

## THE GREAT COMMA

**TEXT:** Luke 6:27-38

Most of you know that I am somewhat unorthodox. And I do have some strong feelings about how we worship and perhaps some off-the-wall thinking about some of the Biblical texts. I follow some of the liturgical Christian traditions, but I resist the recitation of most of the creeds we find in the back of our hymnal, the most common of these being the Apostles' Creed. I would guess that many of us know this by heart:

“I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into hell;....” etc.

But have you ever noticed the huge leap the creed makes between “born of the Virgin Mary” and “suffered under Pontius Pilate”? A single comma connects the two statements, and falling into that yawning gap, as if it were a mere detail, is everything Jesus said and did between his birth and his death! Called the “Great Comma”, the gap certainly invites some serious questions. Did all the things Jesus said and did in these years not count for much? Does the gap in some way explain Christianity's often dismal record of imitating Jesus' life and teachings?

Other things fall into that gap as well. The Apostles' Creed does not once mention love, service, hope, the “least of the brothers and sisters”, or even forgiveness – anything that is remotely actionable. You could not discern from the official creed but, after all is said and done, *doing* is more important than *believing*.

It would take a book to cover all of the words and acts of Jesus (yes, it's called the Bible). And the Bible gives us a Jesus who is historical, relevant for real life, physical and concrete, like we are. A Jesus we can imitate in practical ways and who sets the bar for what it means to be fully human. Our reading from Luke is one of the best known,

but least practiced, of Jesus' words for us to live by. "Love your enemies", Jesus says. "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them." Where do we start with this?

Well, let's start with "love", a very common theme for Jesus. But not just any kind of love. I think about Elizabeth Barrett Browning's beautiful words "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways?" But when Jesus uses the word "love", *agape* in Greek, he does not mean romantic love, or liking, or even friendship. What he means is whole-hearted, unreserved, unconditional desire for the well-being of another. Nothing is held back. There is no hesitation. No calculation of costs and benefits. No expectation of receiving anything in return. No pay offs. There is only total desire for the well-being of the other for his own good.

Now, oddly, this might also mean you might not like the other. You might oppose some of his behaviors. You might speak against some of what he stands for. But if you *agape* your enemies, the ways you express your dislike and opposition will always also express your total desire for his well-being.

No where and no time has it been more critical for the United Methodist Church than it is today. And I mean this day, February 24, 2019. Our specially called General Conference began in St. Louis yesterday, to decide whether or not the *agape* love of Jesus is or is not in our DNA. To decide whether our motto of "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors" is what we really believe or whether it just sounds "nice". To decide whether we will be united as the United Methodist Church, or whether we will go our separate ways, all based on one sentence in our Book of Discipline. Whether Jesus' instruction to simply "love one another" (with no exceptions noted) is really so hard to follow.

In a beautiful service written by Rev. Meredith Gudger-Raines, Pastor at Ridgefield United Methodist Church, she says:

“Brian McLaren reminds us of all the people Jesus saw when they were ignored by everyone else. He reminds us of the woman who was bleeding and reached out to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment. McLaren says, ‘She did not think she was important enough to ask for Jesus’ help. Jesus healed her [and] publicly affirmed her value. Little children, a Samaritan, a man who might today be classified as ‘disabled’ and ‘unemployed’, a frightened and ‘unclean’ woman, a little girl...they all mattered to Jesus.” Jesus saw these people who were unseen – invisible – to the people around them.

Meredith included in her prayer for the General Conference: “We pray for those who are part of the LGBTQIA community. We remember that as our whole church comes together, they feel talked about, but not talked with. Judged, but not seen. We imagine what it might feel like to have one’s identity or even existence questioned, judged, and put on trial. We lament that we struggle so mightily with Jesus’ seemingly simple command to love one another.”

Today, as much as any other time in our life as United Methodist, in our life as Christians, in our life as followers of Jesus, we need to pray for our church and for each other, and especially for those whom we have entrusted to come together from around the world, to decide whether or not we will take seriously our basic commandment to “love one another”.

In your bulletin today you have a blue card. I ask each one of you to write a few words that express *your* prayer for this General Conference, for this time that will lead to whatever future we have as a united church. As we sing our hymn “God, How Can We Forgive”, I invite you to bring your card and place it on the table at the front of the church. We will follow this with a silent Holy Communion as we reflect on our hopes and dreams as we move forward.

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(Uncover Communion elements.) We will celebrate this time in silence. I believe that as you follow the movements that you see, you will react accordingly. As you come forward to receive the elements, I invite each of you to take one of the blue cards (not the

one you have contributed), to take home and add to your times of prayer during the next several days.

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(Silent Communion)

Let us pray:

Holy God, we give you thanks for the faithful followers of Jesus Christ, who heard his words of love, acceptance and inclusion, and truly do “love one another”. We pray for those who have gathered to affirm or reject a way forward that is inclusive and filled with Jesus’ love for all of God’s creation. May our work here be in affirmation of your love, extended throughout all creatures of this earth. In Jesus’ name we pray.

Amen.