

Pentecost Sunday is the day we celebrate the birthday of the Church. Because it depends on the date of Easter, it is one of those movable feasts, and this year it falls smack dab in the middle of General Conference, the quadrennial meeting of United Methodists from all over the world. It's in Portland this year, and a lot of people I know are there. Only part of me wishes I were there, too.

While Pentecost may be the birthday of the Christian Church, this Pentecost feels more like Judgment Day for the United Methodist Church. As most of you know, our denomination has been arguing about human sexuality for over 40 years. Starting in 1972, every four years, we have been coming together and saying hurtful things about one another as we debate the denomination's rules regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender lay members and clergy. Even though we will also talk about war and poverty, racism and immigration,

global warming and affordable housing; even though we raise tens of millions of dollars for malaria prevention and millions more for disaster aid and refugee resettlement; even though we send missionaries and volunteers around the world to share the love of Christ with the last, the least and the lost, the media is convinced—and not without good reason—that United Methodists are the people who can't share the love of Christ with each other.

I can't tell you how this pains my soul. Just before the Conference began on May 10th, a gay pastor from the West Ohio Conference publicly married his partner of 28 years. A few days later, 111 United Methodist clergy and lay pastors serving faithfully all over the country signed a love letter to the United Methodist Church, publicly coming out as leaders who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Fourteen of the signers are pastors in the California-Nevada Annual Conference. Wherever they serve, they are risking their jobs by being honest about

who they are. But at least they are no longer risking their souls by pretending to be who they are not.

I don't know what General Conference will do, but I'm not expecting much. Conference planners had at least hoped to change the tone of the debate by passing "Rule 44," which would have instituted a group discernment process to take the place of Robert's Rules of Order on certain issues. The idea was that getting delegates to have face-to-face conversations would diminish some of the damage that has been done by all the up-or-down votes over the years.

This process would have organized delegates into small discussion groups where controversial issues would take on names and faces and feelings. It would have opened up new spaces for listening, not only to the "other," but most importantly to the Holy/Wholly Other, the Spirit of God. It was hoped that they might even hear the rushing of wind that was

the Holy Spirit moving through the room, trying to re-birth our church.

That was the hope, anyway. After lots of parliamentary maneuvering on Thursday, Rule 44 was voted down. It seems that the majority of delegates couldn't trust the Spirit to guide the process. If anyone was listening as the body was voting, I'm pretty sure they heard the sound of Jesus weeping.

So when I sat down with the text for this Pentecost Sunday, what I heard loud and clear was a message for the United Methodist Church straight from the pen of Saint Paul. In his love letter to the Romans, I heard him saying that we are living out our institutional life in the flesh instead of living life in the Spirit.

Now this interpretation may seem a bit of a stretch, but not if you dig into Paul's argument that spans these first several chapters of the Book of Romans. Our text today is a very small part of Paul's long commentary on the relationship

between the Law and sin. So let's start with sin. The first thing we need to know is that when Paul talks about living life in the flesh, he's talking about living in sin. Right away, our minds move to making a list of sins, especially those juicy "sins of the flesh." But Paul is not talking about a list of sins. He's talking about a law of sin, a power that comes from within us and keeps us from doing what we know is good and right for ourselves and others. Because so many of us tune out as soon as we hear the word "sin," I think that a more helpful way of talking about this power is by using the word, "selfishness." What Paul is warning us about in the Book of Romans is a life that is lived with our self at the center. Those who live "according to the flesh" are those who are preoccupied with their own needs and wants and who set their minds on themselves rather than on anyone else or God or what God wants for their life. This is sin or selfishness, and we know it all too well.

Enter the Law. What God wants for our life God long ago put down in the Law. But in our self-centeredness, we managed to turn even the Law into an excuse for more sin. According to Paul, it all began when we religious types took the Law to be a sign of our own righteousness.

That caused a couple of problems. First problem: by focusing on the Law, we just made it that much more attractive for people to break it. Any adolescent will show you that. Draw them a line; they will cross it. So our focus on the law just led to more and more sin. But there's a second problem, Paul says. When we put obedience to the Law at the center of our concern, we tended to overlook our own disobedience. Lots of parents of adolescents do that. It's the old "do as I say not as I do." So the Law also led to more and more hypocrites.

In Paul's mind, clinging to the Law means that we end up in one of two places: we either feel really bad about our

behavior and think that we are horrible people and God couldn't possibly love us; or we try to hide from our behavior by making other people feel really bad, by telling them that they are horrible people and God surely doesn't love them. Either way, Paul says, the Law that was supposed to save us, ends up enslaving us. The more we focus on the Law, the more we miss out on the love.

This is my short summary of what Paul has to say about living life in the flesh and becoming a slave to sin. And to me, this looks an awful lot like what has been going on at General Conference for decades. On the issue of gays in the church and in the ordained ministry, we have become slaves to the law—not God's law, but to the rules and regulations that are contained in our *Book of Discipline*. Don't get me wrong: most of those rules are very good rules. But we have put obedience to one or two of those rules above obedience to the Spirit of God. And when we do that, we put the rule of law before God's

commandment to love. Paul says: "To set the mind on the flesh [on the power of sin] is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit [the power of love] is life and peace." [8:6] Tweet that to General Conference 2016.

Some of you newcomers may ask, how did we get here? Richard Rohr's book "Falling Upward" gives me one way to answer that question. When I was first ordained back in 1988, I vowed to obey the *Book of Discipline*. I was willing to take that pledge because I could see the value of having what Rohr calls a strong container, one that is built on the faith and the wisdom of my spiritual foremothers and fathers, and gives us some limits some guidance as I began the practice of ministry.

For United Methodists, *The Discipline* has indeed been a strong and reliable container for more than 200 years now. When the Methodists in America were left stranded after the Revolutionary War when all the English clergy went back home to England, Wesley sent two men, Thomas Coke and Francis

Asbury, and with them he sent a few simple rules that would, in the absence of a formal church, create a container for these orphaned Methodists. Wesley wanted to give them a spiritual identity that was strong enough to help them keep their faith despite the challenges of life on the new frontier.

But over the years, the Methodists kept adding more rules and by now the Discipline runs several hundred pages long. After twenty-six years in the ministry, I have come to feel about the United Methodist Church what Richard Rohr feels about the Roman Catholic Church: it is certainly not perfect, but it is essential for my spiritual growth. As Rohr puts it:

Church membership requirements, church doctrine, and church morality force almost all issues to an inner boiling point, where you are forced to face important issues at a much deeper level to survive as a Catholic [or a Methodist] or a Christian or even as a human. I think this is probably true of any religious community, if it is doing its job. Before the truth sets you free, it tends to make you miserable. [*Falling Upward*, 74]

Thankfully, I am not a miserable Methodist, but General Conference does challenge my faith in ways that makes me

uncomfortable, to say the least. But that is good for me, because no spiritual growth ever comes out of comfort, only out of discomfort. "Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come. 'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home."

It is amazing grace that teaches us that life in the Spirit is not an easy life. In fact, it has its share of what Rohr calls "necessary suffering." Just look at Jesus. Look at the cross. The cross will tell you that any church that is built on love is a church that is built on suffering. Any Christian who is going on to perfection in love (as Wesley used to say)—that is, learning to love even the enemies of love—is going to endure a lot of suffering. We just have to remember that Jesus' suffering ended in resurrection and, by God's grace, ours will, too.

So you ask me, when is the United Methodist Church going to give up this life in the flesh and live life in the Spirit? In Rohr's terms, when are we going to pass from the sin-

obsessed first half to the holier second half of our denominational life?

I can't speak for the denomination, but I will dare to speak for this congregation. If anyone wants to know what it means to live life in the Spirit, I will tell them to get to know a local church like this one where love takes precedence over law; where regardless of what General Conference does, you will go on putting flesh on the Holy Spirit and loving people where they are, no matter who they are, accepting them, supporting them and nurturing them to be the Spirit-adopted children of God they were created to be.

As your pastor, I rejoice that, as Paul says, "you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you." [8:9] It may be Judgment Day for the United Methodist Church, but it is Pentecost Sunday at this church. And by the grace of God, life in the Spirit begins right here. Happy Re-birthday.

Willow Glen UMC Welcoming Statement
(approved in October 2015)

In Jesus Christ, God reaches out to everyone to call them home, and here at Willow Glen UMC, we open our hearts and intentionally welcome you into our home, into our church family, and into a closer relationship with God.

No matter your race or cultural background, age or abilities, sexual orientation or gender identity, marital or legal status, family situation, financial circumstances or personal challenges, the Jesus we know already loves you and that is what we are here to do.

So honor us with the opportunity to get to know you, worship with you, listen, share and grow in God's love with you. The wider we draw the circle of grace, the more we know and experience the love of God.