

"I Don't Know How to Love Him." This is a song of confession from Mary Magdalene in Jesus Christ Superstar, a musical that I watched for the very first time this week, believe it or not. In some sense, the song is one that belongs to all of us in our relationship with Jesus. We don't know how to love Jesus until we have experienced God's unconditional love in our own lives—total acceptance, love with no strings attached.

In Mary Magdalene's song we see how easily one can become worked up by a love so freely given and life changing. As Christians, we might be challenged by this song which lifts up a popular conception about love—that the change love brings about in our lives and in our very being is something to be feared.

However, the scriptures tell us that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18), and that is love's true labor—to ease worries, to calm anxieties, to rest assured on God's promises. . . to trust in another. The scripture from 1 John goes on to say that fear in love is not a perfect love because the fear comes from the threat of being punished. Being perfected in love, holy love, means receiving the rewards and benefits of that which leads to holiness or sanctification in God's love.

How that actually happens—the process of being perfected in God's love, will be different for each of us, but it requires of all of us that we be brave—that we have the courage, the heart, to be moved and to be changed so that we may be more like Christ and His love.

So often in the church we tend to sanitize and spiritualize our notions of love, and yet we have these wonderful texts from the Song of Songs that are romantic love poetry. We are reminded that sensual love that depicts the blooming romance of lovers is a good and holy thing.

The luscious and sensual imagery of the lovers beckoning to one another is a reflection of the natural world God made in God's love for us. The garden imagery of land and sky, flora and fauna, take us back to the original Garden of Eden and the proto-couple, Adam and Eve. But this time, in the Song of Songs, the couple is not expelled from the garden, punished for their disobedience. No. In this scene, one lover encourages the other to "rise up, my dearest, my fairest, and go." The one lover encourages the other to be brave and to follow where love leads.

In our Gospel lesson, Love leads us to where the human love of law and tradition are in direct conflict with God's grace and transformative love. Jesus in speaking to the Pharisees and legal experts points us to the hypocrisy of the faith community when it keeps rules that are not in alignment with God's love for all.

In the United Methodist Church we have a long-standing tradition of writing rules for the life of the church by committee. If you have ever engaged in the process of writing by committee, it is not an easy task, but for many, it is a labor of love. Globally, United Methodists meet every four years to continue to respond to the needs of this world and to discern how God is calling the church into God's preferred future. As much as we pray and sing, and resolve to be co-conspirators in God's plan, we don't always get things right. Even John Wesley, the founder and perfecter of our Methodism didn't always get things right. As a pastor, John Wesley let a relationship with a church member turn into a love affair—a clear violation of the sexual ethics United Methodist pastors keep in this day. Later, when the relationship with Sophia Hopkey turned sour, he refused her to partake in Holy Communion—another violation of what United Methodist pastors now hold sacred—the Lord's Table being open to all.

Like the Pharisees of Jesus's day, we need the reminder that outside influences aren't what contaminate the body. What matters to God is what comes from the inside out. Purity of heart is what matters most to God.

God continually calls us to respond in faithfulness—not simply with outward ritual, but with faithfulness that fully surrenders to God's love.

We so often forget that all doctrines are nothing more than human precepts. Our human knowledge of God is so very imperfect. And when our United Methodist law books say that "Homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching," we have to remember that this particular phrase was slipped into our law books at the eleventh hour with very little foresight to the great harm this would do to the love we have for one another in the church. In that moment back in 1972, it was fear that cast out perfect love in the United Methodist Church. To put it bluntly, ignorance, intolerance and bigotry is the present day sexual sin that comes out of the United Methodist Church and contaminates the United Methodist Church.

The good news is, that by God's grace, we not only have the opportunity to repent of our denominational sin, but we can be transformed as the body of Christ to call out the true sexual sin we see in our world today.

True sexual sin is the exploitation of another. Sexual sin is treating a person as an object and not as a beloved creation of God. Sexual Sin is predatory behavior against those who are most vulnerable. These kinds of sexual sins ought to lead the church into deep conversations about the formation of our individual sexual identities and a collective sexual ethic for the church.

We thought we had seen a sexual revolution in the 1960's and 1970's, but you ought to know what's going on in our world today. Do you know that pornography is more accessible to teenagers than it has ever been, and this is where they are getting their

sex education? Do you know that dating apps have completely changed the culture and landscape of dating for single adults? Do you know that Oakland, Contra Costa County and San Francisco are the epicenter of a human trafficking triangle that fuels the underage sex market? Our advances in technology and communication while very good in some respects, has also opened the doors wide open to sexual exploitation.

Do you know that there are places in this world where if a person is simply perceived as homosexual, that person can be imprisoned or even be put to death? Murder, without question, is incompatible with Christian teaching.

Friends, we can no longer waste time on debates that are a half century old, and irrelevant to the world we live in today. The church's navel-gazing about who's in and who's out is no better than the Pharisaical rule following in Jesus's day.

Our work on earth as it is in heaven is indeed a labor of love. And the goodness of God's creation in scripture should tell us that Love's labor in every age is not divorced from the sacred worth and sensual forms of our bodies. Our God works to make us whole in who we are. And so Love's labor in the church in our day, is to promote healthy and committed relationships that value human dignity and are rooted in the identity of Jesus Christ.

We cannot afford to be prudish as a church when technological and illegal forces are shaping the sexual health and human dignity of our communities. We are the people called Methodist who are not only called into personal holiness, but social holiness.

Perfect love casts out fear. So take courage. Be brave. Let God's love bloom from within you. Listen for the call of the beloved that tells you to follow where love leads. As we lift our hearts in prayer and sacrament, let Love's labor be born anew in each of us this day. Amen.