The Household of Faith

June 3, 2018

 I am so very pleased to be with you today. I am grateful to Pastor Amy for inviting me to fill her pulpit today and I’m hoping you have not brought over-ripe vegetables with you. Today is my reliability test. If I can preach all weekend, then maybe I can reclaim a place in the preaching rotation. But it all depends on you. If you punctuate my message with lots of cheers and applause, then I may be back. On the other hand, if I have to dodge a lot of vegetables…

*Say after me…*

 *I love you, Lord*

 *I praise you, Lord*

 *I thank you, Lord*

 *I want to serve you with my life*

 *Sweet Lord, I pray that today every word I say and every thought I have might come from you. You know what I have in mind to say, so I ask you that if it is at odds with your will, close my mouth and change my mind. Have me speak only those things that are in tune with your will and your plan. Have me say only those things that would draw all of us closer to you and would testify to your glory. I ask you to touch with your Holy Spirit those who hear, soften the hearts of those who have hardened them, and for those who are searching, help them find a home filled with your loving presence. I ask it all in the name of Jesus. Amen.*

 “…so great a cloud of witnesses…” The writer of Hebrews gives us this amazing picture of the church. I don’t know about you, but when I hear that phrase, it calls to my mind the spirits of all those who have gone before me. Millions and millions of followers of Christ, who over two thousand years, have given their hearts to Jesus, have done their best to model Jesus in their lives, have died, and have joined all those followers who have died before them. Over the ages, countless men and women and children have given their hearts, their lives, and their devotion in the cause of Christ. It warms my heart and brings tears to my eyes to be part of the present family of Christ-followers, doing my best to bring honor to the name of Christ and to the lives of those who have gone before.

 In the old baptismal vows of the former Methodist church, after a person was baptized, there was a congregational pledge designed to affirm the vows that had been given and received, and to welcome the new convert into the midst of this “great cloud of witnesses.” It begins with the pastor addressing the church… “Members of the household of faith…”

 I love that phrase. It says to me that we are more than just fellow travelers on the road. We are a family. We belong to the same household. We are related to each other as family. It’s why we call ourselves “sister” and “brother.” We are the church, the household of faith, the present followers of Jesus Christ. And when we watch as someone is just baptized, we also renew our vows to ”renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of our sin.” We renew our vow to “accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.” We “confess Jesus Christ as our Savior, put our whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as our Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races.” This is our sacred promise to the God of the universe, to Jesus Christ, and to the Holy Spirit. It is a holy thing. We are the family of faith, the household of faith.

 And like all families, we will disagree about nearly everything! Will Rogers, one of my favorite pundits, grew up in the 1920’s and 30’s as a Methodist in Oklahoma. He said, “Methodist preachers are like manure. Spread’em around and they do a lot of good. Pile’em all in one place and they get to stinkin’! It is said that two Methodists will provide at least three opinions, followed by a potluck lunch.

 There are some big things going on in the United Methodist Church these days. You may know that two years ago, the General Conference, the group of Methodists representing the Methodist Church worldwide, charged a group of United Methodist bishops to devise a plan to make some changes to the way we treat LGBTQ people. The issue has become divisive. The bishops have already offered a preliminary summary of the results of their discussions. There will be lots more discussion to come.

 Within the UM Church, it is thought there are three general opinions about how this should all move forward. One group wants retain language that says LGBTQ people cannot be pastors or church leaders, or in many cases, even be invited into membership. A second group is Ok with trusting individual churches and pastors to make decisions regarding the roles of LGBTQ people in their churches. And a third group wants to openly invite and accept all people, LGBTQ or otherwise into the church. Tempers are flaring. There is talk that some congregations will leave the United Methodist Church. Some are already making moves in that direction. There may be division. There will undoubtedly be struggle and hurt. Things will be said, claims will be made, insults will be hurled, lies will be told. It is going to get ugly. No one knows how it will all be resolved, but we will all likely be drawn into the storm. That is why it is so important for us today to be clear about the essentials.

 I expect that most of you disagree with me about something, maybe nearly everything. That makes us even. The beauty of all that is that even when we disagree, we still can sit quietly beside each other, sing our hymns, pray for each other, and worship God with our whole heart. We may not agree about some things, but we share complete agreement on the important things. We recite the Apostles’ Creed together… “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord… I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy universal church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” This is the important stuff. These are the essentials.

 My father liked canned spinach. If you’ve ever had canned spinach, you know what I’m talking about. It’s dark green and slimy. It lies on a plate like a clump of bad seaweed. My mother added to its native delectability by slathering it with butter. But my Dad would gobble it down and ask for more. I can’t even think about it without my stomach doing a little flip-flop. I could never get it down my throat. Until his dying day, Dad loved canned spinach. Until I die, I’ll never try to eat it again. We disagree on canned spinach. But I never knew a man who loved me more deeply, or loved me as perfectly as my Dad. And I loved him, and still do, with a desperate love. When you love someone so much, spinach doesn’t stand a chance.

 Mom was a crummy cook. I don’t know whether it was learned or just came naturally. When I met Carol as a junior in high school, I weighed 105 pounds. Carol and her Mom know how to cook. I’m a walking advertisement. But my Mom was never a cook. She would go to the butcher and buy a roast for Sunday dinner. She would buy the best cut of meat in the butcher shop. We nearly always had dinner together on Sundays. We sat at the dining room table, used cloth napkins and the good dishes, and were required to use our best table manners. She would cook that roast until it was the consistency of a meteorite and serve it with either peas or lima beans, boiled into mush, and mashed potatoes. Sundays I tried to stay late at church, got lost in the neighborhood, or pretended to never hear her calling. Sunday dinner was awful. I didn’t recognize my dislike as a disagreement, but I have come to understand that this tendency to bake good food into charcoal was part of my Mom’s signature style. I never knew what real food tasted like until I ate with Carol’s family.

 But my Mom loved me with a fire that was unquenchable. Nothing was too good for me. If it was within her means, she would work hard to see I got what I needed and wanted. My recognizing that caused me to modify my needs and wants into things that were attainable, more modest, and less costly. And I loved her with all my heart until the day she died. Since then, she and my Dad are constantly in my thoughts. I remember the wonders they provided, the joy they brought, the things they taught me, and the way they were always supporting and encouraging me. We disagreed on some things, but we always loved each other. When someone asks me to describe my family, I invariably begin with my Mom and Dad, even though they’ve both been gone for a long time now. We were, and still are, family.

 John Wesley, who founded the Methodist movement back in about 1740, understood this. He said, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” The really important things we must agree on. We can disagree on the small stuff. Everyone is entitled to their opinion. But no matter what, we love each other and treat each other with kindness and respect. We offer all the grace we can. This is good stuff! We need more of it today, I think. Don’t you agree?

 John Wesley, also, as a general guide for us, wrote three simple rules for us to follow. He says, first: Do no harm. He lists a number of behaviors he considers harmful. Among them are:

 Drunkenness

 Slaveholding

 Fighting, quarreling, brawling, returning evil for evil

 Uncharitable or unprofitable conversation

 Doing to others as we would not they should do unto us

 Doing what we know is not for the glory of God

 His second rule is: Doing good.

 As you have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and as far as possible, to all men

 To their bodies, by giving food to the hungry

 By clothing the naked

 By visiting or helping them that are sick or in prison

 To their souls, by instructing, reproving, or exhorting all with whom we come into contact

 By doing good, especially to them that are of the household of faith, or groaning to be so

 By employing them preferably than others

 By buying one of another

 By helping each other in business

 By all possible diligence and frugality

 By denying yourself and taking up your cross daily

 His third rule is: attend upon all the ordinances of God.

 By public worship of God

 By listening carefully to the preaching of the Word

 By accepting the Lord’s Supper

 By family and private prayer

 By searching the Scriptures

 Three simple rules: Do no harm, Do good, Stay in love with God

 Once again, these are the essentials. “In the essentials, unity; in the non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”

 It occurs to me that if we pay attention to Wesley, we tend to be pretty good people. We tend to become people who would please God, who would honor God.

 Sometimes, it is hard to translate these concepts into real life. I’ve read a list, but let me flesh it out a bit with one example of what it means to live out these rules.

 I have told you this story before, but I’m going to tell it again, because it demonstrates in real life what I think God calls us to be and do.

 One of my fellow pastors, Dr. Fred Craddock, tells of the time he had been invited to attend a conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was Friday night, and he was looking forward to the events of Saturday morning. Friday night the session was over. He went out of the church. It was beginning to spit snow. He was surprised— early-November. His host was surprised. In fact, he had written and said it was too early for the hard winter, but do bring a light windbreaker. It was snowing. The next morning, it was three feet against the door at the motel where he was staying. The host called. He said they had to cancel the session. The buses aren't running, the airport is closed. We can't get around. The city has been surprised. They're not grading the streets, yet. They were caught unprepared. I can't even come and get you for breakfast. Wonderful! But, he said, if you can get down the street about a block and walk around the corner, there's a little bus station. If it's open, there's a little cafe in there. You can get some breakfast.

 He put on his windbreaker. It didn't even work in the room. He went outside, blowing snow and ice, fought his way against the wind down the street and around the corner. The bus stop was open. A little cafe. He went in. Every stranded traveler in western Michigan was in there—wall-to-wall stranded people. He made his way in and found a little place with some folk there and a chair at the end of a little table. He sat down.

 A man in a greasy apron came over and said, “What'll you have.”

 He said, “Can I see a menu?”

 He said, “What do you need with a menu. We got soup.”

 “That's what I was going to order. Soup.”

 Here came the soup. He put the spoon to the soup. It was awful, absolutely awful. He couldn't stand it. He put the spoon down. But it was hot. He said he put his hands around it and with his little soup-heater, he consoled himself, regretting this terrible state of affairs.

 The door opened. Somebody yelled, “Close the door.” And she did, this woman who came in. She found a place to sit at a table, pushed in there, sat down. And he came over, this man with the greasy apron and said, "Whatta ya want?"

 She said, “A glass of water.”

 He brought her a glass of water and said, “Now, whatta ya want?”

 She said, “Just the glass of water.”

 He said, “Ya gotta order.”

 She said, “Just a glass of water.”

 “Ya gotta buy something. Whatta ya think this is, a church or something? I've got paying customers here. Now whatta ya want?”

 She said, “Can I just stay...till I get warm?”

 He said, “Ya gotta order something or get out.”

 He was getting loud. She got up to leave. Those at her table got up to leave. And you know what? Others got up to leave! He said he saw everybody getting up to leave. He got up to leave. He said, “I'm voting for something here, I don't know what it is.” But they started getting up. Everybody in that place got up and started moving toward the door.

 And the man in the apron said, “Ok, Ok, she can stay.”

 And everybody sat down. And she sat down. And he brought her some soup.

 He said, “I said to a man beside me, I said, ‘Who is she?’”

 “I never saw her before.”

 He said, “Wasn't that something? It's as though they were saying, ‘If she's not welcome, I’m not welcome. If she’s not part of the family, neither am I.’ We all sat down and the room was rather silent except for the slurping of soup.”

 He said, "If they can do it, I can do it.”

 He got his spoon and went back at that soup. It was pretty good soup. He ate the whole bowl. He said, he didn’t know what kind it was. It looked kind of gray. He didn’t know what was in it.

 But as he got up to leave and went out and back toward his room, he realized that he knew then what it tasted like. That soup tasted a little bit like bread and wine. Just a little bit like family. Just a little bit like church.

Hebrews 12:1-2

 *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

I have thought long and hard about this passage of Scripture and one phrase has kept nagging me… “who, for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross.” It is a hard chasm to cross for me. What kind of joy would that be? What kind of joy would be so powerful and so precious that it would cause you to voluntarily walk to your own crucifixion?

 I found that I was in good company with that question. Charles Martin, one of my very favorite authors, wrote in his blog that he had been wrestling with that question, as well. He said…

 One day I got stuck on this scripture so I said, "Lord, what 'joy' could possibly cause you to endure the cross? I mean what on earth, could possibly be worth the hell of that?" He was quiet a minute. Then He whispered, “You."

 Brothers and sisters, the world may change around us, the United Methodist Church may dissolve and blow away, but our relationship with Jesus Christ will be the cornerstone of our existence long after all the other things have faded and gone. Bishop Palmer encourages us to “be not afraid,” and I think that is good advice. As long as our eyes are on Jesus Christ, as long as our focus is on maintaining our relationship with Almighty God, as long as we actively pursue ways to deepen and enrich our faith, we will be fine. We will hold onto each other. We will encourage each other. We will love each other. We will worship together. We will care for each other. We will pray together. We will be the church. We will be a family. We will be the household of faith.

Pray with me…

 *God of Everything, God of the United Methodist Church, God of First United Methodist Church of Springboro, have mercy on us. As we navigate the rocks and shoals of these times, guide us into calm and open water. Help us to remember that our relationship with you is the most precious gift we have. Give each of us the heart to find unity in the essentials of our faith, grace and patience and tolerance for those who disagree with us in the non-essentials of our faith, and loving kindness to all persons at all times. Have mercy on us, Lord. We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ.*

*Amen.*