

## Wesley United Methodist Church

June 1, 2014

"A Church United."

John 11:1-19

Funny things happen in church sometimes. A Sunday school teacher was telling her first-grade children the parable of the seeds. She explained that God said we can plant a seed. If the sun shines on the ground and it rains, or we water it, the seed will grow. However, everything we plant does not grow, because sometimes the seed blows over the fence and falls among weeds. If we do not take care of it, it dies.

Then she explained that people are often like this. God creates us to be good, and if we live good lives and love God and help others, we can grow into a beautiful person. But if we get lost or fail to follow God's teachings, we can be like the seeds that never grow.

Six-year-old Mark understood this very well. He announced loud enough for the whole church to hear: "My Father! He's over the fence alright. He never comes to church, he doesn't read the Bible, and he never helps anybody." I would like to have heard the conversation in Mark's car going home that morning.

Someone from Oregon spotted a "typo" in the church bulletin. It read like this: "The ushers will eat latecomers." That's one church where you want to be on time. Funny things happen in church. Also, of course, tragic things occur in church as well. We are not all God created us to be.

In John's Gospel Jesus prays for the church. He prays that we will all be one. Considering the present fragmentation of the Christian community, Christ is probably still praying that prayer today. What is it that holds together the body of Christ? What is the source of our unity?

Obviously we are united, first of all, by our beliefs. I say that knowing that churches are just as apt to be torn apart by what they believe. Maybe that's not totally bad. At least where people are arguing, beliefs are important.

There is a delightful story about a certain Mexican bank robber by the name of Jorge Rodriguez, who operated along the Texas border around the turn of the last century. He was so successful that the Texas Ranger put a whole extra posse along the Rio Grande to try and stop him. Sure enough, late one afternoon, one of these special Rangers saw Jorge slipping across the river, and trailed him in a discreet distance as he returned to his home village. He watched as Jorge mingled with the people in the square around town well and then went into his favorite cantina to relax. The Ranger slipped in and managed to get the drop on Jorge. With a pistol to his head he said, "I know who you are, Jorge Rodriguez, and I have come to get back all the money that you have stolen from the banks in Texas. Unless you give it to me, I am going to blow your brains out." There was on fatal difficulty, however, Jorge did not speak English and the Texas Ranger was not versed in Spanish. there they were, two adults at an utter verbal impasse.

But about that time an enterprising little Mexican came up and said, "I am bilingual. Do you want me to act as translator?" The Ranger nodded, and he proceeded to put the words of the Ranger into terms that Jorge could understand. Nervously, Jorge answered back: "Tell the big Texas Ranger that I have not spent a cent of the money. If he will go to the town well, face north, count down five stones, he will find a loose one there. Pull it out and all the money is behind there. Please tell him quickly." The little translator got a solemn look on his face and said to the Ranger in perfect English, "Jorge Rodriguez is a brave man. He says he is ready to die."

It's absurd to say that what you don't know won't hurt you. Tell that to Jorge Rodriguez. It is equally absurd to say that it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere. Of course, it matters what you believe. Sometimes it matters so much that churches divide. That's sad. But when the dust settles, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us, there is a common bond that unites everyone who takes upon himself or herself the name Christian. That bond is

this: We believe that God so loved the world That he gave his own Son that whoever believes in him shall have life everlasting. We believe that and that unites us with millions of believers around this planet.

Likewise, we are united by who we serve. We serve Christ. He is the inspiration of our lives. He is the living presence who works within us. He is the Lord and Master of all we are and hope to be.

We are united by those whom we are trying to save the world for which Christ died. The church can never be satisfied with protecting its own existence. We serve One who poured out his life for the world. That is our calling as well.

There is a moving story that happened during WW II in Sweden. In 1939, trainloads of Jewish children with pale, thin faces and sunken eyes were piling into trains with no belongings except for the large tags around their necks, designating their home city, their name, and their age. They had already seen and experienced far beyond their years atrocities that most people would never have to see in a lifetime. Swedish families were taking in children for the "duration of the war." One of those Swedes who opened his door was Johan Eriksson, a middle-aged man who had already raised four children as a young widower. When he learned that a frightened young nine-year-old named Rolf needed a home, he responded and so a little Jewish boy began to adjust to life in a strict Swedish Baptist home.

At first, when there was a knock on the door or loud voices outside, the boy would dive into a closet and cover his head, but he was surrounded with warmth and love in the Eriksson house, and he began to gain weight, lose the far-away gaze, and eventually he began to laugh again.

When an invasion by the Nazis seemed imminent, men at the machine shop warned Johan that soon he would lose the boy. "They'll never take him so long as I'm alive," declared Johan.

In keeping with a promise that the Swedish government had made to the Jewish refugee organization, Johan respected Rolf's religious heritage. Johan took little Rolf to church with his family, but he went to considerable lengths to see that the boy also learned the Jewish tradition and when the proper age came, he was prepared for and celebrated his Bar Mitzvah. When the war ended, Johan wanted to return to Rolf's parents a son who had been raised as closely as possible to the way they would have wanted. But when the war did end, the family was never reunited, of course. Rolf's parents perished somewhere in Europe along with millions of others of the Jewish faith. Their last hastily scribbled note to Rolf instructed him to never forget what his Swedish family had done for him.

Rolf did not forget. He grew up to become a successful businessman with a family of his own. But he never forgot Johan's acts of kindness. If Johan was sick or needed him, Rolf thought nothing of taking the train across Sweden to spend what was left of the weekend with the man who had become like a father. And when Johan was on his deathbed, all the children hurried home, but everyone knew who would arrive first-Rolf.

Who is it that you are offering shelter to? To whom are you reaching out arms of love and mercy? I ask the same question of myself. We have no other purpose as the church of Jesus Christ.

United by what we believe. We believe in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and Lord. United by whom we serve. We seek to serve Him in all we think, say and do. United by whom we are seeking to save. The world for which Christ died.