

Questions Thinking Christians Ask

DESCRIPTION

This series explores six important questions that thinking Christians in the 21st century often grapple with.

NOTE: Some of the content of this series comes from part one of Martin's book, *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian? A Guide to What Matters Most*.

1. ***Can Good Christians Have Doubts?*** (Psalm 13, Mark 9:17-18, 21-24)
2. ***What About Other Religions?*** (Acts 10:1-5, 34-35)
3. ***Can Christians Believe in Evolution?*** (Genesis 1:1-5, 26-27, 31)
4. ***Why Does God Allow Suffering?*** (Isaiah 40:28-31 and other selected passages)
5. ***Is the "Rapture" Real?*** (Matthew 24:36-39, 44)
6. ***Where Does the Church Stand on Homosexuality?*** (John 13:34-35, 15:9-12)

Questions Thinking Christians Ask Can Good Christians Have Doubts?

Psalm 13, Mark 9:17-18, 21-24

A tradition at First Church is that every year around Christmas, the church staff has a Christmas party at the pastor's house. Paula and I have enjoyed hosting those events the past two Christmas seasons. At the staff parties, the group brings gifts, and we play "Cutthroat Christmas" where people steal gifts from one another. I was near the end of the line, so I had my pick of the gifts. I decided to take a DVD of a movie called "*Cinderella Man*" starring Russell Crowe and Renee Zellweger. I saw it years ago when it was first released, but wanted to watch it again.

It sat on my desk for five months, but last month I finally watched it. If you're not familiar with the movie, *Cinderella Man* tells the true story of Jim Braddock, a boxer during the depression years. After injuring his hand, Jim's boxing career came to an end. Unable to find regular work, Jim and his family struggled greatly during the depression years. Although a devout Roman Catholic, those bleak years strained Jim's faith in God. In one poignant scene of the movie, the Braddock family had no money, the kids were sick, the electricity had been cut off in their apartment, and they had little food.

Late that evening, Jim came home after another unsuccessful day of seeking work. The kids were in bed, coughing with a bad cold; the apartment was freezing; and the only light in the apartment came from a candle. Jim sat down at the table with his wife to eat a meager bite of dinner. He and his wife joined hands and bowed their heads to say a blessing over the tiny meal. She began the prayer, "Lord, we are grateful..." but Jim did not join her. She looked up at him, and with her eyes asked, "What's the matter? Why are you not praying with me?" For a moment Jim looked at her in silence. He then said, "I'm all prayed out."

Jim Braddock did not recant his faith. He didn't leave his church. He didn't abandon God. But for a while, he struggled with his faith, he had some doubts, and he was all prayed out. Many of you know what that feels like. You prayed for God's healing, or God's strength, or God's presence, or God's direction, or God's help, but the heavens were silent and God seemed absent. And after a while, you, like Jim Braddock, felt all prayed out.

Every Christian, at some time or another, has an experience like that. Even people in the Bible felt that way from time to time. The writer of Psalm 13 certainly did. In today's OT text, the Psalmist struggles with his faith, struggles with prayer, struggles with God. In verse 1 he said, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" The Psalmist poured out his heart to God, but his prayers felt unanswered, his faith felt worn out. Like Jim Braddock in *The Cinderella Man*, he felt all prayed out.

Have you ever felt all prayed out? Do you ever have doubts about God? Do you ever wonder if God really exists? Or, if God does exist, do you ever wonder if God is as good, loving, and just as you have been taught? If so, you are in good company. People have felt all prayed out for centuries, including many biblical heroes.

After years of praying for a child with no results, Abraham and Sarah felt all prayed out. Frustrated with leading the people of Israel through the wilderness, Moses felt all prayed out. Sick in mind, body, and spirit, Job felt all prayed out. Hiding for his life in a desert cave, his enemies in hot pursuit, David felt all prayed out. Crying out to God in anger and anguish, the prophet Jeremiah felt all prayed out. As we've just seen, believing God had abandoned him, the psalmist felt all prayed out. After denying Jesus three times, Peter felt all prayed out. After repeatedly praying for healing but not receiving it, the apostle Paul felt all prayed out. In anguish over his inability to believe Jesus was alive, Thomas felt all prayed out. At one point in his life, even Jesus felt all prayed out. The authorities were breathing down his neck. Powerful people wanted him dead. He had less than a day to live. So he went to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. Three times Jesus poured out his soul to God to spare his life. "Father," he pleaded, "Don't let me die; let me live!" But the heavens were silent. Instead of being rescued by God, Jesus was arrested, abandoned by his disciples, denied by his best friend, put on trial, condemned, beaten, mocked, and cruelly executed. Hanging on the cross, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Like so many others through the years, Jesus felt all prayed out.

We are beginning a summer sermon series today called, "**Questions Thinking Christians Ask.**" Today's question is, "**Can good Christians have doubts?**" The answer is clearly yes. God's people, from the very beginning, have had times of doubt, as we just reviewed. If they are honest, every Christian believer from the first century through today, at some point in their life, can relate to today's NT reading when the man said to Jesus, "Lord I believe, help my

unbelief.” We do believe. We wouldn’t be here today if we didn’t. But sometimes we struggle with unbelief. Every person here today has had at least one time in their life when they said, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.” Some churches and religious leaders teach that religious questions, struggles, and doubts are a sin; but they are wrong. Doubt is not the enemy of faith but part of faith, and always has been. Tennyson was right when he said, “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.”

So what do we do when we feel all prayed out? What do we do when our faith is weak? When God seems absent? When we have no more spiritual energy? What do we do when we are all prayed out? The answer is—we keep on. We keep on praying. We keep on affirming faith. We keep on trusting God. That’s what the Psalmist did. After crying out in despair, “God, how long will you forget me? How long will you hide your face from me?” he then said in verse 5, “But I trust in your unfailing love.” In spite of his despair, in spite of feeling abandoned by God, the Psalmist said, “Lord, I still trust in you. I still affirm faith in you.” When he was all prayed out, he continued to pray, and believe, and trust. And it was enough to get him through until his faith returned. And it’s enough to get you and me through until our faith returns. And until that happens, we can let our church family believe for us, on our behalf. Are you struggling with doubt today? Then let us believe for you, until your faith returns. In the meantime, you are welcome in this place, even with your doubts.

I once heard a story about a famous writer who was asked, “Do you believe in God without any doubts?” She replied, “I believe in God with all my doubts.” That sounds just about right.

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Questions Thinking Christians Ask What About Other Religions?

Acts 10:1-5, 34-35

A few years ago an adult Sunday school class in my church asked me to visit. They wanted me to answer the question, Will Jews make it to heaven? When I arrived at the class, the leader immediately asked, “So, will Jews make it to heaven?” Before I could respond, another member of the class said, “And while you’re at it, what about Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists?” As you might guess, we had an interesting discussion. Today we continue our series, questions thinking Christians ask. Today’s question is, What about other religions?

Imagine for a moment a global village of one thousand people. Further imagine that these one thousand people represent, proportionally, all the religions of the world. If that were true, three hundred of the one thousand people would be Christians. Two hundred people in the village would have no religion at all. The other five hundred people in the village would be made up of non-Christian religions including Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews. In our imaginary village, 30 percent would be Christians, 20 percent would have no religion, and 50 percent would practice non-Christian religions. This raises the question for Christian believers, What about the 50 percent? What attitude should Christians have toward other religions? Today we will explore three popular answers to that question. Please turn to your listening guide to follow along. ***(Note: listening guide can be found at the end of the sermon).***

All religions are the same. This view is popular among many folks, including a good number of Christians. This position says that in spite of apparent differences, all religions, in the end, are basically the same. The problem with this view is that it’s inaccurate. All religions are not the same. Certainly similarities can be found. For example, most religions try to connect human beings with the sacred, most religions have sacred scriptures, and most religions teach compassion and ethical living. However, in spite of these similarities, vast differences exist between religions. For example, take Christianity and Judaism. Christians have much in common with the Jewish faith. Christianity was born in Judaism and participated in Jewish faith for many decades. But, in spite of their similarities, significant differences persist, primarily around the person of Jesus Christ. Jews teach that Jesus was a good man, a teacher, even a prophet, but no more. Christians teach that Jesus was the Messiah, the son

of God, the second person of the Trinity. These are not minor differences! Christianity and Judaism are not the same.

The same dynamics are true with Islam. In spite of similarities, Christianity and Islam have major, irresolvable differences. The differences are even more pronounced with Buddhism and Hinduism. For example, the Buddhist religion doesn't believe in a personal God, and Hindus believe in many gods. So to say all religions are the same is naïve, inaccurate, and a disservice to the uniqueness of each faith. Since this first view is not helpful, let's look at a second option.

Other religions are false. This view says that all non-Christian religions are false religions and not of God. Therefore, people who practice these religions do not know God and have no hope of salvation in this life or the next. This view may sound harsh to you, but it's held by many good people. In fact, it's the view I was taught as a young Christian. I vividly remember a Sunday school class I attended when I was fifteen years old. A missionary from another country was speaking. He told us it was imperative that we send more missionaries around the world because people who did not accept Christ were lost and going to hell. I asked the missionary, "What about people who've never heard of Christ?" He said, "They will die, lost in their sins, and spend eternity in a devil's hell." I said, "You're kidding." But he wasn't kidding. This view believes strongly the only way to God is through Jesus.

Where does this belief come from? Proponents of this view say it comes from the Bible. For example, Acts 4:12 says, "There is salvation in no one else [Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." At first glance it seems clear-cut: if people don't go through Jesus, they don't get to God. However, from the beginning of Christianity, followers of Christ have debated how to interpret passages like this, which seem so exclusive of non-Christian religions. Some Christians interpret these passages as absolute, literal, doctrinal truth. Others interpret these passages not as absolute dogma but as poetic and devotional in nature, like saying to your beloved, 'You're the most beautiful person in the world.' It's unlikely that person is literally the most beautiful person in the world. But the statement is not intended to be literal, but poetic and heart-felt, a sort of love song to their beloved. So good Christians have strong disagreements on this issue. But many believers hold strongly to the view that all non-Christian religions are false, and people who practice them have no hope of salvation. This is a long standing historical view of

many Christian believers, including many in our own denomination and is a valid theological perspective. Let's review one final position.

Other religions are to be respected. In this third view, other religions have insight and value and should be respected. People who hold this position believe people of other faiths are following God to the best of their knowledge. They understand that in many ways our religion is determined by geography. For example, if we lived in Saudi Arabia, it's extremely doubtful we would be Christian. Instead, there's more than a 99 percent chance we would be Muslim. This third view has a more accepting, positive, and respectful view of non-Christian religions than the second view. However, as you can see on your listening guide under 3A, many people who hold this position *affirm the uniqueness of Christ*. They believe Jesus is the best picture we have of God. Therefore, they fully support evangelism and missions because they want all people of all nations and religions to know Jesus. However, this position does not believe that non-Christians have no hope of salvation. Ultimately, as noted in your listening guide under 3B, this position *leaves judgment (of non-Christians) to God* as we see in this passage from the book of James.

The view that other religions are to be respected has biblical support. For example, in Acts 10, we are introduced to a character named Cornelius. Cornelius was not a Christian, nor was he a Jew. He later became a Christian believer, but in this passage, he was not. Cornelius was a Gentile, a pagan in the eyes of most Christians and Jews at that time. In many ways Cornelius's religion was similar to today's Muslims. He believed in one God, worshipped God, gave alms to the poor, prayed daily, and lived an ethical life. Although Cornelius was not a Christian or a Jew, the Bible says that his prayers and alms were pleasing to God. This is extremely important. Even though Cornelius was neither Christian nor Jew, his religious practices pleased God. In this story the apostle Peter, who believed all Gentiles were pagans, cut off from God with no hope of salvation, learned otherwise. At the end of the story, Peter said to Cornelius, "I now realize.... that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35, NIV). This passage, along with others in the Bible, respects other religions and holds out hope that people who practice non-Christian faiths can know God, please God, and participate in God's kingdom.

Good Christian people disagree on this complex and controversial issue, and we need to respect each other's views even when we disagree. In the end, we must trust God to do the

right thing concerning non-Christian religions, whatever the right thing is. This third position of respecting other religions, while at the same time affirming the uniqueness of Christ and sharing Jesus with all, is where I find myself at this point in my journey.

I once heard a true story about a quiet suburban neighborhood in Pennsylvania. Almost all of the families in that community were Christians. However, one family in the neighborhood was Jewish. Christmas season was rapidly approaching, and the entire neighborhood sparkled with Christmas decorations. However, the decorations at the Jewish family's home looked different. Instead of Christmas trees and lights, the Jewish home featured a large illuminated menorah in their front window. A Jewish menorah, of course, represents the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, which falls at about the same time as Christmas. In many ways the menorah, like the Star of David, is a universal symbol of Judaism.

A few days before Christmas, at five o'clock one morning, the Jewish family awoke to the sound of shattering glass. The family ran downstairs and saw that their front window had been broken. Their illuminated menorah lay on the floor, beaten to pieces. The attack was a horrible assault on this Jewish family and on their religion. The pain of the assault was compounded even more by the fact that their grandparents had died in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany during World War II. The husband immediately began to clean up the mess and had the window replaced. It took all morning to get everything finished. During the day word spread throughout the neighborhood about what happened. Many neighbors came by and told this family how sorry they were that this awful thing had occurred in their neighborhood. Later that afternoon the Jewish family left their home to visit relatives. They did not know that behind the scenes, their Christian neighbors were hard at work, trying to redeem this horrible event. That night, when the Jewish family returned from visiting their relatives, they were met by an extraordinary sight. On the front window of nearly every home in their neighborhood hung a large illuminated menorah.

I don't pretend to fully understand how God relates to people of other faiths, or how we should. But I do believe that the response of these Christian families in that Pennsylvania neighborhood, a response of respecting other religions, is a response that honors God, honors Jesus Christ, and honors Christianity.

Listening Guide

Questions Thinking Christians Ask: What about other Religions?

1. All Religions are the _____

2. Other Religions are _____

“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12)

3. Other Religions are to be _____

“In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o’clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, “Cornelius.” He stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” He answered, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter . . .

Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.” (Acts 10:1-5, 34-35)

A. This position affirms the _____ of Christ

“The Son is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.” (Hebrews 1:3)

B. This position leaves _____ to God

“There is only one Law-giver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:12)

Questions Thinking Christians Ask Can Christians Believe in Evolution?

Genesis 1: 1-5, 26-27, 31

About a year ago, I told you the tail end of a story. Today I want to share the entire story. It took place when I served as a pastor in Honolulu, Hawaii. My congregation included a large number of seekers, people who had not yet become Christians but who were exploring the Christian faith. Most had Buddhist backgrounds. Many of those seekers were students at the University of Hawaii. One of them, a young woman named Mary, was working on her Ph.D. in biology. After attending our church for over a year, Mary requested an appointment with me. On the one hand Mary felt drawn to Christianity. But on the other hand she struggled with the issue of science and faith, especially evolution. She told me, “I want to believe in God, but a literal reading of Genesis is impossible for me. As badly as I want to be a Christian, I cannot forfeit my mind in the process.” Mary wanted to know if she could reconcile her belief in evolution with faith in Jesus Christ. I will never forget her question, which I shared with you a year ago. She said, “Dr. Thielen, can I be a scientist and a Christian?”

We are currently in a summer series called **“Questions Thinking Christians Ask.”** My original question for today was, “Are science and faith compatible?” However, I decided that was too broad a subject, so I narrowed the focus to a more specific question, **“Can Christians believe in evolution?”**

In a nutshell, evolution proposes that the universe began 14 billion years ago with the Big Bang, followed by a long, complex, evolutionary process, which ultimately led to human life. The question is—can the Christian community legitimately believe that? That’s the question we will grapple with today. Which means this will not be a traditional sermon, that’s impossible given the topic. But, we will be looking at the major biblical and theological theme of creation.

Before I begin, let me remind you what I said several weeks ago when we began this series: Good Christians disagree on numerous topics, and this is one of them, and that’s OK. We can agree to disagree on secondary topics like this. As John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church once said, we can “think and let think.”

However, whatever we may think about evolution, intellectual integrity demands that we acknowledge a basic truth. In the scientific community, the jury is no longer out on evolution. Evolution, at least among scientists, is a given. No serious biologist doubts the basic tenants of evolution. For scientists, the issue is settled—evolution is a fact. Of course, that is not the case in the church. Evolution may be settled in the scientific community, but it is definitely NOT settled in the Christian community. In fact, evolution is extremely unsettling for some Christian believers. To help us navigate through this issue, I want to lay out 3 basic options for dealing with evolution. When it comes to evolution, most people fall into one of three different camps. They are listed in the listening guide in your order of worship, along with an excellent book if you want to dive deeper into the subject of faith and science. **(Note: listening guide can be found at the end of the sermon).**

The first option is atheistic evolution. In this view, the universe came into being spontaneously and randomly, without a creator. Atheistic evolution is evolution without God. Obviously, this view is not acceptable to Christians, who affirm that “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Nor is this view intellectually satisfying. It’s awfully hard to believe that the entire created order just randomly occurred. Since atheistic evolution is not a viable Christian option, let’s move on to option two.

The second position rejects evolution. This view, held by many Christians, insists on an extremely literal reading of Genesis 1–2 to explain the details of creation. Although several versions of this literal view exist, the most popular, called “young earth creationism,” says the world was created in six, literal, twenty-four-hour days. It argues, based on biblical genealogies, that the world is less than ten thousand years old. Although this view allows for minor changes in species over the years, it completely rejects the possibility that one species evolved into another. In a nutshell, this view argues that evolution is a myth, a lie, and an enemy of faith.

Many Christians affirm this view, and I respect them. However, this position has to grapple with some major challenges. First, it has *scientific* challenges. In spite of elaborate efforts to give scientific explanations for its view, like trying to agree that fossils were developed during the flood in Moses time, in the end, this position denies virtually every branch of modern science including physics, chemistry, cosmology, geology, anthropology, genetics, and biology. Not only does this view have scientific challenges, but it also has biblical

challenges. Clearly the Bible is not a science book. Scripture was written in a prescientific age. For example, the writers of the Bible believed the earth was flat. That's why the Bible speaks about the four corners of the earth. They believed there was a huge dome over the earth, what they called the firmament, from which God opened up levers to let in the sun and rain. The book of Genesis was never written to give us a scientific explanation of creation because modern science did not exist back then. And to complicate matters, Genesis has two completely different creation stories, one in Genesis 1 and another in Genesis 2. The two accounts don't agree with each other and cannot be reconciled.

For example, in the first account man is created last, but in the second account man is created first. So what's the deal? The deal is that the Bible cares little about science and very much about theology. Beyond the scientific and biblical challenges with this view, it also forces people to make an either/or choice between science and faith, which many Christians believe is an unnecessary and unfortunate choice. Of course, you may agree with this view that rejects evolution, many do. But if so, you need to be honest about the serious scientific and biblical challenges that come with this view, grapple with them, and come to an acceptable resolution.

The third position is called "theistic evolution." Theistic evolution affirms, along with science, that the universe was created by some kind of evolutionary process. However, unlike atheism, this view believes that God directed that process. This position claims that God created the universe but did so through the process of evolution. Theistic evolution is the overwhelming position of scientists who are also believers. Theistic evolution is the position taught by the Roman Catholic Church, and is the position of most mainline Christians, including most United Methodists. Theistic evolution provides a satisfying synthesis of science and faith that makes sense for millions of Christian believers, including me.

Years ago a conservative pastor asked me, "Do you believe in creation, or do you believe in evolution?" I said, "Yes." He gave me a strange look and said, "What do you mean, 'yes.'" I said, "Yes, I believe in creation. And yes, I believe in evolution. I believe God created the world, but I believe God created through evolution." He was not happy with that answer, and you may not be happy with that answer either. That's OK. As already noted, good Christians disagree on this issue. And they have for a very long time.

For example, way back in 1925, evolution was hotly debated in a courtroom right here in the state of Tennessee. A public school teacher named John Scopes was put on trial for violating a state law against teaching evolution in public schools. They called it the “Scopes Monkey Trial.” During the proceedings battle lines were drawn; no middle ground existed. You either believed in godless, atheistic evolution; or else you believed in God, Christianity, and the Bible.

Hollywood made a movie about that trial, which became a classic, called *Inherit the Wind*, starring Spencer Tracy and Gene Kelly. In the closing scene of the movie, the attorney who defended John Scopes for teaching evolution was picking up his things from a table, including two books. The first book was *The Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin, which first laid out the theory of evolution. The second book was the Bible. The attorney picked up Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and then set it down. Then he picked up the Bible and set it down. Back and forth he went, holding one book, then the other. Which to choose? Biology or Genesis? Reason or faith? Science or Spirit? Finally, the attorney picked up both books, Darwin’s *Origin of Species* AND the Bible, tucked them under his arm, and walked out of the courtroom.

And so Mary, the young biology Ph.D. student asked me, “Can I be a scientist and a Christian?” The answer, at least for many Christians is yes—a thousand times yes! And if you are interested in the end of that story, I had the joy of baptizing Mary as a Christian believer two weeks after that conversation, who decided that yes, she could be both a scientist and a Christian.

Listening Guide: Can Christians Believe In Evolution?

- Atheistic Evolution
- Rejection of Evolution
- Theistic Evolution

For further study, see Francis Collins, The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief (New York: Free Press, 2006)

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Questions Thinking Christians Ask Why Does God Allow Suffering?

Isaiah 40:28-31

Two and a half weeks ago I turned on the evening news and saw the horrible reports about the church shooting in Charleston. Although most of the news that night was about the shooting, they also told about a terrorist attack in the Middle East. They also reported a story about tornadoes that inflicted enormous damage and killed some folks. It was not an encouraging news program: a church shooting, a terrorist attack, and devastating storms. All this bad news begged the question, once again—“Why does so much suffering exist in this world?”

We are in a series called **“Questions Thinking Christians Ask.”** Today’s question is, **“Why Does God Allow Suffering?”** Because of the complexity of today’s subject matter, I’m going to speak in very broad strokes; we’re going to look at the forest and not the trees. In our time together, I want to rapidly review ten Christian insights that can help us when we struggle with the problem of suffering. But before I do, let me remind you of something very important. God does not cause suffering. God doesn’t get up on Monday morning and say, “I think I’ll give a 7 year old girl a case of leukemia today, and send a massive heart attack to a 57 year old man, and send tornadoes to wipe out a community. Then, to finish off the day, I’ll send a disturbed, hate-filled young man to a black church in Charleston and kill off 9 people during Wednesday night prayer meeting.” God is not in the business of making people suffer. I could talk about that all hour but I need to move on. Please turn to your listening guide in your order of worship and let’s quickly review ten Christian insights about suffering. **(Note: listening guide can be found at the end of the sermon).**

- 1. A limited perspective.** The hard fact is, there are no easy or final answers to the problem of suffering. As you can see in this text from 1 Corinthians 13 Paul says, “We see through a glass dimly.” We don’t have all the answers about suffering; and, at least in this life, we never will. So, as we grapple with the problem of suffering, we must admit our ignorance. One day all of this will be made clear. But for now we have a limited perspective.

- 2. *A world marred by sin.*** As we read in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Most of the suffering in the world is caused by human sin. Examples abound. Racism. Infidelity. Greed. Dishonesty. Drunk driving. Crime. Spouse abuse. Child abuse. Substance abuse. War. Terrorism. Environmental irresponsibility. School shootings. Church shootings. And the list goes on. The vast majority of suffering in this world is the result of sin. And sin is not just the bad things we do but also the good things we don’t do. For example, if we put the time and energy and money we should put into reducing world poverty, suffering in this world would be dramatically reduced. I could go on, but sin causes a huge amount of suffering in the world, probably about 90% of it.
- 3. *A world that includes evil.*** Sometimes human sin, as bad as it can be, doesn’t fully explain suffering. There does seem to be a dark power of evil in the world that goes beyond human sinfulness. As Ephesians 6:12 says, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against ... the spiritual forces of evil ...” The Holocaust is perhaps the most vivid example of this kind of evil. That kind of overwhelming evil seems to point to demonic power at work in the world. I don’t have a fully developed theology of Satan because the Bible doesn’t offer one. There is great mystery here. But in this text and others, the Bible speaks about spiritual forces of evil, which cause suffering in our world.
- 4. *A life-giving necessity.*** In order to have life on our planet, the possibility of suffering is inevitable. Take gravity for example. We cannot live without gravity: we’d all float around in space. But as you know, gravity sometimes causes suffering. A senior adult falling down and breaking a hip is a good example. Gravity is a life-giving necessity for life to exist, but it also creates suffering. The laws of nature keep us alive, but sometimes they hurt us. That’s the price we have to pay for the gift of creation and life. Let me give you another, much larger, example. Earthquakes and tsunamis sometimes cause suffering in our world. They are caused by shifts in the crust of the earth. But our planet could not support life without some shifting in the crust of the earth. So the earth’s crust, which allows us to live on this planet, sometimes results in suffering. Like gravity, the shifting crust of the earth is a life-giving necessity. But it also causes suffering. In short, you cannot have life on our planet without pain. Suffering is the price we pay for the gift of being alive.
- 5. *A God who suffers.*** The cross of Jesus Christ does not explain suffering. But it does tell us that God is not an aloof God, cut off from human struggle. Instead, God is a God of the cross, a crucified God, who fully enters human pain and suffering as you

see in this text from Mark. So when the world suffers, or when we personally suffer, we are never alone. God suffers with us. The older I get and the more suffering I see, the more important this becomes to me.

6. ***A God who comforts***. Not only does God suffer with those who suffer, but God also provides comfort, as we see in this text from Isaiah. That comfort comes in many different forms. God comforts us directly, through the Holy Spirit, giving us strength and courage to face suffering. God also comforts us indirectly, primarily through other people who love and support and help us through suffering. When people suffer, God is in the business of offering comfort.
7. ***A church that serves***. Part of God's answer to the problem of suffering is the church's response to suffering, as we see in this text from Matthew. For example, a few days ago, I went to visit a member of our congregation who was seriously ill. When I arrived, members of our church were already there, giving love and support to that suffering family. When people suffer, the church responds. And this doesn't just happen on an individual basis. It's much bigger than that. Worldwide service organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Bread for the World, The Red Cross, and the United Methodist Committee on Relief are all examples of God's alleviating suffering through the service of others, especially the service of the church. Whenever suffering occurs in this world, the church is always there, reducing suffering in the name of Christ.
8. ***An opportunity to grow***. I wish it were not so, but most human growth comes through suffering, as you can clearly see in this text from James 1. Hard times, more than anything else, build character and perseverance and growth. For example, a person recently told me that her cancer, agonizing as it was, brought her closer to God, clarified her values, connected her to others, and made her a dramatically better person. Please hear me carefully. I'm NOT suggesting God brings suffering on us in order to make us better people. But God, in God's mercy, does use the hard times that come our way to help us grow.
9. ***A world full of good***. Sometimes, when we watch the evening news, it's easy to think the whole world is in misery. But that's just not true. In spite of some very real suffering, the world is full of life and joy and love and good. For example, over the past week, several people in our community were victims of crime, several were rushed to the hospital, and a few died. But during that same time thousands of people in our community went to work every day, loved their family, ate lunch with their friends, did community service, went to church on Sunday, and tucked in their children at night

with a kiss. And not just in our community but all over the world. Yes, nine people were killed at a church shooting in Charleston two weeks ago. But on that same day millions of other people went to Wednesday night church, connected to God and their church family, and were not hurt. Don't forget that! Most people in the world are NOT suffering today. So, in the midst of pain, let us remember that wonderful things are happening all over the world—things that don't make the evening news. As Paul reminds us in this text from Philippians 4:8, "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

10. A future of hope. Finally, we need to remember that one day all suffering will come to an end. In the final kingdom of God, there will be no more pain, no more tears, no more cancer, no more war, no more crime, no more hurricanes, and no more church shootings. As John affirms in Revelation 21, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth ... He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain."

I realize that these ten Christian insights don't answer all our questions about suffering. As I said in the beginning, we have a limited perspective; we see through the glass dimly. But these insights are enough to keep us going until the day finally arrives when God outlaws suffering forever and makes all things new. In the name ...

Listening Guide: Why Does God Allow Suffering?

1. A limited _____
"We see through a glass dimly." (1 Corinthians 13:12)
2. A world marred by _____
"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)
3. A world that includes _____
"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against ... the spiritual forces of evil ..." (Ephesians 6:12)
4. A life-giving _____
"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1)

5. A God who _____
“Pilate had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.” (Mark 15:15)
6. A God who _____
“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” (Isaiah 40:1)
7. A church that _____
“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink...” (Matthew 25:35)
8. An opportunity to _____
“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete.” (James 1:2-4)
9. A world full of _____
“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” (Philippians 4:8)
10. A future of _____
“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth ... He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.” (Revelation 21:1, 4)

###

Questions Thinking Christians Ask Is the “Rapture” Real?

Matthew 24:36-39, 44

Years ago, when I was just 15 years old, I attended a youth lock in at a Baptist Church. After eating dinner and playing games, we had a Bible study on the Second Coming of Christ. The teacher began to talk about all kinds of strange things like the Anti-Christ, the 7 year tribulation, Armageddon, and the rapture. It was pretty scary stuff. Then they taught us a song about the rapture called “*I Wish We’d All Been Ready.*” The closing words of the song say, “*There’s no time to change your mind, the Son has come and you’ve been left behind.*” Then they showed us a movie called “*Like a Thief in the Night.*” It was all about the second coming of Christ and the rapture and the end of the world. It was terrifying.

That youth lock-in was my first exposure to the theological view called “Premillennial Dispensationalism.” Aren’t you glad you came to church today to hear about premillennial dispensationalism! This view has been promoted by a series of wildly popular novels in recent years called “*Left Behind.*” We are in a summer series called, “**Questions Thinking Christians Ask.**” Today’s question is, “**Is the rapture real?**” United Methodists almost never talk about this subject. When was the last time you heard a sermon or had a Sunday school lesson on this topic? But it’s a fairly major biblical and theological subject, and we need to be informed. Once again, this is a complex subject, so like last week, we’ll do a broad strokes, big picture review.

I had so much fun last Sunday preaching a 10-point sermon, I decided to do a 14-point one today! Please turn to your listening guide, and let’s dive in. We have to move so fast today I filled in the blanks for you. I didn’t think people could keep up! (**Note: listening guide can be found at the end of the sermon.**)

First, A on your listening guide, let me give you a very brief overview of the popular, “Left Behind” theory of the second coming. According to this view, the end of the world will go like this. First, Jesus will secretly come to earth and true believers will be transported to heaven. This is known as “the rapture.” The rapture means that people will literally be snatched up into heaven. That’s the meaning behind those bumper stickers which say, “Warning: in case

of rapture this vehicle will be unmanned.” Second, after the rapture, those left behind will face seven years of tribulation. During these seven years of tribulation, the Anti-Christ will inflict global warfare and horrible natural disasters upon the world. Third, after seven years of tribulation, Christ will gloriously return. He will then defeat the forces of evil at the great battle of Armageddon. Fourth, that will be followed by Christ’s 1000 year reign over the earth. After that the world ends and heaven and hell begin.

There are many variations of this view, but that, in broad strokes, is the basic outline. Well, a lot of people believe this way, a lot of good people. This theory is taught in a lot of churches, including a lot of churches here in Cookeville. And while I respect the sincerity of those who hold this view, there are serious problems with this theory. I’d like to quickly review four basic problems with left behind theology. Once again, as I’ve said before, you can disagree with me here—Christians have different opinions on this. But from my perspective, there are major flaws with left behind rapture theology.

Please look at section B in your listening guide. First, there are biblical problems. This is a very complex subject, and I don’t have time to develop it. But the Bible simply does not support this elaborate system of thought. For example, no passage in the Bible even uses the word “rapture.” There is not one passage in the entire Bible that talks about Christ coming twice—once in secret to rapture his church, and then a second time 7 years later. The Bible teaches that Jesus will return once and once only. The only way to make this elaborate system work is to take dozens of unrelated biblical passages, many of them obscure, most of them out of context, and piece them together into an elaborate system.

The fact is, the Bible does not lay out a detailed master plan of the end of the world. For example, the book of Revelation is not a road map to the future—it spoke to the people of its day. It dealt with Rome and Nero and the persecution of the early Christians. In short, the entire left behind rapture theory does great injustice to the Bible. It makes for fascinating novels, but we must remember that the Left Behind novels are fiction. So this view has serious biblical problems. Second, there are historical problems. The fact is, this whole left behind rapture theory is a new invention in the church. This theory was first developed in 1830 by a man named John Darby. Which means, that for over 1,800 years, the church did not hold this view. For over 1,800 years the church simply affirmed that one day Jesus would return—judge the world—and usher in the final Kingdom of God. This entire left behind rapture theory

is not the historical faith of the church. For example, there is no rapture in the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed. So again, this is not the historical faith of the church. Third, there are theological problems.

For example, God is presented as a vengeful, war monger, wrath filled, violent God. The God of left behind theology doesn't remotely resemble Jesus' view of God as the loving heavenly father. Left Behind theology gets it wrong. Finally, there are social problems. For all practical purposes, left behind rapture theology abandons the world that God created and that God wants to redeem. For example, proponents of this system say nuclear war is inescapable. They say the pursuit of peace is pointless. And, they say our environmental woes are unstoppable. As a result, there is no call for social justice, no concern about caring for the environment, no effort to make peace among the nations. It's a recipe for social disaster.

Instead of advancing the Kingdom of God on earth, as Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer, rapture theology is about escapism from the world. It's all about saving self, and letting the world go to hell—literally. I could go on and on. But this view has serious problems—biblically, historically, theologically and socially. If you want to research this further, I've listed three good books you can read in the listening guide. But my advice concerning this left behind theology is to leave it behind.

Let's now move to C. on your guide, What the Bible teaches about the second coming. Obviously, I don't have time to cover everything. But listed here are three very important biblical teachings about the second coming of Christ. First, Jesus will return—once. In this text, Jesus said, "**When** the Son of Man comes in his glory." Not if, but when. The Bible and the Christian faith clearly affirm that one day Jesus will return, history will come to an end, and the Kingdom of God will fully arrive. But scripture is clear that Jesus will return once, not twice. There is no rapture, or 7 years tribulation, or 1000 year reign.

The Bible simply says that Jesus will return, judge the world, and usher in the final kingdom of God. Second, We Don't Know the Details. Over and over again in history, people have set dates for the second coming, only to be proven wrong. Read text. If Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lord of the Universe, the one who existed before the foundation of the earth, the second person of the Godhead—If Jesus Christ doesn't know when the second coming will be, how in the world does any human being know?! They don't. Indeed, Jesus teaches

that it will come when we least expect it. We don't know the details. Finally, We Should Not Speculate. Read text. I love the way The Message translation puts this. It says, "You don't get to know the time. Timing is the Father's business." So what does the Bible teach about the second coming? Christ will return and end history someday. But we don't know the details. So we should not speculate. And that's pretty much all we need to know about the second coming.

Finally, let's look at D., What Christians Should Do Before the Second Coming. First, we need to be ready. As we read in this text, Jesus says we must be ready for the second coming. And how can we be ready? By having faith in Jesus Christ, by being a believer, by affirming that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. Second, we need to be working. As we see in this passage we need to be engaged in Kingdom business. We currently live in the time between the first coming of Christ, and the second coming of Christ. During this time we need to be about the masters business. The business of sharing Christ with others, of ministering to those in need, of seeking justice, of caring for the poor, of meeting human needs, of seeking reconciliation, etc. Jesus says, while you wait for me to return—do my work! Finally, we need to be hopeful. Unfortunately, a lot of the pop theology about the second coming is bad news—death and doom and destruction.

But ultimately, the second coming is good news. The second coming of Christ should not produce anxiety and fear in Christians. Rather, it should inspire hope and confidence and optimism. For it affirms that God is working to redeem the world, and that one day, in the final Kingdom of God, justice and love will reign. This is a great hope for us. We see that hope in these passages from Revelation. In this passage, God promises a day when death will be defeated. A day when there will be no more mourning or crying or pain. In this text we read about the river of life, and the tree of life, and the healing of the nations. So what should Christians do before Christ returns? We should be ready. We should be working. And we should be hopeful.

Listening Guide: Is the “Rapture Real”

A. An Overview of the Popular “Left Behind” View of the Second Coming

1. True Believers Transported to Heaven—The “Rapture”
2. Those Left Behind Face Seven Years of Tribulation
3. After Seven Years Christ Will Gloriously Return
4. Followed by Christ’s 1000 year (millennial) Reign

B. Problems with “Left Behind” Rapture Theology

1. Biblical Problems
2. Historical Problems
3. Theological Problems
4. Social Problems

C. What the Bible Teaches About the Second Coming

1. Jesus Will Return—Once
“When the Son of Man comes in his glory ... then he will sit on the throne of glory.”
(Matthew 25:31)
2. We Don’t Know the Details
“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Matthew 24:36)
3. We Should Not Speculate
“Jesus said to them: It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.” (Acts 1:7)

D. What Christians Should Do Before the Second Coming

1. Be Ready. “So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” (Matthew 24:44)
2. Be Working. “Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives.” (Matthew 24:46)
3. Be Hopeful. “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain ... Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” (Revelation 21-22)

[For further research see *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* by Barbara R. Rossing, (Westview); *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* by Amy Johnson Frykholm, (Oxford University Press); *In God’s Time: The Bible and the Future* by Craig C. Hill, (Eerdmans).]

###

Questions Thinking Christians Ask Where Does the Church Stand on Homosexuality?

John 13:34-35, 15:9-12

Today concludes a summer sermon series called ***“Questions Thinking Christians Ask.”*** I decided to save the easiest question for last! Today’s question is, ***“Where Does the Church Stand on Homosexuality?”*** And the honest answer is—all over the map. American churches, including the United Methodist Church, are not of one mind concerning homosexuality. Although an oversimplification, Christians hold three major views on this topic, which I’ve listed in your listening guide in the bulletin, and which we will now review. (Note: listening guide can be found at the end of the sermon).

The first major view can be summarized as nonwelcoming and nonaffirming. Although churches who hold this view might say homosexuals are welcome in their churches, for all practical purposes, gay people are not welcome. Not only are these churches nonwelcoming; they are also nonaffirming. They do not affirm or accept homosexual behavior of any kind. Instead, they harshly condemn it. Unfortunately, people and churches that hold this view are often (but not always) mean-spirited about it. For example, A few years ago a pastor in middle Tennessee said in a sermon, “Homosexuals will not be allowed into heaven.”

That proclamation seems a bit above the pay grade of that pastor since God, not clergy, decides who makes it into heaven and who doesn’t. But this kind of condemning attitude is prevalent among many people who affirm this view. As a United Methodist pastor, I do not believe this first position is a viable option for individual Christians or for churches. To be nonwelcoming goes against the spirit, teaching and example of Jesus, who welcomed everyone.

And, this nonwelcoming position is a violation of the United Methodist Book of Discipline that says all people are welcome in the church. In fact, the Discipline is very explicit here. It says, and I quote, “We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.” I know that a lot of churches in our community affirm this first view. But not welcoming people into God’s church, and often condemning them in the process, goes against the spirit of Jesus,

and it goes against the official policy of the UMC. Therefore, position number one is not a viable option for us here at First UMC because gay people are welcome in this place.

The second major view can be summarized as welcoming and affirming. This position fully welcomes gays and lesbians into the church. However, they don't just welcome gays, they also affirm loving, monogamous homosexual relationships. They point out that the Bible speaks very little about homosexuality. There are only about seven references. Jesus never mentioned it once. On the other hand, they argue, the Bible is full of passages about God's love, grace, and acceptance.

They also argue that the Bible knows nothing of homosexual orientation. In ancient days people just assumed that folks who practiced homosexuality were heterosexuals engaging in same sex behavior. People who choose this welcoming and affirming position claim that homosexuals do not choose their sexual preference. They argue it's just the way they are, and they point to a growing number of scientific studies that suggest a strong link between homosexuality and genetics. They also say the Bible knows nothing of loving, monogamous gay relationships. Finally, they argue that the biblical passages about homosexuality need to be understood in their specific historic context. For example, this group notes that there are over 300 passages in the Bible affirming slavery, but we now know this was an ancient historical understanding, and not God's will for humanity. So people who hold view number two claim that just as the church has changed its position through the years on slavery and women's rights, we need to do the same concerning homosexuality.

The third major view can be summarized as welcoming but nonaffirming. This position is fully welcoming—all persons, including gay and lesbian persons, are absolutely welcome into the church of Jesus Christ. This position has none of the condemning spirit that is often found in position number one. However, while this position is fully welcoming, it is also nonaffirming—it is not ready to affirm homosexual behavior.

This third position is where the United Methodist Church currently stands. This view is affirmed in The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, which is our official guidebook. For example, the Discipline affirms that homosexual persons have sacred worth, are welcome at our churches, and deserve full human and civil rights. However, the United Methodist Church does not affirm homosexual behavior, will not ordain practicing homosexual

clergy, and will not celebrate homosexual marriages. Of course, not all United Methodists affirm position three. A strong minority in the UMC is pushing the church to adopt position number two, welcoming and affirming. However, people who hold this third view are resisting that effort. They argue that the church has been very clear on the topic of human sexuality for most of its history—that sexual relations are intended for married couples of opposite gender—and they feel strongly that we should not change that historic position.

So those are the three main views on this topic. I probably should have added a fourth view, what we might call the “I don’t know” view, because a lot of people are still grappling with this issue, are still unresolved, and still feel ambivalent about it.

What I wish we could do at this point is engage in a comprehensive discussion of view number two and three. But that would take many hours of biblical interpretation, and extended theological reflection, and huge amounts of back and forth dialogue—none of which are possible in one Sunday sermon. So for today, it’s enough to say that good Christian people, including good Methodists, who love Jesus and take the Bible seriously affirm position number two. And good Christian people, including good Methodists, who love Jesus and take the Bible seriously affirm position number three. And no easy resolution is going to be found between these two positions. I certainly cannot provide an easy resolution in today’s sermon. However, before concluding, I would like to ask two crucial questions, which are listed in your listening guide.

The first question is, how should Christians respond to homosexual persons? And the answer is very simple. Regardless of how we feel about homosexuality, even if we are strongly opposed to it, we are called by God to love homosexual people. As Jesus taught in the Great Commandment, God commands us to love our neighbors. We are to love our rich neighbors and our poor neighbors, our white neighbors and our black neighbors, our liberal neighbors and our conservative neighbors, our Republican neighbors and our Democrat neighbors, and our straight neighbors and our gay neighbors. Even if we disagree with homosexual behavior, we can and must treat gay people with love and respect as human beings created in the image of God with value and worth and dignity.

The second question is, how should Christians respond to other Christians who disagree with them on this subject? And that brings me to today’s text in the Gospel of

John. In John 13 Jesus says, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Jesus is very clear here. As Christians, we are called to love one another, even when we disagree with each other. Sadly, when it comes to the debate over homosexuality, we are not doing a very good job of doing this. Instead, some Christians on both sides of this argument are viciously attacking other Christians who do not agree with them.

Not long ago I read a tragic story in *USA Today*. The story was about a young gay man and his father, who serves as a pastor at a conservative church. As you might guess, this has caused significant conflict in the family. A few months ago, both the son and father attended a rally at the Supreme Court. The son stood on the pro-gay marriage side. The father stood on the anti-gay marriage side. The father sent his son a text telling him that he must repent or else go to hell. The son responded to the text by saying, “Forget I exist.” Later, the young man told a *USA Today* reporter, “I’m done. I’m done with the hate. I’m done with the comments. Why do I have to go to hell because I’m gay? Now I will have to find a new family.”

I cried when I read that story. That family has been destroyed by this issue. It broke my heart to read about it. And it breaks my heart that the church family seems to be doing the same thing. We are taking sides. We are attacking each other. We are even talking about splitting the United Methodist Church over this issue. There’s a lot of talk these days about a denominational schism over this. And that may well happen. But if so, it will break the heart of Jesus who says in today’s text, “By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Our acrimony toward one another over this topic is an embarrassment to Jesus Christ, and is damaging his church.

The UMC has always been a big tent church. There has been room for people of diverse theological perspectives. We have always been able to agree to disagree on secondary issues. And make no mistake, the gay debate is a secondary issue. This is not about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is not about the Holy Trinity of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is an issue that good Christian people who love Jesus and take the Bible seriously have valid disagreements about. And it’s OK to have disagreements in the family of God. Our differences do not need to destroy the Christian family. We can disagree on this issue and still be civil, respectful, and loving. And we sure don’t need to split the body

of Christ over it. This is the spirit of the document included in today's bulletin by two UMC pastors, which I hope you will take home with you and read.

A few days ago I was inspired by a story from an unexpected place: the political arena. I'm rarely inspired by politics! But this was an exception. The story was about Joe Biden and Lindsey Graham. As you probably know, Joe Biden is the Vice President and a staunch Democrat. Lindsey Graham is a senator from South Carolina and a staunch Republican. They agree on almost nothing. But in this story, which broke after the death of Joe Biden's son, Senator Graham said in an interview, "If you can't admire Joe Biden as a person, you've got a problem ... Joe is the nicest person I've ever met in politics. He's as good a man as God ever created." Senator Graham and Vice President Biden are political adversaries, but they are not political or personal enemies. The story got me to thinking, if Washington politicians who vigorously disagree on virtually everything can have this kind of respect for one another, surely Christian disciples can do the same.

This kind of civility, respect and love is what our Bishop is calling us to in these days of unrest. After the recent Supreme Court ruling, Bishop McAlilly wrote: "I pray that we will lead with deep respect for each other. This is not a time to draw lines in the sand but rather a time to come together." And then our Bishop offered a prayer. He ended his prayer by saying, "In the midst of our diversity as the United Methodist Church, grant us the will to live in unity. Above all, teach us to walk humbly with one another, and allow us to live with one another with grace and mercy as Christ has taught us to do." Dear God, let it be so.

Listening Guide: Where Does the Church Stand on Homosexuality?

Three Primary Views on Homosexuality

1. Nonwelcoming and Nonaffirming
2. Welcoming and Affirming
3. Welcoming and Nonaffirming

Two Crucial Questions

1. How Should Christians Respond to Homosexual Persons?
2. How Should Christians Respond to Other Christians Who Disagree with Them On this Subject?

