

**MESSAGE: “Reconciled to Brother or Sister”**

**Text: Matthew 5:21-24**

**Liturgist Text: II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10**

***Purpose:*** the purpose of this message is to call for inclusion of lgbtq brothers and sisters into full participation of the life of the Church.

#### **MEDITATION**

**As the wider denomination struggles to affirm unity in the midst of passionate, divergent views of human sexuality, the United Methodist Church of Auburn is a voice for reconciliation. Differences of opinion are present in our congregation as well, but core values guide our congregation as expressed in our *Welcoming Statement of Diversity*. All people have sacred worth, and we celebrate the rainbow diversity God has planted in our garden of fellowship!**

**Though I grew up in a family of twenty, more or less, depending on which year of my childhood under consideration, we were always able to eat dinner together at one table. Unless, of course, it was a holiday. For Easter, Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner, we almost always had visitors, and the family table could not possibly accommodate all who were present. Until I reached a double-digit-age, therefore, I was among those relegated to a separate children’s table. My Mom tried to make it festive, and it had most everything the grown-ups’ table had, although the grown-ups’ table almost always got it first. But it did not feel as legitimate. ‘Separate but equal’ may be true enough in the first part, but it is rarely true in the second. It never feels good to be excluded, and the year I found myself sitting at the BIG table, I felt like I had arrived.**

**From one point of view, being a Reconciling Congregation is about opening the table to everyone. I am reminded of a Heritage Singers song we used to sing quite often in my family, “There’s plenty of room in the family, room for the young and the old, plenty of happiness, plenty of love, plenty of room in the fold.” But the table of reconciliation doesn’t stop with the young and the old; it also makes room for the poor and wealthy, the abled and differently-abled, the Jew and Greek, the native and foreigner, the Christian, Moslem and Agnostic, the gay and straight, and everything in between.**

**Being a Reconciling Congregation also means the privileges and responsibilities belong to everyone. Full participation means exactly that: full participation. I was once part of a church which dismissed a Sunday School teacher because it was discovered that she had once been divorced. If we insisted on that metric, I would be disqualified from being your pastor, because I was once divorced. ‘Reconciling’ means that we welcome and nurture the full participation of people of every age, heritage, ethnic origin, sexual orientation,**

economic status, faith background, family structure, gender identity, marital status, race, social standing and varying capability.

**‘Reconciling’ does not mean that we all think the same, agree on everything or even agree completely with the diversity statement printed in our bulletin each Sunday. It means, rather, that we choose to be in relationship with God and one another because we share core values and do not wish to make differences in point-of-view a litmus test of one’s devotion to God. In the spirit of John Wesley we say, “If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand.”**

**A salient definition of the term *reconcile* is: ‘to re-establish friendship between.’ When Jesus was asked ‘What is the greatest commandment,’ he responded, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart soul and strength, and a second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself.” There can be no wholeness in our relationship with God if we are ‘out-of-step’ with our neighbor. The two are inextricably linked.**

**This is the heart of what Jesus teaches in this morning’s text. “When you offer a gift to God and remember that your sister or brother has something against you, leave your gift and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” If your horizontal relationship with brother or sister isn’t whole, your gift will be hollow, an empty gesture.**

**In the biblical story of Cain and Abel which our Tuesday morning class was discussing this week, there was significant debate over why God praised Abel’s offering, but criticized Cain’s, resulting in a violent altercation which left Abel dead and Cain guilty of murder. Could it be that God discerned Cain’s jealousy toward his brother, and therefore did not receive his offering?**

**In the mission statement of our denomination, the United Methodist Church pledges to extend open hearts, minds and doors to everybody. But like the history of our nation, the history of our denomination is shredded with prejudicial exceptions to this ideal. Slaves were considered ‘less-than’ and thus relegated to another table. Indigenous Americans were marginalized by practices which boxed them into reservations and kept them poor. Women were ineligible for pastoral candidacy and ordination, simply because they were women. In our own day, lgbtq candidates who are honest about who they are and how they live, continue to be ineligible for ordination. How can we expect our relationship with God to be whole, if we have not ‘first been reconciled to brother and sister?’**

**To be honest, I have not always been an advocate of full participation for those identifying as lgbtq. Raised in a conservative, evangelical home, with an uncompromising devotion to scripture, I believed the Bible condemned the practice of homosexuality. But I**

also had deeply personal reasons for questioning these ‘convictions of certainty.’ I read, re-read, and studied the biblical passages that supposedly left no doubt about how God feels. I listened to the stories of others, mined my own story, and read scores of books on gender studies. I began to see that the biblical texts I pointed to were condemnations of abusive sexuality rather than responsible sexuality, gay or straight. I took note of the fact that Jesus himself never once addressed the issue. Like other epiphanies in my spiritual walk, the Holy Spirit dismantled my arguments, prejudice and self-righteousness. My heart opened, space at the table grew, and I learned the gift of acceptance.

Today, I can affirm the United Methodist Church of Auburn’s *Welcoming Statement of Diversity* without reservation, but the journey continues for me, as it does for you. Since I arrived as your pastor, my daughter announced that she is transgender, changing her name from Elsbeth to Elliot. Our love for her, or more accurately I should say, ‘him,’ is cellular and nothing could ever change that, but my wife and I struggle, even as we grow in our learning curve. In our hearts, though, a song echoes, “There’s plenty of room at the table, room for the young and the old. There’s plenty of happiness, plenty of love, plenty of room in the fold.”