

**Michael Gehring**  
**Philippians 2: 5–11**  
**I Peter 3: 15b–16a**  
**Main Street UMC**  
**September 2, 2018**

The sermon series which begins today is called *Essential Christianity: That Which Unites Us*. There is so much division in our world and, sadly, within the Christian Church, and ironically enough, within the United Methodist Church; a friend of mine calls it the Untied Methodist Church.

My first year in college was at Arkansas Tech University and my dorm Turner Hall reeked of a smoking product that was not tobacco. The frats didn't have their own fraternity houses and evidence of that littered the hallways. I transferred to Evangel University my sophomore year. Evangel is a liberal arts Assemblies of God college. Now that's an oxymoron if there ever were one. The Assemblies of God, of course, is a holiness denomination, and there were lots of ethical expectations placed upon us students. If we failed to meet them, we were held accountable with expulsion being one method that was sometimes employed. The obvious rules were no drinking, no smoking, no cussing, and no gambling. Not all Christians agree with that list of ethical admonitions.

It is interesting that the great majority of issues that have divided Christians recently in America have, by and large, been not about theology but about ethics. For example, when was the last time you had a knock down argument over what transpires when we celebrate the Eucharist; is it transubstantiation, transelementation, consubstantiation, or simply memorialist?

I grieve over the divisions in the church, but what we are going to focus on in the coming weeks is that which unites us as Christians. It is important, as believers, that we can articulate our faith. I Peter instructs, "*Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.*"

In the meditation for August 5, I quoted the New Testament theologian Sakari Häkkinen who wrote, "*In the Ancient world poverty was a visible and common phenomenon.*" (HTS Theologese Studies 72/4) He stated that 9 out of 10 people lived at or below subsistence level. Subsistence level is defined as having barely enough resources to sustain life. The middle-class, as we think of it, didn't exist. Social safety nets such as Social Security, Medicaid, and unemployment benefits were non-existent. Of that 90%, it is estimated that 2/3 lived in extreme poverty.

You can imagine in such a world literacy was very low. The scholar Meir Bar-Ilan stated that in the first century there were rural Jewish towns in which only one person could read and write. The literacy level in the urban areas was higher

but it never exceeded 5%. And the overall literacy level for all of Israel was probably less than 3% which, of course, means 97% of the population could not read or write. <http://faculty.biu.ac.il/~barilm/illitera.html>

The early church took faith formation seriously. If one converted to Christianity, one had to take catechism instructions for a year and at the end of that year then one was baptized; only after instructions and baptism could one then partake of communion.

Because the vast majority of people were illiterate, auditory learning was essential and memorization crucial. After the end of a year of faith training, when the candidate was brought forward for baptism, they were asked a series of questions which they had to answer in front of all who were there. They didn't have hymnals in front of them and even if they did, it wouldn't have done them any good. But by this time, they knew their faith and proudly and gratefully responded. "*Do you believe in God?*" "*I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.*" "*Do you believe in Jesus?*" And on it would go.

If we are going to be honest, we protestants have not done as well in faith formation as we should have. We United Methodists do not even have an official catechism. By the way, I consider that scandalous. But we have made great strides in teaching the faith. And my friend Bishop Wilke, author of *The Disciple Bible Studies*, has greatly contributed to increased biblical literacy in the Methodist Church. I want to thank Bob Langlais for coordinating this crucial ministry for us. I also want to thank all of our Sunday School teachers and our small group leaders for the work they put in to teach the faith.

Last Sunday we talked about the Shema: *Hear O Israel the Lord our God is one. You are to teach this faith to your children and your children's children.* And to teach the faith, we've got to know the faith. Let us commit as a community to deepen our discipleship. And with grateful hearts, let us now take a few moments of silent prayer to prepare our hearts to receive God's amazing love as revealed in the bread and the cup.