

Multiplying Love 2024 Lenten Study

The Church as a Community of Inclusive Love and Grace

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Scripture Text: Ephesians 3:14-19

Paul Chilcote writes, "Renewal in the Wesleyan way revolves around the church as a community of love and grace." He notes that this renewal of inclusive love will reflect four dimensions of love. This first dimension is the message of God's great love of salvation and grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Consider John 3:16.

As redeemed people, the letter to the Church at Ephesus is a timeless word of encouragement for generation upon generation of people to better understand this new life we have been given in Christ. We are God's masterpiece, intricately designed with love, intention, and purpose. Each of us are jars of clay. Some days we may behave or feel like crackpots, but we are God's beautiful cracked pots filled with treasure and light that shines through. We have been created to be the celebration of God in the many places where we've been planted.

In Ephesians, the Apostle Paul uses language and writes in a spirit of appreciation for the best of who the church is when she is in Christ. He lifts up unity, love, and all that brings life, health, vitality, and excellence to the body. Paul names the ideals of what it means to be the church. This is not to say that the Church at Ephesus or any church is perfect. But Ephesians paints a picture of all that we strive for as we seek to live together by the Spirit.

Our lived experience of love and grace in Jesus Christ draws us into the second dimension of a renewed Wesleyan movement of inclusive love. We are drawn into community where we learn how to love, and we come to know the depth of caring relationships. It has been my faith community, who saw me, loved me, called me forward, and sang my song, as God's prevenient grace caught my attention in new ways. Our renewal is tied up in intentionally leaning into doing life together, growing in faith and trust that God's love and God's table is large enough and there is a place for everyone. The community that Christ reveals goes beyond inclusion to radical belonging. There is this South African word, Ubuntu, that means "I am because you are". Archbishop Desmond Tutu defines Ubuntu as, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours." We cannot be all of who God has created

and called us to be apart from the community that surrounds us.

Our experience of the gospel lived in community provides the foundational framework for a renewed Wesleyan movement. The third dimension flows from accepting God's love and grace and learning to love in community. It is in community where we receive the discipline and engage in practices that nourish and help us grow in faith. We have been created and purposed to be places of redemption through our commitment to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Transformation is a process! In our communities, there are people within and beyond the church who are on the road to recover themselves and to gain courage to pick up their mats. It is in community, in small groups, in class meetings, covenant groups, and Bible study where we together live into who we "be" so that they can then know what we are called to do.

The fourth dimension of a renewed movement is servanthood. Chilcote notes that we find our ultimate purpose in servanthood. In service as advocates for immigrants, feeding hungry children, helping families move forward, we are hope in this world. When we stand up for and with those ostracized, traumatized, and marginalized by the -isms of this world, we bear witness to the inclusive love of God. In serving the sick and dying, daring to spend our greatest energy on the world's greatest needs, loving and teaching children, we are renewing love in the world! We are the church; we are a filling station! Sunday after Sunday, in worship, we sooth with melodies from heaven, give and receive bread for the journey, share sanctuary with all who enter, to experience the heart of God and find refreshment for dry, parched souls. Our fervency in prayer, our intercessions, our burden bearing for the church and for many make a difference in this world. Chilcote writes that we as a community of love and grace are gathered to learn how to learn and love (as disciples) and then sent out into the world (as apostles) to share that love with others. Whenever we love beyond ourselves, rise to challenges and bear witness that together we can do all things through Jesus Christ who gives us strength, renewal happens in and beyond us!

Let us rejoice in confidence that God who began this good work is faithful to bring it to completion. When we consider God's faithfulness, we are amazed by the truth of scripture, that God time and time again, does more than we could ever ask or imagine. When we consider from where we've come, we could never have dreamed of the places God has led us. From Tennessee, Winona, Africa, New York, South America, South Minneapolis, Grand Rapids, St. Paul, down the road, across the street, around the corner, from addiction to recovery, from fractured relationships to reconciliation, from sadness to joy, from darkness to the marvelous light. The

Holy Spirit has met us in pig sties, been with us as we turned toward home, saw us from a distance, swooped in, arms flung open and welcomed us back home.

God is with us. God is for us. God loves and keeps us. We have a God who calls us up and onward to live into the full measure of who we are in Christ. No matter where we go, in all seasons, wherever we are planted, we are the United Methodist Church. We are held together in Christ! The love of Jesus love holds us, binds us. We are loved that we will be love in this world. Amen!