

“An Inclusive Church”

Luke 10:25-37

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Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

I love this church. I hope that you love our Fair Oaks United Methodist Church, too. If someone asks you to share three things why you love this Church, are you ready for your answer? If you are not sure, maybe you can find some insights on the back of the bulletin. It says, “Our congregation, Fair Oaks United Methodist Church, is a *warm, welcoming, and open-minded Christian community*, seeking to live the life that Jesus shows and teaches.” I am not hesitant to invite neighbors and visitors to come and join our church. Another aspect that I appreciate and admire about our church is our bold church statement saying that *we are an inclusive, reconciling congregation*. Let me briefly remind you of some part of our church statement. “We believe that each individual is of sacred worth. Therefore, we pledge ourselves to engage in the sacred hospitality and responsibility Christ taught, regardless of race, culture, age, sexual orientation, family structure, economic situation, and mental or physical condition.”

As a Methodist clergy, I am keenly aware of the reality that our denomination is still struggling over the issues of gay rights like many Christian denominations. Our clergy members and local churches pledge to follow the church’s law as contained in the Book of Discipline, our rule book. In 1972, General Conference, which takes place every four years, is the higher body that amends the Methodist church’s law via votes by clergy and laity. The Conference body added a line to the Book of Discipline declaring the practice of homosexuality “incompatible with Christian teaching”. This law bars the ordination of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” as clergy and prohibits clergy from officiating at same-sex unions. But our church has made bold steps to open our doors proclaiming we embrace and welcome everyone regardless of their sexual orientation. I admire and support your radical, hospitable spirit and heart.

Recently I read a news article in the New York Times regarding a Methodist clergy’s trial due to his violation to perform same-sex wedding. It made me think again about our church’s stance on this sensitive matter. It is about the Rev. Dr. Thomas W. Ogletree, a Methodist minister, who officiated a same-sex wedding. Dr. Ogletree, 79, is a retired dean of the Yale Divinity School and a veteran of the nation’s civil rights movement. He was an ethics

scholar. Ironically, a year ago, Dr. Ogletree received an invitation letter from his gay son, Thomas Rimbey Ogletree and he was asked to come and officiate at his son's wedding. And so he officiated his son's wedding, but soon he was accused by several New York United Methodist ministers of violating church rules. It started out as a deeply personal act, but then it was soon condemned as a public display of ecclesiastical disobedience. Now he is facing a trial for his action. He said, "When my son asked me last year to officiate at the wedding, I was inspired and said yes. But I actually wasn't thinking of this as an act of civil disobedience or church disobedience. I was thinking of it as a response to my son."

Last week, I saw our conference resident Bishop's interview on KCRA Channel 3 regarding same sex marriage. Our Conference Bishop Warner Brown Jr. will be the leader of the Methodist church in 2014 on behalf of our denomination. Did you know we are the third largest denomination in our country? In his interview, he confirms that ministers should not marry same-sex couples in their churches regardless of last month's Supreme Court rulings on California's Proposition 8 and the Defense of Marriage Act. Following the Supreme Court rulings, Bishop Brown sent a letter to our conference clergy saying, "Under our current rules, I must encourage pastors to reach out to their ecumenical partners, so that pastors and churches that are permitted under their polity, which means rules and regulations, to offer marriage to same-sex couples." He emphasizes that our pastors be invited to assist in providing pastoral care. The Bishop expressed his personal view on performing same-sex weddings, He stated, "Personally, I would not do same sex marriage, but I would assist a couple in finding someone who would do that. And I would support them if I thought their relationship was healthy and sound."

Our Scripture reading lifts up a Samaritan man for his good act. What is the point of this whole story? We should remember that a Samaritan man is not a positive character to Jewish readers and disciples in Jesus' time. I am sure that there must be many faithful, honest and hospitable Jews, Priests and Levites, but why a Samaritan man? Jesus could have used a character of good standing, priests or Levites, instead of a Samaritan man who wasn't acceptable to Jewish culture and religion. Have we wondered why Jesus lifts up this man in this Scripture reading? The region of Samaria and people of Samaria were abandoned and deserted by Jewish people. Jews believed that Samaritans were punished by God because of their interracial marriage and mixture with different cultures. But Jesus didn't care about ethnicity, class or gender issues. If Jesus come and visit our Fair Oaks church, I believe Jesus would smile at us reading our church statement. Each individual is of sacred worth. Therefore we pledge ourselves to engage in sacred hospitality and responsibility Christ taught.

We commit ourselves to maintaining a place of safety and sanctuary for all who come together in ministry and mission. In our Bible story, Jesus reminds us of “compassion” and “acceptance” of our neighbors. If there is no “compassionate heart and acts out of this source” in our church, it means nothing whoever we are. Compassion is more important than values of keeping the law.

I hope we continue to be proud of who we are as an inclusive church and reconciling congregation. This takes our heartfelt and courageous action. Let us begin to break down our narrow minds, narrow doors and our narrow hearts and embrace others as they are. Let’s invite people and let them feel welcome in this community and experience the vast and liberating love of God through us. Jesus calls us to become good Samaritans and to continue our bold step to stretch and open our doors, our minds and to come close to our neighbors. Serving with compassion is what matters to God. Amen.