



## General Conference Follow-up

**John 15:9-17**

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

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In a normal week, by mid-week, I have a pretty clear grasp on what worship will look like and the way the sermon might be a part of it. I start writing the sermon on Tuesday or Wednesday, and I have a full draft ready by Thursday ... maybe Friday at the latest.

That was not true this week.

General Conference ended on Friday at 6:00pm. With all that was happening at General Conference throughout the week, I felt like I needed to wait until the Conference had ended before I could mentally begin to write the sermon. Only, the family and I hopped up to New York City for a quick vacation on Thursday, and we didn't come home until late last night. So, honestly, I didn't even start typing notes for this morning's sermon until we got on the train at 6pm yesterday. It was the first time in this whirlwind of a trip that I had a chance to sit down and collect my thoughts.

I offer the opening commentary to help you understand this is probably not the most coherent of sermons I've ever preached. In some ways, I'm still trying to reconcile what exactly happened at General Conference this year, because y'all ... it was a lot.

I mean, *a lot*.

But, before I talk about the work of General Conference this morning, let's look at our Gospel text from John 15.

(Now, I know that some of you know what happened at General Conference, and you're probably thinking, *don't bury the lead!* Believe me, I'm not. This is the lead; the Gospel message will always be the lead.)

John 15 comes near the end of Jesus' teaching ministry. For nearly three years, the disciples have been following Jesus, listening to his teachings, witnessing his miraculous healings, and watching how he interacted with others in the world. This teaching is being offered before Jesus has been arrested and crucified, before he is resurrected, before he departs in the ascension. It's one of the last teachings Jesus offers directly to the disciples as part of his teaching ministry.

Jesus begins, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."

Listen clearly to Jesus' opening words. The love of Jesus for you and me is not dependent on anything. Jesus loves us, just as the Father has loved him. That is a stated fact. You are loved by Jesus.

Along with that statement of fact, Jesus offers an invitation: “abide in my love.” First Jesus says that we are loved, and then offers the instruction to abide in that love. This is something we have all probably experienced before, either with a parent or a child, or perhaps a friend or even a spouse: Jesus’s opening line makes clear that *being loved* and *abiding in love* are not the same thing. One can be loved by someone else, but can also refuse to abide in that love.

Jesus’s opening line makes clear, we don’t have to do anything to be loved. That is just the way it is: we are loved by Jesus. However, one does need to do something to abide in Jesus’ love. Jesus says, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.”

To abide in Jesus’ love, we must keep Jesus’ commands. Keep that in mind one moment, because in verse 12, Jesus clarifies this further with the informational statement, “This is my commandment ...” But let’s pause for a second, because before we get to verse 12, Jesus tells us what the outcome is of abiding in his love. In verse 11, Jesus says, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

Wrap this first part all together: Jesus loves us, and invites us to abide in his love. We can abide in Jesus’ love by keeping his commandments. And Jesus tells us all of this: that we are loved, and that we can abide in Jesus’ love by keeping the commandments, *so that* we might have the joy of Jesus, and that our own joy may be complete.

The outcome of Jesus’ love, the outcome of our abiding in Jesus’ love, will be divine joy.

This joy needs a brief explanation because this isn’t just any joy that we will experience. Jesus says that “*my joy may be in you.*” This joy is not a personal and selfish joy. This isn’t a “I won the lottery” kind of joy. This isn’t a joy that celebrates a person getting exactly what *they* want for their *own* personal benefit. This is Jesus’ joy. And it only takes a scan through the Biblical text to know about Jesus’ joy. Consider Isaiah 9:3, which says, “When God breaks the yoke of the oppressor, the people rejoice.” Isaiah 29 says, “the humble will rejoice in the Lord; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.” In Luke 15, Jesus tells a couple stories in which a lost item was found, and closes each story with, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin ...” and “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.” In 1 Corinthians 13, the apostle writes, “Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth.” Again, in 2 Corinthians 11, the apostle writes, “Brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace.”

There are many more places where joy is talked about, and where the invitation is given for the people to rejoice, but in every circumstance, the joy comes because God’s will is enacted. The lost are found; the hurt are healed; the broken community is reconnected; the low are lifted up; the high are brought low. ... In one way or another, the order of God’s creation is restored. And, even if but for a snippet of time, when God’s preferred way of living for creation is experienced, there is joy. This is God’s joy. This is Jesus’ joy.

And we feel that joy. When we acknowledge Jesus' love, and abide in that love ... when things are as Jesus commands, we experience joy. Not just any joy, but Jesus' joy. The joy of the Lord.

Now back those commands. Jesus says, "if you keep my commands, you will abide in me."

And then in verse 12, Jesus picks up with a targeted statement, saying, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you."

So to abide in Jesus' love, we have to keep his commands ... and in his next breath, Jesus says clearly, his command is that we love one another as he has loved us. This isn't just any kind of love, it's the kind of love Jesus has offered to us. In case we're confused, he clarifies: there is no greater love than this, that we put our life on the line for the life of another.

This is the love Jesus offered to us: he put himself up against both the religious and political elite of his time to teach and witness to the will of God, a will which rejoices when the lame are made to walk, and the blind are made to see, and the bleeding are healed, and the dead are brought back to life, and those who had been shunned are welcomed as part of the community. It's not just the teaching of Jesus that makes this kind of love significant, it's that he was willing to sacrifice himself to be sure such eternal reconciliation might be true.

Jesus goes on to offer a few other supporting statements. He says, "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." And then he wraps it all up with one more reminder, "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

We talked about commandments a few weeks ago, and it's obvious in the reading of the Biblical text from start to finish: there are a *lot* of commands that we can parse out of the scriptures. But Jesus says that all of the commands we are to follow come back to this conclusion: that we may love one another."

And I know there are a lot of people who like to define love in different ways to justify not actually loving others. People like to call it "tough love" when they act with hatred, anger, and animosity towards others, because somehow their "tough love" is what's going to get them to change their ways. Their tough love is offered with insistence that the person change according to what the person offering tough love believes is the right way to change.

But this tough love act doesn't seem to pass the standard Jesus names for what it means to love. We aren't invited to define how we love for ourselves, we are invited to define it after Jesus's example of love. We are invited to lay our own life down for others, just as Jesus did in giving up his life so that we may share in God's eternal joy.

This is the invitation of Jesus himself, that we might know we are loved, and that we might abide in Jesus' love by keeping Jesus' commands, commands that require us to love one another as Jesus loved

us (that is, laying one's life down for another). And then, in summary, we are told that we are given these commands, so that, once again, we might love one another.

That's the lead. That's the call of the gospel. That is literally Jesus' teaching on faithfulness and commandment following. You are loved; abide in Jesus' love by keeping his commandments, which are to love one another. And by keeping his commands, you will love one another. Amen.

Now let's talk about General Conference.

There was a lot of work done over the past two weeks at General Conference. A new General Conference budget was passed, and bishops are going to be re-allocated around the world based on the new realities of conference sizes. A new pension plan was passed for clergy that's going to shift the financial liability for retirement away from the church, doing away with the existing defined benefit plan. Deacons were given sacramental authority. And a path was paved for a new structure to our global church that would allow for more equitable regionalization, de-centering the American church in the structure of our global denomination.

There was a lot more that was also accomplished, but those topics aren't going to be the ones that get the publicity from General Conference this year. CNN, NBC, and the AP didn't include any of those in their headlines last week. To understand the most significant of the changes from General Conference this year, I need to give a quick recap of the history of the United Methodist Church. Don't worry, it doesn't go as far back as you might think.

In 1968, what was known as the Methodist Church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren. The result was a new name, the United Methodist Church. ... That's right, the denomination as it exists today, though it has its origins in the 1700s, only goes back to 1968 as the "United Methodist Church." ... In response to that merger in 1968, the denomination decided to write a new set of social principles to help guide our life going forward. Understand, the social principles are non-binding statements that help guide our work as a church. As non-binding statements, they have no power in and of themselves, but they do offer guidance and support for other parts of the Church's life, which do carry power and authority. In the wording of the proposed social principles presented to General Conference in 1972, there was no prohibitive language around marriage or ordination for people who identify in the LGBTQ community. In fact, the only language that even referenced the LGBTQ community in the proposed social principles in 1972 said, "persons of homosexual orientation are persons of sacred worth."

But those social principles were not passed as proposed.

From the floor of the General Conference, a delegate made a motion to add in one sentence, which said, "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." That sentence was adopted by a vote of the plenary session, and was added to the social principles in 1972. ... 52 years ago. That's how far back the prohibition goes. It doesn't go back to the start of the Methodist movement in the 1700s. It doesn't even go back to the merger of the north and south Methodist Episcopal Church in 1939. The incompatibility clause goes back to just 1972.

In every quadrennial meeting of the General Conference since then, including two special sessions of the General Conference scheduled to deal specifically with this language, the incompatibility clause has been debated on the floor of the Conference. In every General Conference since 1972, petitions have been submitted that would have removed this language all together. And in every General Conference since 1972, those petitions to remove the language were voted down and the incompatibility clause was retained, *and* other petitions were passed that added additional prohibitive language. Prohibitions were put on pastors officiating same-gendered weddings; petitions were passed that prohibited the ordination of members of the LGBTQ community; petitions were passed the refused funding to any organization or agency that was offering teaching and support for the LGBTQ community; petitions were passed that made it possible for a clergy person to be forced to take a year without pay if they officiated a same-sex wedding. ... *Every single* General Conference since 1972 has seen new language added that was more restrictive and more punitive toward the LGBTQ community and their allies.

I haven't been around for every General Conference since 1972, I'm just not that old ... but more seriously, I've been paying attention to General Conference gatherings for a little over 20 years now. I've watched closely the previous five General Conference gatherings, dating back to 2004. I can say, at least from my vantage, that those General Conferences have not ended with much joy. Even those who supported the petitions that were passed seemed to leave without joy, even after voting in favor of such restrictive and punitive petitions. There have been *moments* of joy in the midst of Conference happenings, but as a global denomination, the United Methodist Church has not spent much time celebrating and rejoicing as a globally connected denomination in quite a while.

And I know that the results of this year's General Conference will continue to leave some uncertainty as to the future of our denomination. There will be some who are not happy with the petitions that passed at this year's Conference. The division of thought certainly indicates there is still a lot of work to do as a Church to share in God's reconciliatory work.

But in a nutshell, the General Conference this year removed *every* statement, clause, and prohibition that has been added in the past 52 years that references or is related to, in any way, the LGBTQ community. I mean it: *every. single. one.* The incompatibility clause has been removed. The prohibition on same-sex marriages has been removed. The prohibition on the ordination of LGBTQ individuals has been removed. The punitive charges against clergy who officiate same-sex marriages have been removed. The restrictions on funding organizations involved with the LGBTQ community have been removed.

The be clear, the General Conference didn't add a lot of new language back in. There was no real attempt to add language that was affirming or supportive – but all of the harmful language toward the LGBTQ community has been removed. ... All of these petitions were removed by a vote of 63% or more voting in favor, and a large number of the removals took place through consent calendars, which passed with over 90% in favor.

As I said earlier, I waited until last night to write this sermon. I needed time to mentally process what all happened last week, and I still have more processing I need to do.

But at least for today, here are the truths I can name. This much I have processed already:

I know there are a lot of people who disagree with the votes and actions of the General Conference. I lament that anyone is hurting. The work of the Church should be fully aligned with God's work of reconciliation, and we aren't there yet.

I also know that for the past 52 years, the United Methodist Church has been a place of hurt, pain, and grief for a lot of people who were told that because of who they loved, they weren't welcome. I know the Church, and its members within, are the reason a lot of people will never cross the threshold of the church, because those individuals were told by the Church they are incompatible with God's love, simply because of who they love.

I also know that the removal of a few lines of text from the denominational handbook is not going to immediately convince those who have been or felt hurt and unwelcomed that it's safe to come back. We have a lot more work to do than changing the words of our polity: we have to change the words we speak, the looks we give, and the invitations we offer. We have to change how we think and engage, so that we might be more loving to one another.

I also know that no change in the Book of Discipline is going to mark the end of our work as a Church. If anyone thinks that the work of this General Conference marks the end of the line, they don't understand Jesus' teaching or the invitation of the Gospel. As sure as there are still people who do not know God's love, we can be sure we still have work to do. For we are loved by Christ, and so we are called to abide in Christ's love ... and how do we do that, but to keep Christ's commandments. And this is the commandment Christ offers, "that you love one another as I have loved you."

And here's the final thing I know: as General Conference concluded, there was a lot of joy. People who have longed to share their gifts in ministry, were joyful that going forward, they will be able to. There was joy from pastors, not unlike myself, who get to celebrate the love of their parishioners in the public eye. There was joy that God is doing a new thing, and that you and I are still invited to be a part of it. There is a divine joy in our midst, even tempered with an lack of understanding of how we move forward and where we go next, but there is a joy in knowing that Christ still loves us; that the Spirit is still leading us; and that our mission has not changed, but will be possible in ways it was not possible before. We are called to extend God's love to those who have been outcast and shunned, that we might make disciples of Jesus Christ, and see this world truly transformed.

Let us give thanks for such joy, and for the love of the Savior, who invites us to abide with him, and to share in the holy work of loving one another. Amen.