

*This I Believe -  
The United Methodist Social Creed  
Acts 2:43-47*

When I was in seminary, studying for ministry, I heard in a class one sentence that has stuck with me—as much as anything else I learned in that time. It’s the historical explanation for how the Christian church, in those first years after Jesus, became the fastest growing religion in the history of the world. In just a few hundred years, Christianity went from being a small sect of Judaism to being the official religion of the Roman Empire, an empire so big that it spread over what are today as many countries in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and Asia. Historians have documented this: what accounts for the phenomenal growth of the Christian church—the one thing people saw that made a life of following Jesus Christ look terrifically attractive to people on the outside—was the way followers of Jesus loved and cared for one another. “*See how they love one another*” was what outsiders said about the Christian community. What they saw is what is described in that passage we just read from the second chapter of Acts:

*All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God’s goodness to everyone.*

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates: “Every meal was a celebration.” That sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? No wonder other people wanted to be a part of this. And the even more compelling thing was, it was a community that welcomed everyone—*anyone*—who wanted to come along. This practice—of inviting people in and then taking care of one another—more than anything else, was what made the Christian Church come alive and stay alive and grow. That’s a historical fact.

I love that. I’ve carried that little factoid around with me all these years since seminary. It’s like a little treasure in my pocket that I take out to look at from time to time. When I get discouraged about the Church, or lose the thread of why we do the things we do, I remind myself that this is what the Church has been, what it can be, what it *must* be.

I was pretty surprised to find, some years later, an article in a scholarly journal that said that it’s likely that the practice of sharing property and meals and caring for one another was *not* unique to those early Christians; that they picked it up from some other sects that were already living that way.

I was so disappointed.

Not because what I believed before is untrue—this article didn’t *contradict* the fact that the mark of the early Christian communities was, “See how they love one another.” What disappointed me for a moment was that maybe the way those early Christians lived out their faith wasn’t *unique*. That Christians weren’t the *only* people who lived in that generous, self-giving, deep community way that is so inspiring.

*Uniqueness* is one of the ways we tend to identify truth. If we find something that is the best, or the most, or the biggest of something, it's a sign of value. In western American culture at least, this is something we strive for: to excel in a way that sets us apart from everyone else. It's part of our competitive make-up. The Guinness Book of World Records has been recording these things for years: the world's biggest hamburger, the world's tallest man, the world's ugliest dog. Reality TV shows gave everybody a chance to find fame by being the biggest weight loser, the chef who's faced the worst cooking disaster, the family with the most badly behaved children. Now, social media can raise one clever tweet or Instagram photo above all the rest.

(This is really just an aside, but you know what I think is the most annoying mark of uniqueness in our world today? Passwords. That whole collection of identifiers we have to make up and then remember, so that we can find ourselves online. Some with more than 8 characters; some with at least one capital letter, a number and a symbol; nothing too obvious; nothing you've used recently; nothing you can easily remember. Someday we're going to look back at this time and say, "Remember when we had to use all those ridiculous passwords just to get onto our own accounts")

Passwords aside, we value uniqueness: whatever it is that makes us different from everyone else, gives us a sense of our place in the world. Confidence that we will be seen, known, even in a crowd. There are times in our lives—like middle school—when we work harder at blending in, not being the most *anything*; but for most of our lives, it's our *particular* place and value that we work at. That's what makes falling in love such blissful experience. Someone has seen me—me alone—for who I am, and for what makes me lovable. "Who am I?" all of us ask. What is my life about? What is my particular calling in the world? This I believe, I've asked you to imagine in this season of our life together.

What makes a *community* work is finding the intersection between what each of us knows authentically, uniquely, for ourselves and the commitments we hold in common. This church can only do its best work when we are 'on the same page,' when what you want and hope for your life is encouraged and given space to grow here. You don't necessarily know that coming in, do you? Few of us research the mission statement of a church before we wander in the first time. Like those early Christians, we are wooed in by the scent of something attractive—*see how they love one another*. Only gradually do we gather the sense that this church—any church—'fits' for us.

So today, as we come close to the end of our series called *This I Believe*, I want to say a word about the unique beliefs of the United Methodist Church. Virtually every Christian sect or denomination uses in its mission statement Jesus' last words to his disciples: "Go and make disciples." That's what most churches would say they are about: making disciples—followers—of Jesus Christ. The United Methodist Church has added a phrase to that mission statement that, for me, changes everything. It makes Methodism the path of Christianity I choose—and maybe you too. The United Methodist Church says that its mission is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ *for the transformation of the world*." It's the 'why' of everything we do. Whatever we do—preach, do music, teach children, maintain buildings, organize committees, eat cake, learn what it means to follow Jesus—we do not to appease an angry God, or assure ourselves of a secure and blissful afterlife, but so that the *whole world* might be transformed—changed into a place that reflects the visible, generous, inclusive, reconciling love of God.

What that means is that in *this* kind of Christian community, faith—beliefs—aren't complete until they get translated into action, the ways we love one another. And so, in a uniquely Methodist way, our creed is a Social Creed. It says what it means to be a Christian in real life in this world. It speaks of commitments to the earth, to justice, to peace, to an inclusive stance toward people of every kind of difference. Its final sentence says, "*We...gladly accept our commission to manifest the life of the gospel in the world.*" (The creed is reprinted below.)

The Church doesn't always live out these commitments perfectly. This week, in Portland, the United Methodist Church begins its every-four-years General Conference. Delegates from all over the world will come together to worship, to re-state the Church's commitments, and to disagree with one another—about some decisions that we will never notice here in Campbell, and some things that matter a lot. Much of what you will read and hear about General Conference will be news that is not exactly "See how they love one another."

But these are our people. The delegates at this Conference, whether they're from Ivory Coast, Korea, the Philippines, Fiji, Angola, Alabama, or Northern California, whether they are conservative or liberal, are people who are part of a United Methodist Church that pledges itself to be part of God's work of transforming the world to look more like the kingdom of God Jesus talked about.

And so, in solidarity in this work, with our best intentions not to be cynical or hopeless, I invite you this morning to stand as you are able and to join in the Litany that accompanies the United Methodist social creed.

### **The United Methodist Social Creed**

*We believe in God, Creator of the world; and in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of creation. We believe in the Holy Spirit, through whom we acknowledge God's gifts, and we repent of our sin in misusing these gifts to idolatrous ends.*

*We affirm the natural world as God's handiwork and dedicate ourselves to its preservation, enhancement, and faithful use by humankind.*

*We joyfully receive for ourselves and others the blessings of community, sexuality, marriage, and the family.*

*We commit ourselves to the rights of men, women, children, youth, young adults, the aging, and people with disabilities; to improvement of the quality of life; and to the rights and dignity of all persons.*

*We believe in the right and duty of persons to work for the glory of God and the good of themselves and others and in the protection of their welfare in so doing; in the rights to property as a trust from God, collective bargaining, and responsible consumption; and in the elimination of economic and social distress.*

*We dedicate ourselves to peace throughout the world, to the rule of justice and law among nations, and to individual freedom for all people of the world.*

*We believe in the present and final triumph of God's Word in human affairs and gladly accept our commission to manifest the life of the gospel in the world. Amen.*

### **A Companion Litany to Our Social Creed**

God in the Spirit revealed in Jesus Christ,  
calls us by grace  
to be renewed in the image of our Creator,  
that we may be one  
in divine love for the world.

Today is the day  
God cares for the integrity of creation,  
wills the healing and wholeness of all life,  
weeps at the plunder of earth's goodness.

**And so shall we.**

Today is the day  
God embraces all hues of humanity,  
delights in diversity and difference,  
favors solidarity transforming strangers into friends.

**And so shall we.**

Today is the day  
God cries with the masses of starving people,  
despises growing disparity between rich and poor,  
demands justice for workers in the marketplace.

**And so shall we.**

Today is the day  
God deplors violence in our homes and streets,  
rebukes the world's warring madness,  
humbles the powerful and lifts up the lowly.

**And so shall we.**

Today is the day  
God calls for nations and peoples to live in peace,  
celebrates where justice and mercy embrace,  
exults when the wolf grazes with the lamb.

**And so shall we.**

**Today is the day  
God brings good news to the poor,  
proclaims release to the captives,  
gives sight to the blind, and  
sets the oppressed free.**

**And so shall we.**