesthood.

I recognize that we all are incapable of living out such a demanding life and more is demanded for clergy. That is why the Lord demands us to abide in him and constantly stand firm in his teachings. I pray that we are all soundly grounded in the Scripture.