

Message: Love Changes the World**Why does God love us?**

Have you ever wondered why God loves us? How God loves us? I'm talking about going past the pat answers and diving deeper into our doubts and uncertainties. After all, it seems there are pros and cons to loving humans. This week is a good example: it's filled with highs and lows. The positives are easy: the joy of Frank and Betty Nelson's 50th wedding anniversary and renewal of vows is a blessing. The gift of baby Carolyn to Loni and Ben is a blessing. There are many others. God doesn't withhold blessings. Some of us shared the blessing of God's love with others this week and, in doing so, we passed God's love to others. That's for good.

Bob Pierce, the founder World Vision, famously said, “Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.” This week, our hearts are broken. They're broken for the families of Philando Castile in Minnesota and Alton Sterling in Louisiana. They're broken for the families of the five police officers killed, seven officers injured and the two civilians injured in Dallas. They're broken for the family of Micah Johnson. They're broken for families in Ferguson, Baltimore, Florida and families across the country who live with oppression every day.

Violence changed the world this week, rather than love. This breaks God's heart. The world is a violent place. It always has been. We only have to read Genesis 6:11-12 for evidence, “*When God looked at the earth, he saw that people had ruined it. Violence was everywhere, and it had ruined their life on earth*” (ERV). God took action during Noah's time with the great flood, but made a promise never to do so again. Instead, God promised to work through the spiritual children of Noah and Abraham. The way God does that is through the power of love.

Yet we must ask: what is the source of racism? Fear. That's what the Spirit tells me. After all, God tells us “do not fear” over and over again in the Bible. We're afraid of our weakness, our failing. We don't know or trust God enough to love unconditionally. We feel vulnerable when we want to feel strong. So we build our a tower of Babel, leading to greater division, rather than seeking God's love or offering God's love to other people, those who are different from us in some superficial way.

If these recent events, and the threat of other tragedies, give you restless nights, then God's Spirit is working on your heart. I offer these words from Psalm 46:1-2a: "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear....*" And in Romans 8:28 Paul writes, "*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*" When I read those verses, I get a mental picture. It's isn't the image of a God who's distant and uncaring, moving us around a global chess board, sacrificing a pawn here or there to win some sort of cosmic game between good and evil. The image is a God who loves and cares for us, a God whose heart breaks when we do violence to one another.

The United States is struggling with a race issue, no matter what official statements may say. The issue isn't just white-on-black, though that's the most predominant way racism rears it's ugly head. Racism happens anytime we marginalize someone or treat someone differently because of the color of their skin or their country of origin or their native language; whatever it is we choose to use as a discriminator between "us" and "them." Mental, verbal, sexual, economic and physical abuse all lead to one place: violence. The great Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. showed us how to change injustice and racism: use the spiritual power of non-violent, civil protest. That's how God's love acts.

I've seen and experienced racism, having lived in the southern part of the United States for much of my life. It's an ugly, evil way to live and it creates an environment of conflict that cycles from generation to generation. It's a terrible way to treat people who're God's children with every right to God's love and grace. But as everyone gathered here knows, racism isn't limited to the south. It's present in Los Angeles. It's present in Riverside County. It's present in our neighborhoods, homes and in our churches.

Yet Jesus gave us a very different view of life when he said, "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...*" (Matthew 5). God's grace isn't withheld from some and given to others. God is with everyone. God is with those who are unharmed. God is with those who were injured. God is with those who were killed. I believe God's Spirit came to each

of the people who died in their time of need. That’s because we believe in a God whose kingdom is not limited or bound by death. And I believe God’s Spirit is with the families of the victims today and those recovering from injuries. I also believe God’s Spirit is with the families of those who committed violence. God seeks to redeem us all. That’s how God loves us.

We’ve been called to take action. “In September 2015, Bishops of The African Methodist Episcopal Church, part of the United Methodist Church, called all Christians to acts leading to the eradication of racism in the United States.

It’s a bold call. It’s one United Methodists are committed to. In baptism, we pledge to ‘*renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of our sin.*’ That goes beyond feeling sorry. It calls us to change our ways. We also pledge to ‘*accept the freedom and power Christ gives us, ... [to] resist evil, injustice and oppression in every form in which they present themselves*’ ... ‘*in union with the church which Christ opens to people of all ages nations and races.*’

If that isn’t enough, the 2012 Book of Resolutions says, flat out, ‘*The UMC is committed to the eradication of racism,*’ and we call for ‘*every annual conference, district and local congregation within the US to have a strategy and a program which educates and supports systemic and personal changes to end racism and work multiculturally,*’¹ even requiring those preparing for ordination to participate in multicultural education and anti-racism training. There’s a general agency, the General Commission on Religion and Race, leading the way in helping us all acknowledge and dismantle racism wherever and however it manifests itself.”² God’s love calls us to change our ways.

What are we to do when we face violence, particularly racially motivated attacks? I invite you to remember what Paul wrote, “*in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us*” (Romans 8:37). When we face crises, don’t despair. Pray unceasingly

¹ Resolution 3374, 2012 Book of Resolutions, pp. 453-454

² <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/september-6-2015-day-of-confession-repentance-prayer-and-commitment-to-end>

together as effective action emerges from prayer. Simple acts of hope in the face of overwhelming adversity send a powerful message to others: we believe in the future and we're determined to make it a healthy one. We face the future with assurance because of Jesus' promise: “Remember, I will be with you always” (Matthew 28:20a). We can overcome our uncertainty, doubts and fear because God is with us.

One thing we should do is acknowledge loss without diminishing it. Making excuses, blaming others and pointing fingers doesn't help. It takes away from the loss of others, putting our agendas and views ahead of those who are hurting and in need. The shortest verse in the New Testament is the most powerful: “*Jesus wept*” (John 11:35). He wept for Mary and Martha at the death of Lazarus. Then he took action, giving the glory to God. Jesus' action wasn't about rules and regulations. It was about how Jesus helps us to come to terms with grief and doubt. It's the story of God's powerful love for us.

How does grief help? It's important for us to acknowledge our uncertainty and doubt when we're faced with a loss. Our emotions are real and we need to embrace them in a healthy way. We must be on guard against unhealthy attitudes and acts that lead us away from God. When we keep our eyes on Jesus, he will guide us through the difficult times and the trials we face. Jesus will give us the courage and strength we need to ask hard questions and to face our doubts and fears. God's grace is strongest when we're at our weakest.

What can we offer to others? Along with love, we offer hope. John the Baptist was the voice in the wilderness calling out “*prepare the way of the Lord*” (Luke 3:4). John brought a word of hope to a people struggling on their own in a violent world. His message: turn back to God, be baptized in faith, and know the saving power and hope of God's love. When we do, things that are hard, challenging and difficult will be removed. Nothing will stand between us and the salvation of God. Jesus shows us a new way. Are we showing Jesus' way to others?

Jesus came to earth out of love, to establish a new covenant between humanity and God. He gave us a radically new way to live, based on love and mercy, not rules and penalties. Jesus will come again to restore and heal all of creation. All rulers, nations and people will come into his

kingdom and stand before the throne of God. Everything will be revealed. Every head will bow and we will all raise our voices, praising his name. There will be no more sorrow, no more tears and the sins of this world will be banished forever. This is God’s promise and it will be fulfilled. That’s a promise, a hope, we can share.

What can we do here and now? We’re called to pray and act together. That’s in our Christian DNA. 1 Corinthians 12:7 says, “*Each person is given something to do that shows who God is*” (The Message). For some of us, that means getting involved as advocates for gun control. For others, it may mean getting involved in ministries to help victims of violent crime. Some may be interested in battling poverty, helping people live better, more sustainable lives. Maybe it’s working for better lending and housing policies and regulations. Perhaps you’re called to join the NAACP. God calls each of us to hear and respond. It’s your turn to step up and take action. Together, we have the power and political capital to make change happen.

I call upon the leaders of this congregation to stop and listen. The only way we can find out if we have a problem and uncover it’s root is by listening before we speak. We must listen and then pray and then listen some more. We need to invite those who are affected to help us find answers. And we need to give the glory to God. God’s perfect love drives out fear: do not be afraid for together we are strong in Christ.

God loves us as a body, a community of faith. We’re persons of faith in a loving, caring and supportive group. That means God is working in and through us as a whole. We’re strongest when we work together for the good of one another, for those in need and for our community. When we’re sick, others care for us. When we’re afraid or in doubt, others offer an encouraging word, a prayer, hold our hand or sit with us and listen to what’s troubling our heart and mind without judgment. When we’re oppressed and feel marginalized, we walk in solidarity, unified in our diversity. Racism has no place in God’s house, amen!

Why does God love us? Because we have a unique capacity to love God and others in such a way that evil is overcome.

How does God love us? God loves us through relationships. Through us, God will redeem and heal our families, neighborhoods, community and world. All we have to do is hear the call and act in love. Are you ready? If so, say “amen!” Praise God!

Let us pray:

Lord, help me to be the person you want me to be today. Give me the boldness to speak in your name, to offer your love to a world that is hurting and in need of hope. Help me to follow you and be transformed by your love so I may bless others with that same love. Bless us when we live generously, sharing your love with others. We commit ourselves to you in faith and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Psalm 89:1-4 (NRSV)

I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens. You said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: ‘I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.’”

Romans 8:31-39 (NRSV)

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.