

## A Call to Community

Hello UMW! Thank you, Laura Pfeffer. Thank you, Ruby Dow, and the committee for this invitation. I am honored to be here to be part of a call to community.

Pray with me, please, this prayer that emerged from Mission u this summer . . .

Great God of Creation,  
we are yours, and we long to live in your light,  
to be your light for the world.  
When we fall,  
Lay down with us until we can stand again.  
When we run away,  
run with us, that we might not be alone in our fear.  
When we strike out in anger,  
let us see you take the blow,  
that we might remember and pull back our hands.  
When we love,  
receive the caress, be the caress, double the caress,  
that your love may grow.  
When we serve,  
let us see your face in those we serve;  
let them see your face in us  
that our time of serving is always and only serving you.  
Fill us, Lord, with your Spirit, with your love, with your light  
that all the world may know  
the glory of your creation through us. Amen.

Okay, here's a little experiment: when I say "Jump" you say "How high?" Are you ready?  
Jump . . . Jump . . . Jump . . .

Now, what did we prove? That you are awake, yes. But was that a call to community? No, that was manipulation of the many by the one.

If I get you all riled up about something, and you go out and march in the streets, is that community? Well, that depends. Do you know and trust me, or am I just an effective motivator? Are you marching as the first step in addressing injustice or are you simply venting emotions. That march might be community in action, or it might just be a mob.

What is community? What word comes to mind when you think about community? Please take a moment and share that word with someone sitting next to you. . . . What were some of the words you heard? [Listen for responses]. Those are all helpful. I have heard some folks use terms such as sharing, loving, caring, united, intimate, comforting. I believe all of those apply, and they evoke an image of a warm and cozy group of smiling folks, sharing a meal or doing ministry together. I believe that is one image of community.

Now let me share some descriptions by scholars and authors that I came across in my research:

Community is dangerous (Stanley Hauerwas).  
Community life is like martyrdom by fire (Eberhard Arnold, *Why We Live in Community*, p. 149).  
[Community is] risky (Richard Rohr, 969).

If the essence of community is to create structures for belonging, then we are constantly inviting people who are strangers to us, and one another, into the circle (Peter Block, 1295).

Dangerous, risky, martyrdom by fire, inviting strangers into the circle: What do those terms have to do with community? Well, I don't think you get to the warm and cozy gathering without the danger, risk, and fire.

Community requires that we open . . . everything, all the time. We don't find authentic community until we open to the other, open to being changed, open to the joy and pain of true sharing. What do I mean by that? Well, let me give you an example.

I love the church, and The UMC in particular. You may know this if you know of my involvement in many levels of ministry through UMW Editorial Board and Mission u, General Conference, Annual Conference, my local congregation, The Crossing Campus Ministry. I even do most of my paid work for the church, editing resources and books to help worship leaders and church leaders be more effective in their work. It's easy for me to share my enthusiasm for the church. I have been called a cheerleader for Christ, and I'm not ashamed to claim that.

But the authenticity of my love for the church is evident only when I also share that I grieve for the ways our church stumbles: in the ways that our love of money and power (and our fear of losing them) motivate our decision making, in numbers as the primary measure of effectiveness, in top-down US-centric structures for ordination and church administration, in the divisive and angry rhetoric that defines encounters around human sexuality, in our sometimes short-sighted and incomplete responses to social injustice—in our local communities and across the globe.

*All* of this is my love for the church—the enthusiasm, the work, the celebration, *and* the anguish and frustration. I wouldn't have that anguish and frustration if I didn't care so much. I also wouldn't have the enthusiasm and celebration. That's as true for those who disagree with me on certain issues as it is for me. If my passion leads only to angry words and posturing, I accomplish nothing; worse, I do harm. But if I engage with those who care differently, and seek the gifts we have to offer each other, together, we might just build community.

True community requires that we make safe space for sharing disagreements, frustrations, and celebration: all of it. And that's hard; it takes time; it requires energy and commitment and sacrifice and patience, and humility. I'm not making this up. Consider just some of the biblical texts that describe authentic community: First, we could spend an entire day on the 10 Commandments, but I simply urge you to go back and read them again. Now, Deut 15 (be generous with your neighbor) and Deut 1:16 (judge rightly with citizen and resident alien), Micah 6:8 (what does the Lord require? justice, kindness, humility), Rom 12 (more on that below), 1 Cor 13 (read it again; *not* a warm and fuzzy chapter), Phil 2 (*kenosis*, self-emptying), Col 3 (strip off the old self).

Let's take a closer look at one example, Romans 12:9-21:

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup> love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

That's verses 9-13. So far, so good. Be genuine, show honor, serve, rejoice, persevere, help one another and strangers. But then, we get verses 14-21:

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." <sup>20</sup> No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Okay, one little rabbit trail, to offer some perspective (thank you, Dan, for pointing me to this insight): "heap burning coals on their heads" is not a curse but an act of healing and neighborliness. In first-century Palestine, many things were carried on the head, including braziers of burning coals to warm the house and cook food or, in some cases, as a cure for demon possession. In the context of our passage, this phrase emphasizes overcoming evil with good, with generosity.

So: bless those who persecute you, associate with the lowly, don't think you're so wise, live peaceably with all, never avenge, feed your enemies, overcome evil with good. This language is not about being polite and warm and nice; it's about genuine caring without boasting, without getting credit, seeking the good of the other before our own good.

This summer, Mission u offered a spiritual formation study on Living as a Covenant Community; Dan and I had the honor of leading that study with some of you here today, and we explored some of these passages I've been talking about. We also learned about the biblical covenants, and the ways that people sometimes succeeded but more often failed to live in authentic community. We explored ways to live more graciously in community.

That study focused on living *as* community, assuming we have already achieved community and simply need some instruction for doing it better. It was a wonderful study and very valuable time. Our focus today, however, is on "a *call to* community." To me, that title implies that we haven't arrived yet, that we still have work to do.

Let me expand one of the quotations I offered earlier: "Community life is like martyrdom by fire;" that's very strong language. The writer, Eberhard Arnold, goes on to explain that "it means the daily sacrifice of all our strength and all our rights, all the claims we commonly make on life and assume to be justified. In the symbol of fire the individual logs burn away so that, united, its glowing flames send out warmth and light again and again into the land." Arnold was not speaking empty words. A German theologian, who lived from 1883 to 1935, he founded the *Bruderkhof*—intentional communities—some of which still exist today

I love his image of each log giving itself away so that the fire might warm the land more effectively. I'm going to carry that with me into every church meeting I attend, and I suggest that you do too. Why? Because we are not there yet. Think about the times you have been in the middle of a heated "discussion" about the color of the carpet or the style of music on Sunday morning or the dirty dishes left in the church kitchen or what the pastor did or didn't do; we've all had those experiences, whether or not we like to admit it. Now recall the image of

each log giving itself away for the sake of the fire, or think about those passages cited earlier about not boasting, about humility, not thinking you are wiser than you are, living in harmony with all. Consider how your feelings and your words in that heated discussion matched with the call to authentic community. We are not there yet . . .

And that brings me to Jubilee. What did you say? Why Jubilee? Well, I will tell you. Hear these words from Leviticus 25:10-12:

<sup>10</sup> And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. <sup>11</sup> That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the after growth, or harvest the unpruned vines. <sup>12</sup> For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

Nearly the entire twenty-fifth chapter of Leviticus is devoted to instructions for celebrating the jubilee year: returning property, forgiving loans, freeing indentured servants, eating only what is freely available from the land. The instructions are pretty explicit. And you know what? The Israelites never, *ever* celebrated the jubilee year. Why? It was too hard. The sense that they owned the land, the property, and the servants was just too seductive. Over the course of those first fifty years, they forgot that the land is God's, the property is God's, the people are God's—both the Hebrews and “the aliens who reside among you.”

God's call to jubilee was just too hard. It was no different than the calls to circumcision, tithing, dietary restrictions, and sacrificial offerings, all of which the Israelites instituted and observed more or less successfully (from time to time). But that call to jubilee was never answered. It meant giving back control—even more—it meant remembering that they never had control in the first place.

And, perhaps most important of all, it meant focusing on the good of the many rather than the desires of the individual.

And so, now I want to ask, how well do we answer that call—the call to jubilee?

Is there a difference between what we say we believe about community and how our behaviors define community? Who belongs in *our* community? Another way to put this is the question the lawyer asks Jesus in Luke 10:29: “Who is my neighbor?” In the story that follows (you know it, the Good Samaritan), Jesus defines neighbor as those in need, the marginalized, the outcast, and as those who truly see the other as brother or sister.

Jubilee calls us to this kind of radical recognition and embrace of the other, to a celebration in remembrance of God's ownership of all that we have and all that we are. The call to jubilee is the call to expand the circle of “us” until no more “them” exists.

Would we be willing to give up our sense of entitlement to “our” possessions, so that equity might be restored in our communities, in our neighborhoods? Would you be willing to give up your car, your TV, your smartphone, your retirement savings, your time and energy, so that those in need have food, clothing, a sense of belonging in the community?

What if the ones in need or the “others” look different from you; what if they live in a different kind of family structure than you do; what if they speak a different language; what if they worship in a different way?

We love the idea of equality (equal access to opportunity for all), but do we truly believe in equity (that everyone *deserves* a fair share of goods and resources)? As a church, we give money to many important causes (sometimes lots of money), but how often do we invest in building relationships, seeking to recognize and embrace the gifts those we serve? Let me say right here that UMW does this better than most other groups in the church. The UMC has learned about ministry *with* from generations of UMW activism.

Did you know that we United Methodists have guidance for answering these questions? Our Social Creed reflects our Wesleyan focus on social holiness. You can find the creed at the end of the Social Principles in *The Book of Discipline*. It is ¶166:

We believe in God, Creator of the world; and in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of creation. We believe in the Holy Spirit, through whom we acknowledge God’s gifts, and we repent of our sin in misusing these gifts to idolatrous ends.

We affirm the natural world as God’s handiwork and dedicate ourselves to its preservation, enhancement, and faithful use by humankind.

We joyfully receive for ourselves and others the blessings of community, sexuality, marriage, and the family.

We commit ourselves to the rights of men, women, children, youth, young adults, the aging, and people with disabilities; to improvement of the quality of life; and to the rights and dignity of all persons.

We believe in the right and duty of persons to work for the glory of God and the good of themselves and others and in the protection of their welfare in so doing; in the rights to property as a trust from God, collective bargaining, and responsible consumption; and in the elimination of economic and social distress.

We dedicate ourselves to peace throughout the world, to the rule of justice and law among nations, and to individual freedom for all people of the world.

We believe in the present and final triumph of God’s Word in human affairs and gladly accept our commission to manifest the life of the gospel in the world. Amen.

(*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* [Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016], ¶166)

“Our commission to manifest the life of the gospel” is another way of stating our call to Jubilee, to community.

Also included with the creed is this note:

It is recommended that this statement of Social Principles be continually available to United Methodist Christians and that it be emphasized regularly in every congregation. It is further recommended that “Our Social Creed” be frequently used in Sunday worship.

How many of you have ever used this creed in your Sunday worship? So few, and I wonder why that is, don’t you?

Another approach comes from Walter Brueggemann in his book, *The Covenanted Self*. He declares that the questions the disciples faced—as they debated who was the greatest and who would sit at Jesus’ right hand in heaven—are the same questions we face today: “What do you

want? You want to be right? You want to be in control? You want to have your way? Or do you want your life” (Kindle loc. 1197)? Are your privilege and entitlement more important than God’s call to Jubilee, to restorative and distributive justice?

Brueggemann later writes of the Sinai community and the first-century Christian communities as “emergency communities.” After the Israelites left Egypt, they were forced to rely completely on the providence of God for survival. The call to Jubilee is a natural outgrowth of that dependence on God during their wanderings in the Sinai. The Pauline communities of the first century were outcast from Judaism and from secular society, forced to rely completely on the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit through the living Christ for the courage to survive and persevere. Their reliance on God was a natural extension of Jesus’ call to love God, and to love neighbor (as Jesus defined neighbor) as yourself (loc. 1380–71).

And then Brueggemann poses the question: “Do you think I overstate, brothers and sisters, if I say to you that . . . our church [today] is an emergency community?” We live in a time of deepening division between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” We live in a time of increasing acceptance of violence and persecution based on the color of our skin or our sexual identity or the way we choose to worship. We live in a time when civil discourse is characterized by who shouts loudest and last rather than by thoughtful, respectful engagement. We, in The UMC, live in a time when the focus on scarcity and fear of the loss of power threaten our unity.

And so, I don’t think it’s an overstatement to say that we are an emergency community. We *can* be an outpost of grace in a world of division. We *can* model for our church, our neighbors, and our world, what it looks like to depend on God’s providence as a natural outgrowth and extension of all that God has given us. When we disagree, we can remember that, as with each log in the fire, genuine warmth grows only in the ways we give ourselves away for the good of the community. This is not about being doormats; this is about giving ourselves away in mutual respect, learning together to disagree with grace, open to being changed. When we enjoy prosperity, we can remember that all we have is a gift from God, good to us only in the ways that we share it with others. When we see injustice or witness persecution, we can invite God to stand with us as we summon the courage and the will to act for restoration of justice and the healing of division. Does all this sound impossible? For one alone, it is impossible. Without God, it is impossible. But together, as community, guided and upheld by the power of the Holy Spirit through the example of Jesus the Christ, all things are possible.

United Methodist Women already know this. Listen to the purpose statement (say it with me if you have it memorized):

The organized unit of the United Methodist Women shall be a community of women whose purpose is to know God and to experience freedom as whole persons through Jesus Christ; to develop a creative, supportive fellowship; and to expand concepts of mission through participation in the global ministries of the church.

“Freedom as whole persons,” “creative, supportive fellowship”: that’s what I have been talking about this morning. Whole persons freely share joy and pain, disagree with grace, live in compassionate care with and for all of God’s creation, and they do so in “creative, supportive fellowship”—in community.

Community is dangerous; it's a martyrdom by fire, wherein we, together, learn to live in freedom as whole persons, giving ourselves away so that the warmth of God's love and grace might warm all people and all of God's creation.

Join me in the Companion Litany to Our Social Creed (below).

So once again, I say, Jubilee calls us to radical recognition and embrace of the other, to surrender and a celebration in remembrance of God's ownership of all that we have and all that we are. I believe this surrender, celebration, and remembrance are the heart of true community.

## **A Companion Litany to Our Social Creed**

God in the Spirit revealed in Jesus Christ,  
calls us by grace

**to be renewed in the image of our Creator,  
that we may be one  
in divine love for the world.**

Today is the day  
God cares for the integrity of creation,  
wills the healing and wholeness of all life,  
weeps at the plunder of earth's goodness.

**And so shall we.**

Today is the day  
God embraces all hues of humanity,  
delights in diversity and difference,  
favors solidarity transforming strangers into friends.

**And so shall we.**

Today is the day  
God cries with the masses of starving people,  
despises growing disparity between rich and poor,  
demands justice for workers in the marketplace.

**And so shall we.**

Today is the day  
God deplores violence in our homes and streets,  
rebukes the world's warring madness,  
humbles the powerful and lifts up the lowly.

**And so shall we.**

Today is the day  
God calls for nations and peoples to live in peace,

celebrates where justice and mercy embrace,  
exults when the wolf grazes with the lamb.

**And so shall we.**

**Today is the day**

**God brings good news to the poor,  
proclaims release to the captives,  
gives sight to the blind, and  
sets the oppressed free.**

**And so shall we.**

—*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶166.