

“An Ecumenical Spirit”

Mark 14:22-25

Romans 14:1-6

Galatians 1:6-9

Rev. Paul E. Capetz

Christ Church by the Sea (United Methodist), Newport Beach

John Wesley, to whom we owe our Methodist heritage, once wrote an important sermon entitled “A Catholic Spirit.” Here the word “catholic” is to be understood as “universal” or “all-embracing,” spelled with a lower-case “c”; Wesley is not talking about Roman Catholicism. I remember how as a boy I was puzzled by the phrase in the Apostles Creed that we used to cite in church each Sunday: “I believe in the holy catholic church.” Then it was explained to me that “catholic” in this sense means “the universal Christian church,” not the Roman Catholic Church. Wesley’s sermon is about the relation of Christians to one another. He prefaces his sermon by insisting that we Christians are to love all our fellow human beings, including non-Christians. The commandment “love thy neighbor as thyself” refers to all human beings, not merely other Christians. Yet Wesley goes on to note that in addition to the commandment that we are to love all other human beings, the New Testament calls us to a special love for our fellow Christians. This is what his sermon is about. By a catholic spirit, then, he means our love for all our fellow Christians, of whatever church and of any denomination. I am calling it an “ecumenical” spirit.

What prompts Wesley to write a sermon on this topic? He explains that in fact Christians don’t always love one another. Then he cites many instances of controversies that have deeply divided Christians from one another. These controversies are of two kinds, having to do with belief and action. Sometimes Christians have disagreed vehemently with one another over what we Christians are to believe. Not all Christians teach the same doctrines or agree on theology. These differences lead to differences in practice or action. Some Christians baptize infants while

others do not. Some churches ordain women while others do not. The list could go on and on. Hence, Wesley's sermon addresses the question how we can love those other Christians who don't agree with us theologically or ethically or whose practice of worship differs from ours.

Growing up in the United Methodist Church I was taught early on to have an ecumenical spirit toward other Christians. Like the word "catholic," the word "ecumenical" also means "universal." It comes from the Greek word for "world." I remember how we learned about the ecumenical movement in Sunday School. I knew that other Protestants such as Presbyterians, Baptists, Lutherans, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians were more or less like us and for that reason we didn't have any particular reason to polemicize against them as being false Christians. Catholics, however, were in a different category. We tended to look upon the Catholics with suspicion. I recall hearing that they believed in the pope, not the Bible; moreover, the fact that they prayed to Mary and other saints was seen as unbiblical. Still, Catholics weren't the ones who came in for our most scathing criticisms. These were reserved for what we called "sects": Mormons, Christian Scientists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. I was taught that these groups weren't truly Christian, even though they claimed to be Christian. Our ecumenical spirit did not extend to them. We viewed them as dangerous because their doctrines were false and could mislead us.

As I grew older, I learned what a difference American history had made to our reasons for being ecumenical. Prior to the birth of this country, freedom of religion was rarely to be found in Europe. Throughout the Middle Ages, it was expected that all members of European society would be Christians. Moreover, in Western Europe, the Roman Catholic Church was the official form of Christianity. All other Christian movements were suppressed or persecuted. When the Protestant Reformers broke with the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, many Protestants were executed for their faith. But not even the Protestants were champions of

religious liberty. Protestants persecuted and killed those who dissented from their teachings. A famous Unitarian Christian was burned at the stake in Calvin's Geneva for denying the doctrine of the Trinity, and many Baptist Christians were executed by other Protestants for denying infant baptism, usually by drowning so as to mock their belief that Christians must be baptized by immersion. Then the Wars of Religion tore Europe apart for about a century. It apparently didn't occur to these Christians, whether Catholic or Protestant, that Christians of various persuasions could live together in harmony without persecuting and killing each other. It was only with the birth of the United States that the principle of religious liberty was legally and politically established for the first time. What an achievement that was! Wesley lived during the eighteenth century when our nation was first conceived. Hence, his concern that love for one's fellow Christians had not always been a reality was more urgent in that context. Ecumenism in our modern sense was a new idea. Perhaps Christians could disagree with one another on issues of doctrine and practice and yet live harmoniously together as fellow citizens of a single nation.

My own experience growing up in this country bore out the fruitfulness of this idea. We had Protestant families of various denominations as well as a Catholic and a Jewish family on our street. All of us kids played together and our parents were good friends with each other. Still, we knew that there were religious differences between us, and while those were not to be taken lightly, they weren't reason to hate one another. In fact, we loved each other: Protestant, Catholic, and Jew. For us at that time, that was as far as religious diversity extended. We knew nothing about Muslims, or Buddhists and Hindus. And there were no atheists that we knew of. Today, our experience of religious diversity has been greatly expanded by the flux of immigrants from non-Western countries, and we now know about Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam as well.

While our age may not be as parochial as Wesley's age was, the issues that concerned him are very much the same today. While he wanted us to extend love to all people, including non-Christians as well as Christians with whom we disagree about various matters, he didn't want us to be indifferent to questions of truth in religion. If Christians in previous centuries overemphasized the importance of finding agreement on religious and theological questions, we today may perhaps underemphasize the importance of having clearly articulated religious and theological convictions by which we live. Think about this: if we are rightly worried about the negative effects of intolerance, we may fear that caring about truth in religious and theological matters could be an obstacle to fostering tolerance. I had a number of students over the years at the seminary where I taught who did not want to take theological controversies seriously out of fear that giving importance to theological questions would prevent us from living in harmony with others. But Wesley was opposed to this. As he put it, "a catholic spirit" is not "indifference to all opinions." Not all claims to truth can be equally valid. So, if we care about truth in general, we cannot be indifferent to questions of truth in religion and theology. Not all religions can be equally right about what they teach. Not all Christians can be equally right about what they teach when they disagree with other Christians. How, then, can we foster love for all of our fellow human beings and for all of our fellow Christians without being indifferent to the issues of belief and practice that divide us? That's the heart of the problem that Wesley identified; yet he also wanted us to pursue both goals simultaneously: to believe that truth in religion and theology really matters and thus has to be taken with utter seriousness, and also to affirm that love is never to be violated as we recognize that ours is a world of deep religious and theological pluralism.

The problem that Wesley identified has been with us ever since the first generation of Christians. Notice how in our two readings from the apostle Paul, Paul is simultaneously trying

to grab both horns of the dilemma. On the one hand, he wants Christians to be tolerant of one another when it comes to their differing practices, such as whether to eat certain foods or abstain from them, or whether to observe certain days as being of special religious importance (Rom. 14:1-6). He therefore exhorts Christians to welcome one another, “but not for disputes over opinions.” On the other hand, there are some differences between various Christians that are of such great importance that Paul feels impelled to denounce them vehemently: “if any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:9). How are we to hold these two attitudes together? On the one hand, he tells us to be tolerant of one another and not to judge; on the other hand, however, he condemns those who disagree with him on matters that seem to him to strike at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian.

Wesley took much the same double position as did Paul. Wesley used to cite as his motto: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love.” But who’s to decide what the essentials are? Paul and his Christian opponents disagreed on what was essential to a proper understanding of Christian faith and the practical implications that followed from it. When Protestants broke with Catholics, they disagreed on what was essential to a proper understanding of the gospel and they could not be reconciled with one another. Five hundred years later, Protestants and Catholics remain divided and that’s why we have a Catholic church right across the street from our own Protestant church. Right now, Christians are engaged in disputes with one another that are equally divisive. Within our own Methodist denomination there is talk of a split over conflicting understandings of biblical authority and human sexuality.

I have to confess that I don’t think there is any easy way to hold Wesley’s two concerns together, though I completely agree that both concerns are necessary. We need to adopt an ecumenical or a catholic spirit with those who are different from us religiously and theologically,

whether they are non-Christians or other Christians. I think we live in an age that is unique in human history; ours is now a truly global world in which religious and theological diversity have taken on a new form right here in our own backyard. Today there is a mosque in my home town and I personally have met Buddhists and Hindus. These non-Western religions are no longer encountered only in books; their adherents have become our neighbors and their children go to school with our children. And here too the commandment applies: “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” When we talk about these religions and their adherents, we need to tell the truth about them. Stereotypes and half-truths will no longer suffice. We have no excuse anymore when it comes to knowing what these religions are all about and how they differ from our own. As Wesley recognized, such diversity in religion is not going away anytime soon. He attributed this diversity in part to the fact that human understanding is limited and partial. He writes: “[M]any good men now also may entertain peculiar opinions...[So] long as we know but in part...all men will not see all things alike. It is an unavoidable consequence of the present weakness and shortness of human understanding, that several men will be of several minds in religion as well as in common life. So it has been from the beginning of the world, and so it will be...” Notice how he acknowledges that good people can disagree in religion. This is what is new about the ecumenical or catholic spirit he is talking about. We should not deny the genuine humanity of those who differ from us religiously and assume they must all be agents of Satan. For this reason, Wesley says: “Every wise man...will allow others the same liberty of thinking which he desires they should allow him...I dare not, therefore, impose my mode of worship on any other....But everyone must follow the dictates of his own conscience...He must be fully persuaded in his own mind and then act according to the best light he has.” This is Wesley’s justification for freedom of religion. An ecumenical or catholic spirit is thus a humble spirit.

But there is also the other side of the matter. This is the question of truth. Who's right? In our concern for love, we cannot be indifferent to truth. Because of the new opportunities for personal encounter with people of non-Christian religions today, there have been serious and productive dialogues between Christians and non-Christians about our religious differences. I was engaged in one such dialogue with Jews for two years when I was a seminary student. As a result, I learned a great deal not only about Jews and Judaism, but also about how Jews perceive Christians and Christianity that forever altered my perceptions of my own religion. I have had less experience with dialogue between Christians and members of non-Western religions, though I would be glad to participate in it. The biggest puzzle for me, however, is that it is not so much with non-Christians that I have my greatest disagreements but, rather, with my fellow Christians. My most intense controversies are with those in my own religious tradition. I don't get riled up by the differences between Christianity and Hinduism or those between Christianity and Islam. Moreover, I don't feel much need to argue with Catholics about why I believe what I believe as a Protestant. No, my most intense disagreements are with my fellow Protestants when I think they are wrong about some matter of belief or practice. Why is this? I think it may be true of all religions that their most polemical energies are reserved for those in their own fold. I observed this when I was engaged in Jewish-Christian dialogue; the arguments that our Jewish participants had with one another about what it means to be a Jew were far more heated than any of the disagreements they had with us Christians. That's why we find so much criticism of Jews and Judaism in the New Testament because all the early Christians were Jews; that's why we find such intense criticism of Catholics and Catholicism in the Protestant Reformers, because all of them were Catholics. That's why today's Methodists are at each other's throats about sexuality, because we are all members of the same family. A secular analogy is the intensity with which

Democrats and Republicans fight with one another; we are all Americans and thus our deepest emotional investment lies in defining what it means to be an American today against those who disagree with us about America. I have the impression that it's easier for an American to love a foreigner than for a Democrat to love a Republican or vice-versa. As a Methodist, it's easier to love a non-Methodist than another Methodist on the other side of the heated issues dividing us.

Today is World Communion Sunday. It was first celebrated in 1933 as an ecumenical gesture designed to foster harmony as well as mutual respect and greater understanding among the various churches that are divided by doctrine and theology, ethics and worship. Even today it serves as an important reminder that all of us who are Christians, whatever our denomination, are members of a larger, universal church. In spite of all our differences from one another, this ritual is a symbolic acknowledgement that we are nevertheless united in a common faith in Jesus as the Christ, as God's definitive self-revelation to us. As we partake of the bread and the wine, as we recall Jesus' words at the Last Supper ("This is my body which is given for you; this is my blood of the new covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"), we should take this as an occasion to remind ourselves that we know only in part, that our understanding of our Christian faith is never perfect and complete, but is open to new insights from our fellow Christians. And though we should always be ready to stand up for the truth as we see it, we must do so in a spirit of humility, in a catholic spirit as Wesley said, or in an ecumenical spirit as I have called it. We bear witness to the truth of the gospel as it has been given to us to know. But we do not claim to be infallible. We remain open to learning new insights and to better formulations of the truth.

When I was in high school, my best friend was a Mormon. Back then I was impressed with how certain he was that his church, and his church alone, taught the true gospel. Once he said to me, "You know, my church is the true church." I didn't know what to say in response. I



was completely caught off-guard. His absolute certainty made me feel uncertain. I had never been taught that the United Methodist Church was the only true church. If I had been as well educated theologically back then as I am today, I would have replied: “We do not claim that ours is the only true church; but we do claim that ours is *a* true church.” Not the one true church but a true church! That’s a very significant distinction. We are willing to acknowledge that other churches are also true churches, especially other Protestant churches, but maybe other churches as well. Yet our refusal to absolutize ourselves and to claim that ours alone is the true church is not a sign of weakness, but of strength. For us it’s not a matter of all or nothing. It’s a matter of degree. We believe that we preach and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ with fidelity and we are willing to grant that some other churches do the same. And if at the present time we are wrong about some churches, we are open to being instructed and corrected in our perceptions of them.

Unfortunately, the ritual of communion that we are about to celebrate has not always been a source of unity among Christians. Instead, it became a bone of contention and a source of division. During the Reformation era, not only did Catholics and Protestants disagree with one another as to how communion should be understood, but even the Protestants could not agree with one another about communion. These doctrinal differences became the major reason why Protestants never formed a unified church. While all Protestants rejected what the Catholics taught, they couldn’t agree among each other as to what Jesus meant when he said, holding the bread, “This is my body,” and holding the cup, “This is my blood.” For this reason, we ended up with our first splits among Protestants who couldn’t agree as to how to interpret the Bible. I would like to think that today we can do better than this. So, as we gather for this meal, let us be humble as we bear our Christian witness to non-Christians and let us be humble as we continue to argue with our fellow Christians as to how the gospel is best understood and practiced. Amen.