

Troublemaking

a sermon addressing

“stirring up trouble in the community”

-Proverbs 6:16-19

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at Marion First United Methodist Church

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Galatians 1:6-9

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—

which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse!

As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

Galatians 6:2-12

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions.

Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load.

Nevertheless, the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor.

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction;

whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!

Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.

Proverbs 6:16-19

There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him:

haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies, and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

This week we are going to hit on a few things all at once. We want to keep things very focused on God and how our lives intersect with God's intentions. The message will have the theme of "stirring up trouble in the community". We will look at some things facing our denomination involving that very theme. We'll use Paul's angst in Galatians as a springboard for this.

The passage in Proverbs isn't a new one. We've looked at the seven things God hates before. One of them is 'stirring up trouble among the community'. Interestingly, this one often incorporates others: arrogance, lying, and bearing false witness. There are additional reasons why this particular action is so insidious, beyond involving so many other of the 'things God hates'.

Foremost, it destroys community. God's intention for believers to live in faithful, loving community with one another. When someone needlessly stirs up turmoil, it breaks relationships within the community. Unnecessary conflict arises. Jesus is emphatic that all of the Law and the prophets are satisfied if we simply love God and love one another. In fact, according to 1 John, if we don't love one another we don't love God, and so the two are inextricably linked. 'Stirring up trouble' and everything connected to it is the antithesis of loving one's neighbor.

To clarify, disagreement and 'stirring up trouble' are not the same thing. Sometimes disagreement creates conflict, but it's born out of an honest inability to see eye to eye. Sometimes the disagreement can be so stark that we are forced to break company. This is Biblical. Paul and Barnabas disagreed about the wisdom of including John Mark on a missionary journey. Paul said "no", Barnabas said "yes". They couldn't agree, so Paul took Silas, Barnabas took John Mark, and they went on their separate missions. Disagreement is honest. When company has to be broken over it, if we are people of faith, grace and community still binds us to some extent.

'Stirring up trouble' is different. Unfortunately it can be both intentional and unintentional. With or without malice, it is creating problems where none existed and need not exist. To use modern terms, it happens with spin, half truths, and convenient forgetfulness. It comes through unmerited character assault and the gossip mill. It comes through stoking fear with assumptions and speculations. It comes through treating opinion as fact and fact as opinion. This results in pitting people against one another which tears at the seams of community.

When it comes to the community of faith, there is a more focused, eternal issue at stake. When the community of faith stirs up trouble among itself and has been invaded by the division, extremism, and vulgarity of culture, we face another problem. The loud voices on either end of the spectrum, the backstabbing, and the desire to run away from one another looks scarily like the world. We don't stand out as different. As Paul might put it, we've given up the genuine gospel of grace, love, and Christ for the idol of opinion, agenda, and partisanship. This isn't Jesus. And this presents a two-fold problem.

First, those who give up Christ to rally under an ideological banner have embraced a false gospel that isn't Jesus. It's a lot of other things, but Jesus it is not. This means people are being persuaded to believe they are in Christ when they are in fact believing a lie. We'll see this more significantly in Galatians.

Secondly, those who are looking for a genuine community of faith that embodies Christ will easily spot the counterfeit and stay away. 'Stirring up trouble' repels genuine Christ seekers from the community of faith.

Potentially, these issues are eternally damaging for everyone. Either people are convinced that a false gospel is real, or people are alienated from the community of faith that was intended to draw people into the presence of Christ.

We must always keep in mind that the church, the body of Christ, is the representative of Christ in the world. If we are not representing Him while convincing people we are, we walk them down the wide road of condemnation. If we are not representing Him and therefore repelling others from Him we are repelling them from the means of salvation. This is no small matter.

This is what was happening in Galatia. It was a Gentile church that had been given a very straightforward and genuine gospel that was leading them to faithful life here and to life eternal. Remember that the Gentile church had its own set of issues to deal with. They were surrounded by the idolatrous worship and pagan traditions they had left to follow Christ. This was plenty of temptation, yet they'd chose to follow Jesus.

Then some Jewish Christians came into their midst, convincing them that they had to observe certain Jewish laws in order to be *truly* Christian. One of these was circumcision. We know Paul's sense of Law from what we see in Romans and his other letters. The Law's benefit is that it helps us know what is and is not right before God. The problem is that we have this sinful nature in us that sees the rules and is automatically enticed to break some of them. For each of us it looks different, but the temptation is real. So our sinful nature twists the Law into an instrument of temptation. So while the Law is pure in intent, it cannot bring about redemption. Law stirs temptation. Only grace through Jesus brings redemption.

Paul is also emphatic that if we are compelled to follow one law we must follow them all. Imagine that pressure on a Gentile! They already have to deal with the temptation of their past, now they have to deal with temptation driven by the law. Paul is absolutely enraged at this. We see the correction in his emphasis to dwell not on the works of the flesh but the fruits of the Spirit. Our actions spring from what occupies our minds. In Romans Paul tells us that keeping our minds 'in the Spirit of God' leads us naturally to do what the Law requires - loving God and loving each other.

Saddling the Galatian believers with the Law was horrific. Paul is so angry that he says he wishes those who are pushing circumcision would go all the way and "emasculate themselves." This is how passionate Paul becomes against stirring up trouble in the community. He sees the consequences and will not stand for it.

So, what trouble is being stirred up in our denomination?

A lot of it centers around the notion of churches exiting the denomination. Some is innocent and unintentional, while some is malicious and intentional. I'm going to try to be as succinct as possible.

In my mind, some of the 'gossip mill' is innocent. Something happening in one church and place is discussed with a friend or family member in another church elsewhere, and questions are raised about what is being done and why. The problem is that every church is different. Suppose a church that's been discussing leaving the denomination for years questions another church that hasn't had any dissatisfaction with the denomination. Suddenly trouble is stirred within the satisfied congregation. Unsettled doubt is planted and stoked by another's angst. The nature of the angst varies from church to church.

The bottom line is that comparing apples and oranges in an atmosphere of chaos, tension, and knee jerk reactions always stirs up trouble that doesn't need to exist

This highlights another issue. When we become curious, we go looking for answers, and this is how more trouble gets stirred up. Because there is no way to know where the UMC will head following the General Conference in 2024, EVERYTHING is speculation. When someone goes looking for answers online, they will find as many replies as there are opinions on the subject. Sadly, we see many

of the most vocal within the church going the way of the culture, sharing only the information persuasive to one's own agenda and point of view. Those in agreement are likely to get whipped up along those specific lines, and those who disagree will keep clicking page after page.

But remember this. A half truth is a whole lie, intended to stir up trouble by misrepresenting information for the purpose of persuading, not informing. It intentionally prevents people from seeing the whole picture, pushing them one direction or another, manipulating them into an ally.

Anything you read or hear that states where the UMC is headed is nothing more than speculation and assumption. To see or say it as anything else is dishonest and stirring up trouble.

After spending some time traveling around within our conference, our bishop Cynthia More Koi Koi felt the need to make a video. In it she addresses some of the more common misinformation and outright lies she heard voiced in the churches. It's a ten minute video you can watch for yourself if you are interested. It's posted on our conference website and the link is posted on our church Facebook page. She addresses three main bullets.

1) That the UMC is changing it's position on core theological beliefs including the divinity of Christ, His role as Lord and Savior, etc. This is an outright lie. Our core doctrine is detailed in 'The Articles of Religion' that go all the way back to Wesley's time. To change anything in it would require a $\frac{3}{4}$ vote at General Conference and each Annual Conference would have to ratify it by a $\frac{3}{4}$ vote. If even one Annual Conference fails to get the votes, the proposed change doesn't pass. Furthermore, absolutely no change to The Articles of Religion has been proposed for consideration at General Conference.

2) That the bishops have no accountability. This is also false. The bishops are accountable to the church, through the delegates representing every local church at major conferences. There is a formal procedure for lodging and pursuing complaints.

3) That the denomination is presently unfriendly to United Methodists with traditional convictions and is trying to nudge them out. This also is a lie. The denomination actually values and wants to retain its traditional voices. One of our long-standing strengths has been in welcoming myriad voices and perspectives. This tension provides a valuable balance, helping us see more clearly as we are open to listening to each other.

Perpetuating any of these dishonest rumors stirs up trouble. Trouble that's completely unnecessary.

The cause of the angst among United Methodist traditionalists is largely coming from the trouble being stirred up by fellow traditionalists. Some churches and pastors who have already exited the denomination are actively recruiting United Methodist churches and pastors to join them in exiting the denomination. Their tactics involve promoting some of the falsities that Bishop More Koi Koi addressed in her video.

'Stirring up trouble.'

One group of pastors formed the 'Wesleyan Covenant Association'. This association calls on churches that are unhappy with the disaffiliation plan to withhold their shares of ministry (also called apportionments). Withholding creates a cascade of issues for people who have nothing to do with present issues. This money goes not just to support the staffing and business of the annual conference, but also serves higher education programs and scholarships.

It provides finances for mission work here and overseas by doing together what your average local congregation can't do alone. These people and programs will become the victims of tragic irony. The

irony is that while pastors and churches are upset about people breaking the discipline by going against its stance on human sexuality, the response they propose is to break the discipline themselves by withholding shares of ministry. One clearly has a greater impact on the church's ability to serve the world for Christ than the other.

'Stirring up trouble.'

So much is stirred up because of fear and uncertainty, jumping to knee-jerk reactions rather than forming thought out responses, and latching on to convenient half-truths because they serve one's own bias or agenda.

Acting on an assumption that the denomination is bound for either conservatism or liberalism is destructive because exiting congregations may well create a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the scales shift because a significant number of exiting churches lean the same way - be it right or left, they are removing their combined voice from the table. If they leave for fear of a shift, and after leaving the denomination does shift the way they feared, it will be largely because they have removed their influence, unbalancing the scales. The finger pointing will continue, and the trouble will continue to stir.

I'm sharing this with you because some have heard these rumors and misinformation. It is important to know what's out there stirring up trouble. It is easier to ignore and process when we have more honest information about those rumors. We have to keep our heads clear and be the example of sailing as smoothly as possible through turbulent waters. The resources, energy, head space, and time spent stirring up trouble without need gets in the way of what we're in this world to do -

Love and serve God by loving and serving others.

This is the bottom line.

I have to say I've been so proud our congregation has been able to keep the main thing the main thing. Paraphrasing Paul, if we just keep our minds, hearts, and spirits focused on what we should be doing to shine the light of Christ, we'll put much of this trouble to the side. We'll also have clearer and calmer space in our hearts and heads should we actually have to make a difficult decision down the road regarding our congregation. In the meantime, love God and love our neighbor.