

June 1 – All Means All

I John 4:7-16

1 John 4:7 it is probably my favorite scripture. Let me share it again: “Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” I see this as our command to love all without exception. God has poured down love upon us and we are to share that love with others. Loving others is how we come to know God fully in our lives. We love as our response to God and as a sign of our faith. In fact, the early church people were known for the way they loved one another.

One of the things we are known for as a faith community in Sequim is that all means all when it comes to welcoming people. I doubt there are any of us here who would turn someone away who comes to worship or to a community meal. I think all of us take a little pride in the fact that we provide a safe place for people to worship. There are some houses of worship in this community where you can risk being labeled and belittled for your beliefs or your orientation. This happened unfortunately during our Holy Week Community services. In some churches you might even be asked to leave if you do not fit their criteria as to what a Christian should think or do. Aren't you glad we are ones who err on the side of love, grace and welcoming? I am.

I think when it comes to a person walking in our door we do a pretty good job of living out the injunctions found in I John that we read today. Are we perfect in doing that? No. But I think we can all agree that we want to be a place of worship where everyone of God's children, no matter where they are in life's journey, finds a smile, a handshake and love.

Now some of you might be wondering where I am going with this sermon. Well friends, there is a storm a coming. Before long Jim Stoffer, your elected representative, and I will be attending annual conference. Because of some of the issues we will be facing at our annual meeting we might be on the local and even national news. We will definitely be on social media. You might get asked by your friends who know you are a Methodist what is going on. So I need to fill you in on the issues so you are informed. But before I do I want to reemphasize the fact that we are a community that loves and nothing will be changing in regards to that here at Sequim: Trinity.

So what are the storm clouds that are circling us? It has to do with how the church is going to respond to our GLBTQ sisters and brothers. A lot of things have been happening this past year in this arena. Some of you have heard about it, and for others what I am going to share will be a surprise. Let me give you a snapshot of what has occurred in just the past twelve months. A pastor in Pennsylvania's ordination was taken from him for officiating at the marriage of his son to his life partner. Since then another United Methodist Bishop has offered him a church in her conference. A retired United Methodist Bishop gave a blessing at a marriage service of two men and was brought up on charges. Other pastors have been charged with performing same gender marriages and in some places the process of removing them from the ministry is going forward and in other places the bishop is refusing to spend church money on these trials saying this is not the way to resolve the issue. We have a church in Seattle in litigation with the Boy Scouts of America over the pulling of their charter because the leader is gay. Right now there is a group of 80 influential pastors from the southeast part of the country who are advocating for our denomination to be broken up along theological lines over this issue. Earlier this year one of our conference district superintendents presided at the marriage of two female pastors, both under appointment. What will be our bishop's response is of interest to the entire church because nothing like this has happened anywhere else. It is this issue that could land us in the news and have your friends asking you what is going on.

There will be spokespeople on both sides of this issue sharing what they believe is or should be the official stand of the United Methodist Church. We need to remember that what is happening at our annual meeting or being discussed nationally will not directly impact us except for having to deal with the messy press that always causes people to think things that are not true.

So where do we stand as a denomination on the most controversial question of the moment which concerns marriage equality? Officially we, as a church, are opposed, but as you heard in my list, many clergy are taking a stand that they call "Holy Disobedience" performing same gender weddings and waiting to see the church's response.

Let me share a bit of background concerning the marriage issue. When it comes to marriage we need to understand that we are struggling with two separate issues. There is the legal side and the religious side of marriage. There has been a blending of the two for generations. First the legal. When you get married a whole host of other things are granted to the two being married through government statutes. These are as far reaching as who is the beneficiary to your estate, who can be on your insurance policy, to who can visit you in the hospital and can speak for you in a medical crisis if you cannot speak for yourself, to who gets to decide your funeral arrangements after you die. Since, until recently, almost all weddings were done in churches with pastors signing the state's forms making the marriage legal, we also had all the theological meaning of marriage woven into the legal statutes of marriage. The courts are now untangling these two interwoven stands and saying the legal side no longer will permit discrimination. They are saying you cannot use theological doctrine to support discriminatory kinds of actions and so are striking down again and again laws stating that a marriage is only between a man and a woman, a doctrine which is based on theology. Many justices are going back to the founding document of our nation, the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and we would add women, are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." In trying to see all are equally treated they have in the issue of marriage, as they have many times before in other situations, struck down discriminatory laws.

We also need to hear that the courts are not telling churches or its members what to believe. They are leaving the theological stuff for us to figure out. No federal judge has ordered a pastor against his or her will to conduct a same sex marriage ceremony. But many are doing so. It is this very question we are struggling with as a denomination. It is a topic that might dominate our annual meeting and hence the reason we might be in the news.

Since you might be asked to be a "theologian in residence," hear what some are saying is the basis for their Holy Disobedience. There are nine verses against homosexuality in the Bible. Some of them are from Leviticus and are found in the same passage as other prohibitions such as not wearing a garment with two different kinds of yarn or eating shellfish. Others are from the writings of the Apostle Paul who also gave

us such sound social advice as a woman should keep silent in the church and be subject to her husband. Jesus said nothing about homosexuality. He did talk about how divorce is wrong and yet we have come to terms with that and now welcome divorced people into our congregations. The Bible lists gluttony as a sin and we know this is a choice, and yet we don't have scales inside the door making you weigh in before worship, to see if you are acceptable to God. The Bible never condemns slavery and accepts as normative that women are second class citizens and yet we have rejected those ideas. So those supporting the full inclusion of GLBTQ population with all of the same rights say that we should be careful that we do not apply the Bible in a selective way on the issue of homosexuality as we have done it in the past regarding women's rights and slavery. You might agree or disagree with their point. But, no matter where you are in your thoughts about the Biblical response to the GLBTQ community I think we can agree that nowhere does the Bible ever say we have the right to hate and reject them. Jesus always reached out to those on the margin with love.

This gets us back to Sequim. When we say we love all we mean all when it comes to being a welcoming church. When we think of people as individuals, our path is clear. We want to be a place of worship where every one of God's children, no matter where they are in life's journey finds a smile, a handshake and love. We want everyone to know they are accepted and loved and cared about. We reject the hate that some spew in the name of religion on this issue.

I believe the major struggle we have is when we, in dealing with our GLBTQ brothers and sisters, lump them into a category. Whenever you believe you have to come up with rules and procedures as to how to relate to a group, any group, things get messy. When we focus on the individual the issues go away. We want all to be treated with respect.

We will continue to live out "Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." You need to ignore the language some will share in the weeks to come. Yes, there are storm clouds gathering but we in Sequim are used to living in a blue hole. We will let God's love shine down on all and work at always making sure all means all when it comes to our response to each and every person who enters our doors.