LIVING OUR PRINCIPLES: THE NURTURING COMMUNITY

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1 Corinthians 12:12-26

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# SETTING THE CONTEXT

 Are some people worth more than others? Are some people more expendable than others? These may seem like easy questions to answer, but our actions as human beings indicate that we often find some people worth more than others, that some people are more expendable than others. In Paul’s day, slavery was a common practice. Free people are more important than slaves, aren’t they? Depending on which religion you practiced, if you were Jewish, of course, Jewish people were better than Gentiles because they were close to the true God. If you were pagan, of course you’d think the opposite, right? And while male and female are not mentioned in the passage we are about to read, Paul did include them in his letter to the Galatians. We still have far too many people and societies claiming that women are less than men. It was common in the ancient world to use the metaphor of the body when talking about human societies and calling for social harmony. **The image was often used to urge members of the subordinate classes to stay in their places and not upset the natural order of things.[[1]](#endnote-1) Paul uses this metaphor to offer a radically different message.**

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

# THE SERMON

 Are some people worth more than others? Are some people more expendable than others? Policies and practices that we live by are based on the answers to these questions. For example, do all children have a right to be educated, to have time to play, to be nurtured in a safe loving environment? Do Bangladeshi or Malaysian children have the same value and have the same rights to childhood as an American child?

 **The Social Principles seek to answer questions like these through the lens of our relationship with God and the witness of Scripture. They seek to bring our faith into conversation with the realities of the world.** “The Social Principles allow the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ to shine upon parts of our society we think about most and also those parts of society and groups of people we tend to ignore.”[[2]](#endnote-2) The Social Principles are reviewed, debated and updated every four years by the General Conference, the international policy making body of the United Methodist Church. In a minute, I’ll tell you about one such change the General Conference made four months ago. You are not required to agree with every statement, but they are meant to offer a public statement of the “mind of the church” that should be a guide or common starting point for dialogue. They challenge us to prayerfully ask, “What does God want us to do? What does God want **me** to do? Who does God want us to be? What does God want us to change? What is God’s vision for our future?”[[3]](#endnote-3)

 Last week, we introduced the Social Principles on the Natural World; this week we are talking about the Nurturing Community. This video clip introduces these principles and United Methodists from around the world.

Watch Living Our Principles Episode 2[[4]](#endnote-4) at <http://livingourprinciples.org/>

**The Nurturing Community addresses issues related to the most intimate forms of community and communion. It has statements on the family, marriage, divorce, single persons, women and men, human sexuality, family violence and abuse, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, abortion, ministry to those who have experienced an abortion, adoption, faithful care for dying persons, suicide and sexual assault.**

 The principle on human sexuality has gotten the most attention and has the most disagreement. At General Conference this past May, the issue of homosexuality consumed so much time and energy that the body wisely referred all discussions to a special commission set up by the bishops. In my observation, we focused so much on this one issue that other important issues were ignored. One of our clergy delegates was sitting at a table with delegates from other parts of the world including Nigeria. The atmosphere of the conference had a lot of animosity and tension because of the contentious debates over homosexuality which highlighted cultural and regional differences. During a break, my colleague asked the Nigerian pastor next to him, “What is the biggest issue you are dealing with at your church?” The pastor looked at him and said, “our biggest issue is Boko Haram.” Boko Haram is a terrorist group that has kidnapped, enslaved and abused girls, attacked Christian churches, killed many people both Christian and Muslim, and done many atrocities. My friend said, his heart broke and the divisions melted away. He said, I worry about the service going too long or someone leaving the kitchen a mess and here is my brother in Christ dealing with this. **Our global church gives us an opportunity to hear first-hand the hurts, pains and struggles of God’s children in places that don’t get our attention**. Issues that seem academic to us, are crucial to our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world and vice versa -issues that consume us perplex them. Some issues demand attention from all of us.

 The Social Principles about sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and sexual assault speak to suffering happening across the world. The principle on sexual abuse begins with **“Violent, disrespectful, or abusive sexual expressions do not confirm sexuality as God’s good gift. We reject all sexual expressions that damage the humanity God has given us as birthright, and we affirm only that sexual expression that enhances that same humanity.”**[[5]](#endnote-5) The principle on Sexual Harassment says, **“Sexual harassment undermines the social goal of equal opportunity and the climate of mutual respect between men and women.”** Do you see how the sacred worth of all people is applied to these very real social issues? These issues effect huge numbers of people. According to the organization that runs the largest sexual assault hotline, 444,500 people in America are victimized by sexual assault or abuse in one year; 1 out of every 6 American women have been the victims of attempted or completed rape.[[6]](#endnote-6) The problem is even more widespread in other countries where rape is a weapon of war. The General Conference in May added a paragraph to the Nurturing Community on Pornography. These issues impact the quality of people’s lives. **These practices of sexual abuse, harassment, assault and pornography diminish the gift of life and the gift of sexuality that God has given to each person. They create layers of harm.** Aren’t these issues ones we can all agree need attention and correction?

 After our Church and Society Committee did a forum on human trafficking two years ago, I started following an organization on Facebook out of Tucson called Willow Way.[[7]](#endnote-7) They are a group that supports and empowers victims escaping prostitution and sex trafficking. Through them, I see a side of life I never knew anything about. At first their stories shocked me, but they also helped me to understand more and have compassion. **After reading their stories, you begin to see so much of this is woven together.** We are doing a lot of ministries for children in the foster care system. I thought it appropriate as we reflect on the nurturing community, we see the story of one of the parents of foster children.

Watch a “heartfelt message from Dec 31, 2015 <https://www.facebook.com/ShakaraSquare/videos/1657523497855768/?pnref=story> [[8]](#endnote-8)

At the end of her video story, she wrote about God giving her the strength to get up again and again and again. **Talking about issues like sexual abuse, harassment, and assault may seem like weird topics for a Sunday sermon, but they impact the quality of life for a person made in the image and likeness of God, a person created by God and thus of sacred worth.** And they impact not just the quality of their life, but of their children and others as well.

 **The Social Principles challenge us to prayerfully ask, “What does God want us to do? What does God want me to do? Who does God want us to be? What does God want us to change? What is God’s vision for the most intimate form of community whether it is the family, the couple or the single person?** We have a passion at this church to nurture children, youth and families both within and outside the church. We support families of all configurations with a loving environment helping them connect to the source of amazing grace and life through Jesus Christ. We nurture children in the faith and hopefully get the Biblical stories deep inside of them through storytelling, art, science, drama, and music. Six 12-step groups meet on our campus that help people overcome addictions to alcohol, drugs and food and support the family members of those with addictions. Our work with children in the foster care system is seeking to break cycles of poverty and homelessness and communicate God’s love to children in the system. Some of you are volunteering on Foster Care Review Boards, confronting the painful realties of these children and families and working for their good. Our work with Hope for the Hopeless offers hope, healing and a safe home to street children in Ethiopia. And so much more.

**Paul made the radical claim that diversity among human beings is by God’s design for the health and well-being of the whole, that we are interdependent upon each other and that those some might consider “the least” should be lifted up and honored.** He reminds us that “If one suffers we all suffer; if one is given glory we all celebrate.” **The Social Principles help us to think about how to enflesh that in our church but also in our world.** May we continue to be a church that “nurtures human beings into the fullness of their God-created humanity both here and in the world.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Amen.

1. Richard B. Hays*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), p. 213. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Social Principles of The United Methodist Church 2013-2016*. (Washington D.C.: UM Publishing House, 2013), p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. p 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. General Board of Church & Society of the United Methodist Church. Living Our Principles: A Film Series on The United Methodist Social Principles. (To be published in October 2016) [www.livingourprinciples.org](http://www.livingourprinciples.org) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Social Principles ¶161 H) Sexual Abuse.* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. These statistics come from the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) found at <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/scope-problem> . [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. You can find out more about Willow Way on <https://www.facebook.com/WillowWayTucson/> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Trina “TiTi Ladette” Cleveland. “heartfelt message from Dec 31, 2015 on Shakara Square’s FaceBook page, <https://www.facebook.com/ShakaraSquare/videos/1657523497855768/?pnref=story> . [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Social Principles, ¶ 161. II. The Nurturing Community, the first sentence. You can find the Social Principles online at <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/social-principles-social-creed>. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)