

*Arvada*  
United Methodist Church

September 20, 2009

Stated Convictions

Rev. Rusty Butler

Mark 9:30-37

Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” The United Methodist Social Principles take that idea seriously. The issues in our Social Principles are issues that matter. Marriage, Divorce, Human Sexuality, Abortion, Care for the Dying, civil rights, the death penalty, war, genetic technology, Corporate Responsibility, Church and State relations, Military Service, and on it goes.

In 1908 when the first Social Creed was adopted by the Methodist Episcopal Church there were 11 statements. They sounded like this...the church stands for equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life. (What about the women? No, they didn't get the vote.) The church stands for the abolition of child labor. The church stands for the suppression of the sweating system. I had to look that one up...it's a term that used to be used for sweatshops. It went on. The church stands for a release from employment one day in seven. And it goes on like that through the eleven statements.

The Social Creed was created in 1908 to speak to the social conditions of the time. As Valerie stated last week, as the social conditions change, so too do the Social Principles and we as United Methodists every four years amend and change our current Social Principles...it is a living document.

Do you have to accept all the positions within the Social Principles? No. But we are to take them seriously, because as Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

Would you pray with me?

O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts lead us to deeper consideration of those things that matter in life. Amen.

In the introduction to her most recent book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor makes a case for what she thinks people mean by the statement, “I'm spiritual, not religious.” Have you ever heard someone say that? I have. My sister-in-law when she found out that I was going to go to seminary and enter the ministry, gasped, “Rusty, you are the most unreligious person I know!” I wanted to say, “But I am spiritual!”

303 421 5135 6750 Carr Street 80004 arvadaumc.org

*A church where science, religion and life are compatible*

*Arvada*  
United Methodist Church

Barbara says people who say, “I’m spiritual, not religious,” are those who want to grow closer to God but not at the cost of creeds, confessions, and religious wars large or small. I think that may be a way to describe a great many of us.

We know pretty much what the religious part is about but the Spiritual part is harder to get hold of. What she comes up with is that the people who say they are spiritual may be using the word to describe a longing...for more meaning, more feeling, more connection, more life. I think she is on to something, don’t you?

A longing.

For more meaning.

For more feeling.

For more connection.

For more life.

The question for the disciples, for the readers of the Gospel of Mark, and for us is How? How do we find more meaning, more feeling, more connection, more life?

I submit to you that when we listen to the stories of Jesus, one of the things he is trying to shape and share with the disciples is a way to meet that longing in the living of their days.

In the scripture today, Mark shares a story of Jesus and the disciples on the way to Jerusalem.

The disciples have been arguing about who is the greatest among them. Jesus asks the disciples, “Now tell me what you were arguing about on the way?” And Mark says they were silent. Well yes, it’s just embarrassing, you know, and what is there to say? You’ve been there...just embarrassed, nothing to say.

*Arvada*  
United Methodist Church

You've broken your mother's favorite vase when you were wrestling with your brother and you try to put it together with Elmer's glue and hope that she won't find out, but she comes in the door and moves (it seems to you) directly to the vase and asks who did it? Silent. It seems easier...words won't come out. Or your parents have gone out of town for the weekend and you've invited a few high school friends over and suddenly it's more like 40 or 50 and someone grabs a dining room chair and the back is broken. You do your best to fix it...but your uncle comes a few weeks later and sits down on the chair and it breaks just where you tried to fix it. And your parents look around and say...now that is strange, why that chair would break like that, we've never had a problem like that....my sister and brother and I just looking at each other...silent.

Have you been there?

I think we've all been there. Silent, embarrassed...don't know what to say. The disciples arguing about who was the greatest among them. That is just embarrassing. I'm embarrassed for them even now.

And Jesus, I'm sure he is just exasperated says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Oh man! That's just about what you'd expect him to say isn't it?

I think he knew better than most, and was at least able to talk about this better than most, what the problems were when you live in community. Rubbing up against people who were not like you. It chafes, binds, there is an itch you can't begin to scratch.

Our social principles take a look around our world, look around our communities; they find a place where things have been rubbed raw. People trying to figure out what to do with this or that situation. And the wisdom of the ages and the sages of wisdom try to come up with some thoughtful way to address the problems.

I wonder if the world is more complex than it was in 1908. In 1908, eleven sentences. Now? Sixty-seven pages.

Death penalty? We know the majority of people in the country support the death penalty, and United Methodists...if we aren't like most people in the

303 421 5135 6750 Carr Street 80004 [arvadaumc.org](http://arvadaumc.org)

*A church where science, religion and life are compatible*

*Arvada*  
United Methodist Church

country I don't know who is...but in our social principles we look beyond what is and use what we consider the best in our Christian understanding to make the statement...

“We believe the death penalty denies the power of Christ to redeem, restore, and transform all human beings. When governments implement the death penalty, then the life of the convicted person is devalued and all possibility of change in that person's life ends. We oppose the death penalty and urge its elimination from all criminal codes.”

Wow. Well. There you have it.

Well, you may not agree with that. I suspect that because we are like America, we'd probably have some who would find themselves disagreeing with that statement.

Here's another, I've heard some of you voice your opinions about whether or not there should be prayer in schools. It says in the Social Principles, “The United Methodist Church has for many years supported the separation of church and state. The state should not require prayer or worship in the public schools, but it should leave students free to practice their own religious convictions.”

Immigrants? That's been a topic on the table for a few years. It says, “We call upon governments and all employers to ensure for foreign workers the same economic, educational and social benefits enjoyed by other citizens.” You know that's going to make some people mad!

Poverty? We take that on...here's one sentence that hits home, “As a church, we are called to support the poor and challenge the rich.”

Bleeding heart liberals...that's what some of you are saying.

I love that because while some of the positions are very liberal, there are others with regard to sexuality that are very conservative especially when we look at what we say compared to what our neighbors the Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Lutherans say.

You think we are mixed up?

303 421 5135 6750 Carr Street 80004 [arvadaumc.org](http://arvadaumc.org)

*A church where science, religion and life are compatible*

*Arvada*  
United Methodist Church

Alcohol? We affirm our long-standing support of abstinence from alcohol as a faithful witness to God's liberating and redeeming love for persons.

Tobacco? We support the restriction of smoking in public areas and workplaces.

Genetic Therapies? Because its long-term effects are uncertain we oppose genetic therapy that results in changes that can be passed to offspring (this is called germ-line therapy).

Rights of Children? Once considered the property of their parents, children are now acknowledged to be full human beings in their own right.

On and on it goes...just fascinating. But it's the best we can do when we've got a thousand people from all over the world trying to help us figure out just who we are.

When the Gospel of Mark was written, children were non-people. When Jesus sits one down in the middle of the disciples and says, whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me...it is a bold swipe at the social conditions of his day.

Children then were of equally low social status with servants.

Jesus isn't silent about the social conditions.

The Methodists are not going to be silent about the social conditions of our country and of the world.

Now I know some folks wish we'd just worry about our own selves and that would take care of things. I understand that. But then too, I can't help think that the best of Christianity doesn't take account of the welfare of our neighbor.

In the hymnal you will find a whole section on personal holiness. But then too you will find a group of hymns about social holiness. We are trying our best to look at the world...to help us, help each other, to find more meaning, more feeling, more connection, more life. Amen.

303 421 5135 6750 Carr Street 80004 [arvadaumc.org](http://arvadaumc.org)

*A church where science, religion and life are compatible*