Lead with Love: The Way of New Creation
Galatians 6:1–16

Good morning, church! Last Sunday, after our joint worship service, we watched the Bishop's Episcopal Address together. As it unfolded, I found myself watching not just the screen, but also many of *your* faces. It was good, wasn't it? – and yes, it was long! Some of you asked me beforehand how long it would be. I didn't tell you it was going to be an hour and ten minutes—because then you'd spend the whole time checking your watch!

But Bishop Thomas Bickerton shared an honest, a deeply encouraging message with us. Later in the week, I was talking with some of my clergy friends, and one of them asked me, "Was it okay to show the Bishop's message at your church?" He explained that in his congregation, the political spectrum is so divided that showing something like that would have been difficult. Maybe even controversial.

And I get that. We live in a time when even within our churches, people hold very, very different views on social issues. As United Methodists, we believe in *social holiness*—that is, we are called to seek justice, equity, peace, the well-being of our neighbors. These aren't just good ideas; these are *gospel matters*. But in today's polarized world, even talking about them can feel… risky.

Some might say, "Let's not talk about anything political or controversial. Just preach the gospel." But my friends, silence is also a choice. And too often, it is the silence of the good that allows injustice to continue. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people, but the silence over that by the good people." When we were baptized, we promised to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. But too often, we are pressured—subtly, directly, relentlessly—to stay quiet. To comply with systems that hurt others. This pressure can feel immense. Sometimes, it can feel almost suffocating.

Part I: Galatia Under Pressure – The Weight of Conformity

While the specific circumstances were different, the early Christians in Galatia were also under intense social pressure. And at the heart of that pressure was one issue: *circumcision*. Now, the Galatian church was primarily made up of Gentile believers. But after Paul left, some new teachers came in. And they began insisting that in order to truly *belong*—to be truly faithful Christians—these Gentile believers needed to follow the law of the Old Testament. And above all, they needed to be circumcised. Sadly, many in the church began to waver, drawn toward this distorted version of the gospel.

Why? Why were they tempted? Because circumcision, in that context, seemed to offer real advantages. Professor Brigitte Kahl helps us understand this. She places Paul's letter within the broader context of the Roman Empire and its power structures. Circumcision, she argues, wasn't just a religious ritual. It carried political and civic weight. Jews in the Roman Empire were legally exempt from certain religious obligations, like emperor worship. So, if Gentile Christians accepted circumcision, they could claim those same protections. It was a way to blend in. A way to avoid suspicion and persecution. A way to gain respectability. Why stir up trouble? Why not just comply and be safe?

But Paul saw what was *really* going on. It wasn't just about a ritual. It was about the church giving in to the pressure to conform. To conform to an oppressive imperial logic. It was

about trading the radical freedom of the gospel for the safety of social acceptance. And that is a temptation we still face today.

Page 2: The Church Today Under Pressure – Choosing Our Witness

The pressure to conform is not just ancient history. The church today is also under pressure. As I mentioned, some people say that pastors should avoid talking about social issues. Why? Because it might divide the congregation. If a sermon doesn't align with someone's political views, they might withhold their pledge. Or even try to get the pastor removed. The financial and emotional stakes, as you can imagine, can feel incredibly high.

But it's not just internal pressure. More and more, churches that speak up with a different voice—especially when they speak up for the vulnerable—are being treated with suspicion. Just last month, for instance, a congressional committee sent letters to over 215 nonprofit organizations—including our own Council of Bishops, the Bishops' Immigration Task Force, the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, and the Immigration Law and Justice Network. The committee claimed it was investigating whether these groups were using taxpayer funds to "facilitate illegal immigration."

Let me be clear: neither the bishops nor the Board of Church and Society receive federal funding. But that's not the point. The point is this: when churches express views that don't align with political powers—especially when they defend the vulnerable, when they dare to embody Christ's radical welcome—they are increasingly seen as threats.

So what should the church do? Should we stay silent? Should we conform, just to stay safe? No. Our church is not called to comfort. Our church is not called to compliance. We are called to be a *prophetic witness*. The gospel invites us to live differently. To be a *new creation*. A community grounded in love, justice and hope with joy! And yes—it's costly. It was costly for Paul. It was costly for Jesus. And it will be costly for us. But it is the way of Christ. It is the only way that truly matters.

Page 3: A New Creation Beyond Empire – The Radical Freedom of Christ

As the pressure mounted in Galatia, the temptation grew: "Just get circumcised. Blend in. Stay safe." And many gave in. But Paul responded with a bold and resounding "No." Not because he was anti-Jewish. His concern was what the act represented in that moment: a surrender to the empire's categories. Categories like: Jew or Gentile. Legal or illegal. Citizen or outsider. Paul saw how these categories upheld domination and fear that didn't cohere with the gospel. And he rejected it. This was Paul's resistance to the logic of empire, out of a deeper, foundational loyalty to Christ.

Paul writes: "*It is those who want to make a good impression outwardly who are trying to compel you to be circumcised… They only do this to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.*" (Gal. 6:12) In other words—they want to stay respectable. They want to avoid the scandal of the cross. But the gospel isn't about looking good. It's about being *transformed*. Paul declares: "*For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.*" (Gal. 6:15) This was a refusal to define people by external status or ritual. But instead, by the inner reality of the Spirit. Paul is announcing a new way of being human—beyond binaries. Beyond fear. Beyond domination.

He declares: "*The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*" (Gal. 6:14) That world—the one built on division, on fear-driven conformity, on power over others—*that world* no longer defines us. In Christ, a *new world* is breaking in. And we are called to live in

that new world. Not in retreat. Not in compliance. But in the radical freedom of love. This new creation isn't just some distant, future hope. It's a present reality we are invited to inhabit, right here, right now.

Page 4: Lead with Love – The Costly and Creative Path

The temptation to stay silent is real. The temptation to comply is real. But that's not our calling. We are called to be a *new creation*. Not to pick sides in a culture war—but to walk the *Jesus way*. A way of sacrificial love. Of courage. Of mercy. Of justice. This is the way of *burden-bearing*. Paul reminds us, "*Bear one another's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.*" (Gal. 6:2) This isn't just about helping a friend move; it's about actively sharing the load of injustice, of marginalization, of suffering in this world. And sometimes, bearing another's burden means daring to understand those who seem to be our adversaries.

Let me tell you about someone who has walked that path in a remarkable way. His name is Daryl Davis. He's a Black blues musician who has spent over 30 years befriending members of the Ku Klux Klan. It started in the 1980s. After a show, a white man told him, "I've never heard a Black man play like Jerry Lee Lewis." Daryl replied, "Well, Jerry Lee learned from Black musicians." The man was surprised. Then he said something even more shocking: "This is the first time I've ever had a drink with a Black man." That man turned out to be a member of the Klan.

Most people would have walked away. They would have chosen safety. Or anger. Or simply disengagement. But not Daryl. He asked questions. He stayed curious. He kept meeting with Klansmen—not to shame, not to argue, but to understand. To befriend. And over time, many of them left the Klan. Not because of argument. Not because of a debate. But because of *relationship*. More than 200 people have left the KKK through conversations with Daryl. Many gave him their robes—not as trophies, Daryl says, but as signs that love can disarm even the most hardened hate. Daryl says, "When two enemies are talking, they're not fighting. It's when the talking ceases that the ground becomes fertile for violence." That is the profound, courageous, transformative power of *leading with love*. It's not passive; it's an active, ongoing engagement, even when it's uncomfortable.

Conclusion: Lead with Love – Our Ongoing Call

My Asbury family, in a divided world like ours, the temptation is real—to pick a side. To stay silent. To retreat for safety. Or to cling to ideological purity, believing *we* hold all the answers. But the gospel calls us to something more. Not to conformity. Not to silence. Not to ideology. But to **love** and to lead… lead with love. And may we be that kind of church—brave in love, steady in grace, and rooted in the Spirit of new creation, transforming ourselves and the world around us, one act of courageous love at a time. Amen.

And now, I invite you to listen a song that says just that. It's a simple song—but it speaks to the very heart of the gospel: "Lead with Love."

Song: "Lead with Love" by Melanie DeMore