

What is God's Will for Our Lorena UM Church?

Texts: Matthew 22:37-40(NRSV), Rev. 2:1-5

July 31, 2011

You may have heard about the church that split over the color of the hymnals. Some wanted red for the blood of Jesus, while others wanted blue for the holiness of God.

Another church had a mural painted behind the chancel above the baptistery, of the Garden of Eden. But, the artist chose to paint Adam and Eve without bellybuttons. One group liked it like that while another group thought it was wrong. The dispute grew so heated that the group that liked the painting as it was came at night with chain saws, cut the building in half and took the end with the chancel and the mural and hauled it off.

We may find those ridiculous, but the truth is that it is often hard to determine what God's will is for a local congregation when facing a major decision.

I know of two congregations that voted to purchase land and relocate their churches. But, they were unable to pay off the land with the pledges that were made. One of them eventually had to sell the new property at a huge loss and is struggling to survive. I am sure that the leadership and the members in each congregation prayed to understand God's will before undertaking the cause and were convinced it was God's choice. Lorena UMC went through a similar painful struggle not many years ago. It is difficult to know God's will as a Church just as it often is for us individuals. Only as they remain one could they do God's will. Hard experiences can pull the member apart or draw them closer together.

I thought of these situations when I pondered how to approach one of the responses I received from you to the question, *"If I could ask God..."* It was:

"What has happened to the spirit at Lorena United Methodist Church?"

I must say that my heart broke when I read that. I have had similar questions about several churches I belonged to before entering ministry or pastored. The only way we can find an answer to that question is to ask people for their honest opinions, something I have been doing for several months. For Lorena UMC most common response was that Pastor Christi who was dearly loved and very popular, left after only two years. I have known Christi for several years and I love her too. She is young and lively with a beautiful gift of communication from the pulpit. And, besides that she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl making her even more adorable. It is understandable that an older pastor

like me who is not that far away from retirement is not as exciting as someone like Christi. I am the first to admit that. But, is there more than that? Beyond the disappointment with losing Christi were some other thoughts. Without going into details, members told of a number of events over the last several years that have left scars on people's hearts. Besides Christi leaving, the beloved, homegrown Matt Kuehl moved on after having served as both Youth Director and "Modern" Worship Service leader. His leaving was another painful blow to this congregation. Added to that has been an unfortunately high number of changes of our other Church staff the last year or so. All that stress takes its toll on the members closely involved in the Church. On top of all that, the economic recession and higher unemployment have added to stress of practically everyone, especially the offerings of just about every church. All that creates a tremendous amount of stress for our Church.

My last sermon, "How Can I Know God's Will for My Life?" may offer some clues to the question, "What has happened to the spirit at Lorena United Methodist Church?" We read the Matthew 22 passage in the last sermon which shows us that Jesus had a clear and simple picture for understanding God's will. That became the foundation of all his teaching:

1. Love God, 2. Love neighbor, 3. As you love yourself.

Considering these three commands, may help us better understand our Church. He was saying that **LOVE** must be the foundation upon which we build our lives and our Church. Someone has suggested that when we are considering how to respond to some word or action that has caused us anxiety, we should ask, **"What is the most loving thing I can do in this situation?": that we become one with Christ and one with each other.** Living in God's love draws us closer together to be one in Christ.

Paul was writing to a Church he founded in Corinth that was having a lot of internal strife. In their case there was a lot of jealousy between members over the difference of wealth and power between the "haves" and the "have-nots." He says in 1 Cor. 13 that their problem was primarily their lack of love, for God and each other.

¹If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

I can imagine that they objected to the implication that they were not loving toward each other. They were growing and apparently a friendly Church. They probably loved church dinners like the rest of us where they enjoyed fellowshiping with each other. But, throw in a little jealousy or resentment

into the mix and what happens. It may not be obvious at first, but the infection begins to spread and before long dissension grows and fractures appear. Regardless of the cause, the results are the same – a fractured church with little love apparent.

Is there anything in the case of the Corinthian church that may apply to us here in Lorena? I wonder if Jesus' "love" commands strike a chord here. Do our private conversations reflect love the Jesus calls for? Or, are they critical? When we discuss a topic that is contrary to our own position, do we acknowledge any truth contained there or dismiss it all together? Unfortunately, we are seeing the results in our US Congress right now of refusal to consider the other party's proposal in trying to resolve the debit ceiling crisis. I thought that our system of government was based on the concept of "**justice for all.**" To me, that requires us to try to see things from the other person/party's point of view. That is called "**Empathy.**" Remember the Native American Proverb? "**Never criticize a man until you've walked a mile in his moccasins.**" Do we try to exercise empathy here?

In the passage we read from Revelation of John, Ch. 2 Jesus Christ is speaking to the Church at Ephesus. He has several complimentary things to say, then he says this: Revelation 2:4(NIV)

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

I ask you then, what was their first love? What is it supposed to be? Perhaps the Apostle Paul can help us at this point. He uses the word, **agape** for love. That word usually means the "God-kind-of-love." So what is that kind of love like? He goes on to explain: 1 Corinthians 13:4-8(NIV)

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

In the Church we are to be **ONE IN CHRIST**. I once knew a woman who called me to discuss something I did while praying with a group that included her. As we prayed I had placed my hand on her shoulder and that the person on my other side. What I did not know was that she was not comfortable with me touching her shoulder. All of us have something that makes us uncomfortable and that was hers. I shouldn't have assumed that it would be OK. She could have spread unkind words about me behind my back. But, after prayer she decided share her discomfort with me. I was very impressed and appreciative of the maturity she showed in coming directly to me. In that way I was able to apologize so we were able to understand each other better and become even better friends. Doing the loving thing is often the most difficult thing we can think of. I am sure it was not easy for her to approach me about that, but it was a fine example of doing the loving thing to reconcile our relationship. We were much closer afterward.

I can't say why the person wrote that they felt that the spirit they once felt was no longer present here at our Church. But, I appreciate that person's honesty. I hope that as we seek to do God's will as individuals and as a Church we will always aim at doing the most **LOVING** thing in each situation. And, let's keep in mind that we don't all have the same idea of what that should be. But, as we each continue to grow more like Christ our Church becomes more like Christ intended: one with God and one with each other. United we stand; divided we fall. **Let's stand together in love to be the Church intends for Lorena UMC.**