

“All You Need Is Love” Episcopal Address
Bishop Cynthia Fierro Harvey Texas Annual Conference 2023
Mark 12:28-31

You’ve heard it over and over again!
It’s all about love. All you need is love!

Love is patient;
love is kind;
love is not envious
or boastful
or arrogant
or rude.
Love does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable;
love keeps no record of wrongs;
Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.
Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
[invite the congregation] Love never ends.

In Mark’s gospel we hear a command to focus on love - we **MUST** love the Lord our God with everything we’ve got then these emphatic words – You **WILL** love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater.

No other commandment is greater than Love of God **and** love of neighbor!

Friends tonight we gather as a people commanded to **LOVE!**

As a people whose primary proclamation is that love became flesh and as Eugene Peterson says, “moved into our neighborhood!”

Love has moved in tonight! Into **THIS** place!

Could you feel the love in this place as you walked in?

As you saw one another in the lobby, the elevator, as you had the opportunity to catch up while waiting in the registration line, could you feel the love?

As you settled into your seat could you take in the breath of the love that is in this place?

Did you feel the love as you heard your voices in harmony together, asking one another – are we yet alive?

It is because of love,
in the flesh,
right here,
right now,
in this place,
that we can say that there is **revival** in this place today.

Last week this space held people for some ordinary meeting, convention, or luncheon –

THIS week THIS space has been made sacred and holy by your presence and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. This space has been set aside for Holy Conferencing – for love made flesh, for REVIVAL.

Love made flesh in the reality of life,
love in the messiness of life,
love in the midst of change.

For much has changed since you last gathered. There are people missing.
People we loved.
People that loved us.
People we called family.
and like family, people we disagreed with, sometimes strongly, sometimes to the point of much anxiety and tension.

Frankly, I hope that a little of that tension is gone.

My prayer is that animosity is gone, and it's been replaced with understanding and harmony.

I pray that fear is gone and that it's been replaced by an undaunted, Pentecost like Holy Spirit-infused courage.

I pray that the Spirit of God in this place permeates every fiber of our being – of our being together.

I pray that then Spirit helps us
reclaim our connection,
our identity,
our LOVE for one another and for the world!

Revival is possible because the Spirit is stirring in us, right in this moment, in this place.

Revival is possible because the primary manifestation of the Spirit's outpouring is LOVE!

All things hinge on love –
love of God,
love of neighbor,
love of one another.

Nothing is greater!

This week we will focus on our future together.

Yes, we lament the past – the difficult meetings, the profoundly difficult questions, the agonizing votes, the sense of betrayal – overwhelming at times, the toxic and manipulative misinformation, the moments when we were utterly numb with pain...

I have heard you, and I continue to hear you...

I acknowledge and intimately share in your pain!

We must not forget it **AND** let's take what we have learned, leverage it and let's square our shoulders to a future filled with possibility, a future that has already

been laid out for us – A future rooted in our revived, love-filled Spirit as God’s people. A future rooted in our call to make that love known in every corner of the places we live, work, and play.

Because of that Spirit we can face the future unafraid because as we know “best of all God is with us.”

Are you in?

Are you game?

Are you ready?

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Let us focus on what we are for // not what we are against.

Let us prepare for the sacred surprises of the Spirit.

Now, I have to pause here for a minute and get real. Because the reality is - those who know me, know that I am not one to lean heavily on the word “surprise”. I really don’t like surprises. I always say the best surprise is no surprise. I like a good plan, a solid itinerary.

But SACRED SURPRISES!, those are different!!! I have come to realize that sacred surprises, surprises that are infused with the Holy Spirit are a holy exception.

Unlike worldly surprises that bring uncertainty and anxiety, **sacred** surprises carry the profound assurance of divine guidance and **love**. Because these surprises are guided by the Holy Spirit, they are filled with purpose, meaning, and a sense of call.

They lead to transformation, sometimes not quite the transformation we were anticipating, but transformation nonetheless!

I welcome sacred surprises, and frankly in this place this week **I expect them**.

They are opportunities for spiritual awakening, alignment, abundant blessings – they are opportunities for – REVIVAL!

Let us prepare for revival!

Let us take our lead from the small group of 25 persons in Chester, TX who organized themselves, elected their officers, registered with the secretary of state, opened a bank account, and found a place to worship and lined up pastors to preach and then secured a retired pastor who came out of retirement and out of a health crisis to lead them.

They named themselves Hope United Methodist

This small but mighty group of 25 have been meeting Sunday after Sunday. And on one Sunday not long ago, they gifted the conference with a check for \$1500 for a bishop's initiative and challenged other churches in the Conference to do the same.

I am happy to report that today individuals and churches have risen to the challenge and that \$1500 has multiplied and is now at a tad over \$160,000.

Ya'll that is a sacred surprise! And it's how a movement starts! 25 people!

Oh my how love works! How hope emerges! 25 people are living up to their name Hope United Methodist Church.

By the way there is room for more surprises!

On the same day I was in Chester, Rev. Kip Gilts was in Jasper

to charter the faithful who, again, led by laity, said we love this church too much – found a pastor, opened a sizeable bank account, found a place to worship and is now Church of the Pines UMC. 67 people in Jasper are making a difference in their community.

A few weeks before, I was in Baytown and received 115! into the General Membership of the Conference. Once the church charters those members will transfer to the new church.

Last week we chartered Mosaic – the first of the New Faith Communities – from day one they have averaged 240 people in worship. They have taken the broken pieces and shaped a beautiful Mosaic.

Ya'll it was glorious. I cannot even begin to tell you the feeling – the Holy Spirit kind of feeling when _____ persons stand to join the church. It was Pentecost all over again.

There is a group in Conroe, who, led by a lay person established Waters Edge.

The group in Bryan/College Station call themselves Bryan Community Church and continues to shape a new worshipping community.

Fairview opened their doors to the diaspora from the Tyler area almost immediately

A new African American faith community is now gathering capturing the displaced from the 288 corridor and beyond. They will have their first public worship service this coming Sunday!

There is a flurry of activity in Henderson aided by the leaders of First United Methodist in Longview.

St. Matthew in the Jacksonville area has captured willing and faithful United Methodists. They are meeting in a beautiful little church just outside Jacksonville – The Chapel at Teaberry Farm. They are a small yet committed group of United Methodists.

Redwater in the Texarkana is feeling the love and the Spirit moving to shape a new worshipping community.

Friends, there is a lot of love happening all around our conference, there's a revival going on. We are in a season of Pentecost!

Many of you have opened your doors and your heart to those who suddenly found themselves without a church home.

I am so thankful for you -- you've provided safe and welcoming spaces for deeply connected United Methodists who have needed to find solace and support.

Your unwavering commitment to being the church, and exemplifying love for your neighbors, fills my heart with deep gratitude.

THIS is SACRED HOSPITALITY that has and continues to make a tangible difference in the lives of those in the Texas Conference.

You are BEING THE CHURCH!

Thank you! Thank you for loving your neighbor.

Love. Love. Love. Love of God, and love of one another.

What's happened in the last year has been terrible, it has broken my heart and I know it has broken yours. And yet we have learned a lot about ourselves, each other, and about our life together.

We have learned that all things work together for good! Sometimes we can't see it, but we know that best of all God is with us.

Adam Bucko has been a committed voice in the movement for the renewal of Christian Contemplative spirituality and in his book *Let Your Heartbreak Be Your Guide* he says

God has invited each and every one of us to the great feast that can be our life. It is a feast where joy overshadows our normal worries and pains and where the smallness of our lives is transformed into the largeness of God's dream.

It is a feast where each of us has a place to sit, eat, drink, talk and even dance, and where our wounds are transformed into gifts. It's a feast that changes us into the likeness of Christ, God's very heart, and where our lives begin to echo the holy energies of God's compassion, which our world needs so much right now.

My friends – **we have a feast before us** where the largeness of God's dream is happening in real time.

It is a feast where everyone has a place to sit, eat, drink, talk and EVEN dance!

Remember....God is the God of reversals – dark turns to light, night into day, the lame walk, the blind see, the wounded are made whole, the hungry are fed, the thirsty find drink, ...

Ya'll that's our work!

Let's not let fear get in the way. Let's not let fear guide us.
Let's allow the Spirit of love to lead us into an uncertain yet hopeful future.

We have a choice to make, and we must choose HOPE!

Because in God's immeasurable imagination – God sees hope right here, right now, in the TAC.

It is time for us to reclaim who we are as United Methodists. Revive our identity. Renew our connection!

I have held onto a piece of paper with these words from a group called MaMuse. They are a folk group that uses their music to bring spiritual uplift, healing and blessing ...

Hear these beautiful words....

We shall be known by the company we keep, by the ones who circle round to tend these fires

We shall be known by the ones who sow and reap the seeds of change alive from deep within the earth

It is time now

*It is time now that we thrive
It is time we lead ourselves to the well
It is time now and what a time to be alive
In this great turning we shall learn to lead in love*

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The time is NOW! to lead in love!

What if we said we welcome everyone, not just any kind of welcome but we welcome with a “A LOVE that welcomes EVERYONE”

What if our mission included a love that births communities into being that make disciples for the transformation of the world.

What if we set love in motion in a way that fuels our praying, dreaming, and imagining for revival.

What about a love that leads us into a more loving and kinder future – a future where we do less harm to one another – a future where we do less harm to our witness for the kingdom of God?

Sorry ya’ll but I have a lot to say – I have been waiting a long time to say these things

We are in a thin space right now.

Where heaven and earth almost touch

We are at a place where we can revive the church through relationship. Through Connection one to the other

Friends there are no forsaken places!

There are people and places all around us that need to know the love of Jesus.

Let us not squander this opportunity.

We are at a critical juncture. Father Richard Rohr reminds us that the word for liminal in Latin means threshold. When we stand in a threshold we are betwixt and between. We are in transition. We are in the process of leaving one room but not having quite entered another.

These kinds of transitions are always both/and. There is fluidity in transitions. There is messiness in transitions.

AND there must be resilience in transitions.

There are new frontiers ahead – some may be familiar while others have never been experienced.

Liminal space Rohr says allows for vulnerability and openness as we wait for something new to happen – something new to emerge.

We typically like to avoid these spaces but much of our work is to get ourselves and others **to** this place and stay a while – long enough to learn something. Rohr says – something essential ... something new.

This is where transformation happens. As uncomfortable as it is, this is the place that propels us to our next.

Put your listening ears on and hear this from the wisdom of Rohr

Christ isn't showing up to see our perfect selves. Instead, we are invited into a real, deep, transformative conversation, there on the threshold between who we are and who we can become, if we are willing to let go of what holds us back.

Often our scarcity mindset, our fear, our sadness causes us to think of all the things that we lack to help us move forward, to help us live into the promise.

Can we let go of this mindset and let God make something of us and this Conference that eyes have never seen, and ears have never heard?

Can we simply love?

Can we embrace the sacred surprises of the Spirit!!

I am so ready!

The landscape is very different and will be even more different as we continue to take the next faithful step. While I would love to catapult us or do an I Dream of Jeannie move and blink us into the future, I remind myself that all we can do is take the next faithful step.

The next faithful step might actually be to sit and listen and not take a step at all. One of the most important things we can do is listen for one another's deepest yearnings and the yearnings of the people we have the privilege of leading.

It's okay to not have all the answers, to not have it all figured out. And it is even okay to admit that we could be wrong. We don't have to pretend to have our stuff together.

We are all broken, we are all people in search of something bigger than us.

We are people longing for peace – not like the Miss America world peace kind - but peace, shalom, completeness, healing peace in our world, peace in our families, peace in our churches – peace!

By the power of the Holy Spirit, I am more than certain that together we will guide The Texas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church to a new future that is filled with hope, promise and new possibilities we cannot even begin to fathom.

For though smaller, our vision is big. Our reliance on the movement of the spirit is huge and our love for one another greater than ever.

We have an opportunity to create a renewed sense of unity in this Conference and in our churches and in our United Methodist Connection.

We have a remarkable opportunity to write a new story – craft a fresh and vibrant narrative that redefines the essence of being Connected - being in covenant - being THE United Methodist Church.

Let us embrace the awe-inspiring and transformative sacred surprises that the Spirit has in store for us.

Together, -- TOGETHER! -- we can embrace the exhilarating adventure of shaping a UNITED Methodist community that radiates hope, inclusivity, and boundless love.

Let's set the tone for the rest of the Connection. Let's model what it means to be United Methodist.

Let's set a table that is large enough for everyone – don't live into the narrative that says there is no room for those with differing thoughts, opinions, interpretations,

and instead let's use our energy to make room, let's use our energy to make something of this moment – something holy and sacred that is a catalyst for change.

Let us base every decision we make on LOVE. We don't have to understand or agree... we just have to LOVE!

It will require not just us in this room but all who are in our Churches, because the mission of the church is to be carried out by **everyone** who is called to discipleship says the theological task in the Book of Discipline.

To be persons of faith is to hunger to understand the truth given to us by Jesus Christ.

We cannot do this in isolation. It must be done in communion, in conversation.
IN LOVE

We have spent way too long in this quagmire it is time we return to the basics of our calling.

We are called to lead people to Christ.

There are people who have been shut out by the church, made to feel less than, not good enough.

Because they don't look like us, talk like us, are the same color as us, smell like us or love like us – they have not been given a place at our tables.

This must stop! Enough is enough!

Let us beg for forgiveness, turn from our ways and live the life that was intended for us.

When we love like Jesus loves – there is always room, there is always enough love to go around.

People are watching us. People are watching the Texas Annual Conference they always have. This time they are watching to see how we recover, how we treat each other. How we encourage one another. How we love each other. How we love our neighbor.

And friends....

Let's make sure that....

Hungry children are fed, are safe, educated, and cared for.

Let's care for those suffering from mental illness, addiction, homelessness, a broken immigration system and make sure they find help in our United Methodist Churches.

Let's be Bold and Courageous like never before as we address racism, climate justice, social justice.

Let's help Disaster survivors rebuild their homes, their lives and entire communities.

Let's give people something to really talk about.

With grit, determination, love and the guidance of the Holy Spirit let's outdo one another in uniting this Conference and the UMC and our work for justice and full inclusion.

Inclusion means inclusion it means everyone - EVERYONE. Inclusion includes LGBTQ persons AND it includes EVERYONE.

Inclusion means inclusion. *Traditionalists **and** progressives. Left **and** right. Black, brown, Asian, native **and** white. Gay **and** straight. Rich **and** poor*

This is not an either-or Connection it is a yes **AND** Connection.

It even includes Longhorns AND Aggies.

We are a connectional church! We need one another. We are not just a denomination; we are a Connection that will not be severed.

I was recently at the Archives at Drew and while some might think of the archives as a bunch of old papers and dusty books, I had a holy and sacred experience as I wandered the 6 miles of stacks that reminded me of our Connection.

SIX MILES OF STACKS!

I found photos in a box not far from Bishop McKendree's papers marked with the date from my time at UMCOR

As I held letters written by John Wesley, and Frances Asbury's unfinished sermon prepared for the 1816 General Conference which he was never able to deliver because he died just 14 miles from the site of the Conference.

I learned that we are all a vital part of something and someone else.

So, I did a little experiment. I decided to use Chat GPT – you know what that is? It is an Artificial Intelligence app. I asked Chat GPT to write a poem about the Spirit of United Methodist Connectionalism.

Hear what the AI wrote....

The United Methodist Connection, a network of faith and love, bound together in devotion, to the grace of God above.

From cities to rural towns, from shores to mountain peaks, the connection spans the earth, a web of faith that never sleeps.

Each heart a vital part, in the body of Christ we share, a family of diverse souls, with a common bond of prayer.

We strive to live with open hearts, to serve and love our neighbors near, to offer hope and healing light, and conquer hate and fear.

The United Methodist Connection, a vibrant force for good, uniting hearts and hands and minds, in a mission understood.

So let us go and spread the love, that Christ has given to us all, and build a world of peace and hope, where every heart can stand tall.

(chatgpt 4.18.23)

Friends, even the ROBOTS KNOW the importance of our Connection..

Faith and love, bound together in devotion.

A web of faith that never sleeps

A family of diverse souls, with a common bond of prayer

We love our neighbors

We conquer hate and fear

We are a force for good

Building a world of peace and hope.

So, here is how I see it, we have some choices to make. We can stay here, or we can revive, renew, reinvigorate and reimagine a new way to be church, a new way to do church.

A new way to love.

All things are possible through God who gives us strength, courage, boldness, vision – all the things we need when we need it most.

My prayer has been that in these three days we can make a shift – we can pivot to borrow a word from my friend Tom Bickerton.

In these three days we can experience one another - anew. We can experience the stirring of the spirit - anew. We can be revived, renewed, reinvigorated and together we can reimagine a new future, a future filled with the hope that the gospel is proclaimed and lived out through love of God and love of neighbor. No other commandment is greater than this!

I remind you of these words from *Let Your Heartbreak Be Your Guide* which I have adapted, and I offer it as a prayer as we prepare to come to the table....

God, you have invited each and every one of us to the great feast that can be our life. You tell us, O God that it is a feast where joy overshadows our normal worries and pains and where the smallness of our lives is transformed into the largeness of your dream. Thank you for reminding us that this feast we call life is a feast where each of us has a place to sit, eat, drink, talk and even dance, and where our wounds are transformed into gifts. Help us to set our tables for the feast that is before us as the Texas Annual Conference.

A feast that will change us into you where our lives will begin to echo the holy energies of your compassion, which our world needs so much right now. Amen and Amen