

Prayer *(Traditional Dakota tribal prayer, BOW #468)*

All: Grandfather, Great Spirit, you have always been, and before you nothing has been. There is no one to pray to but you. The star nations all over the heaven are yours, and yours are the grasses of the earth. You are older than all need, older than all pain and prayers. Grandfather, Great Spirit, fill us with light. Give us strength to understand and eyes to see. Teach us to walk the soft earth as relatives to all that live. Help us, for without you we are nothing. Amen.

Message: What We Believe

What do you believe?

That one, very good question lies at the heart of all important things in our lives. Our beliefs have a powerful and far-ranging impact on each of us, our families and our community. What we believe is central to our identity and the way we live our lives; what we think, say and do. It doesn't matter whether it's Bishop Carcaño, our District Superintendent, me – as your pastor, another member of our congregation or community, or even Oprah who's asking. Beliefs are something we all learn, challenge, re-learn and revise every day of our lives.

You could say all that matters is what we believe, because our beliefs shape and form us. They shape our lives: morally, spiritually and physically. We act according to what we believe and what we believe is shaped by the way we act. Our beliefs really do determine what we'll do with our lives. After all, if we don't believe in a cause or a person or a job or a phenomenon or a God or a world view, then we won't give it any attention or credibility, once our initial interest wears off. That's why fads are short-lived. Does anyone still buy pet rocks?

Today's the start of a sermon series focused on what we, as United Methodists, believe about our most fundamental relationships.

We'll spend some time talking with each other about how we're impacted by our beliefs and experiences. That's only natural in a community of believers who are in life-changing relationships with God, other people and all of creation. Our Social Creed, which you have before you as an insert in the bulletin, is a basic statement of what we believe. It's a summary statement only, supported by a set of seven Social Principles which are found in our Book of Discipline. We'll learn more about our Social Principles next week.

One important note: our Social Principles and Social Creed are not binding truths or laws of our church. They're not at the same level of importance as fundamental Christian beliefs, such as our belief in Jesus as our Savior, the Son of God. They're guidelines that our community of faith lifts up as an example of how we take risks interpreting God's love, taking a stand and calling others to respond, even if the areas are complex or controversial. We see the Social Creed as a statement of

how God’s love for the world is active and engaged, seeking justice and peace with compassion. You can’t do that if you’re passive, isolated or a couch potato. Following Jesus means walking the path he set, being transformed by him and, through the process of transformation, serving God by serving others. That’s what discipleship is.

Our Social Creed calls us to be more than observers. We’re called to care enough about other people’s lives and the world we live in to think and act on the basis of our faith. John Wesley showed us the way by how he lived and the movement he founded. He didn’t believe in standing apart from others with a private, personal faith. Instead, John Wesley, along with his brother Charles and wife Susanna, left the pulpit of the Anglican Church to go out into the streets, markets and fields, bringing the Word of God and Christian way of living and caring for others to craftsmen, laborers, mine workers and all who worked for a daily living. Methodism wasn’t born out of a crisis of theology, but a crisis of mission. Wesley showed us how to combine our personal beliefs and practices by working with others for common, social causes founded in God’s love and care. It’s one of the things that sets Methodists apart from other denominations, though we are not trying to be exclusive: all are invited to participate. We work freely and openly with other Christians and faiths as we care for our global neighbors.

Since the Wesleys began our movement, Methodists have been known as those who get involved with other people’s lives and with political and social struggles. Our focus goes beyond our local community. It spans our nation and reaches all the nations of the world. We believe this is how we’re called to fulfill Jesus’ mission and the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. Our mission reflects this commitment: we’re to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The transformation is simultaneously personal and social. Jesus changed the world everywhere he went, turning unjust and oppressive systems upside down through the power of radical, transforming love. We continue that work today in love.

Please join me now in reading the United Methodist Social Creed out loud. [pause] Now I invite you to turn to the person seated next to you and briefly share one thing that speaks to you from this statement of what we believe. Is there an element of what you read that resonates with your heart, mind and spirit? Have you had a recent experience of God’s love that relates to our social creed? Take a few minutes to share with one another. [pause] Thank you for sharing. I invite you to continue the discussion after the service as you gather with other members, your family or friends. When we share our experiences of God’s love together, we’re all inspired, refreshed and built up.

I invite you to put the Social Creed someplace where you’ll see it this week: on your mirror at home or on a desk or the coffee table, anyplace where you’ll see it. And, when you see it, I invite you to reflect and meditate on what you believe. Think and pray about your faith, your identity and the ways our beliefs call us to live our lives in a loving, meaningful and active way.

I invite you to embrace the active language of the social creed as you reflect. For example, we see the word “believe” used four times. First, we believe in a Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, our Triune God, who gives us good gifts, gifts we’re to use for the good of all people and the world, not misuse for personal, selfish gain. Second, we believe it’s good and right to work. God invites into the harvest field where others receive good through our service. We work for our own good and for the good of others and we actively support those who serve to eliminate economic and social distress, allowing others to achieve their full potential under God’s loving care. Third, we believe the truth of Jesus Christ and the life he promises through the new covenant, a life filled with love and faith. No matter what we may do to each other as human beings, God’s love will win. We’re God’s agents, acting in the world, inspiring others to experience God’s life-changing love for themselves.

Next, we affirm and dedicate. We affirm all of creation as God’s masterpiece and dedicate ourselves to caring for it as faithful stewards. Dedicate is an important word. Not only do we dedicate our service as stewards of the environment, we dedicate ourselves to helping others live in peace. We dedicate ourselves to seeking justice and will work to

help those who are oppressed find freedom from whatever, or whoever, may bind them, no matter who they are, what they believe or where they live. **Next, we receive.** We joyfully receive the blessings of family, community, marriage and sexuality. These are good gifts that God gives to each of us, gifts that make our days bright and lift the darkness during the long nights.

Finally, we commit ourselves. At the heart of our Social Creed is our commitment. We commit ourselves to the rights, dignity of others and to improving the quality of life for all people, regardless of any social, economic, political or material differences we may have. Jesus taught us to “*Love our neighbors as ourselves.*” Our social creed is a passionate statement of our devotion to God and to showing our love for others, no matter how difficult or challenging it may be.

The way we reach the heart of our creed, our commitment, is by starting at the beginning: by loving God. When we wholeheartedly love God, without reservation or pause, we’re able to be grateful for all God gives to us: a wonderful world filled with marvels for us to explore, the blessings of loving relationships and the opportunity to respond and share all we have receive with others, honoring and respecting them as children of our Creator. That kind of gratitude and love can’t be dictated, mandated or forced. We can’t earn it or make it happen. Gratitude and love happen when our identity is firm, our beliefs strong and when we can relax and rest in God’s love together.

I pray you will find God’s grace filling your heart, mind and spirit with love and gratitude this Sabbath and every day. Amen.

United Methodist Social Creed*

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.

* Source: 2012 Book of Disciplines, www.umc.org/what-we-believe/our-social-creed

Psalm 148 (NRSV)

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host! Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created. He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed. Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together! Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted, his glory is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the LORD!

Micah 6:6-8 (NRSV)

“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?