

**Love Boldly**  
*Mark 12:28–34; John 13:34–35*

As I was praying about what kind of word I should share during this season of transition in the church, I felt God leading me back to the essentials. So for the next three weeks, I want to reflect with you on the vision of the United Methodist Church. The mission of the United Methodist Church is this: **to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.** In other words, we are called to make disciples who participate in God’s work of transforming the world.

And in 2025, the Council of Bishops released a vision statement that gives more concrete shape to that mission: **“The United Methodist Church forms disciples of Jesus Christ who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously in local communities and worldwide connections.”**

**Love boldly. Serve joyfully. Lead courageously.** Those are not just beautiful words. They are a way of life. And today, I want to focus on the first one: **Love Boldly.**

**Love**

When Juhee and I first started dating, we went to the movies a lot. She told me she liked romantic comedies, so naturally, I took her to romantic comedies. But it was strange. Every time we came out of one, I would ask, “Did you like it?” and she would say, “Not really.” But then we would go see some action movie where everything was exploding, people were crashing through walls, and cars were flying everywhere—and she would come out smiling and say, “That was so good.” So I finally told her, “I don’t think you like romantic movies. I think you like action movies.” At first she denied it. But later, she admitted it.

Now, even if you do not like romantic movies, when you hear the word *love*, most people in our society think first of a feeling. A warm feeling. A romantic feeling. An emotional reaction. That is why we say things like, “I fell in love.” We think of love as something that happens to us. But the Bible talks about love very differently.

In today’s Gospel reading, a scribe asks Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?” And Jesus answers: “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Did you hear that? In Scripture, love is not first described as a feeling. It is a commandment. That is very different from how we usually think about love. In the Bible, love is not mainly an emotion. It is an act of the will. It is a choice. It is something we decide to do. We do not wait until our hearts feel warm enough. We do not wait until affection comes naturally. We choose to love.

That is why Jesus says we are to love God with **all** our heart, **all** our soul, **all** our mind, and **all** our strength. Not halfway. Not conveniently. Not only when it is easy. Not only when we feel spiritual. **Love with all.** In other words, Jesus calls us to **love God boldly.**

But what does that really mean? Because this commandment is often misunderstood. Sometimes it is even twisted into something dangerous. These days, the news has been heavy on my heart. To sell the war with Iran to the public, President Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth have used religious language and imagery. Trump shared an AI-generated image of himself depicted like a Jesus-like healer, then deleted it after backlash, and later reposted another

AI image of himself together with Jesus. Hegseth has repeatedly wrapped the Iran war in overtly Christian rhetoric, invoking scripture and speaking in ways that blur the line between faith and violence.

And let me say this as clearly as I can: that is not love of God. That is not faithfulness. That is not holiness. You can wrap violence in religious language. You can dress empire in church words. You can put God-talk on top of destruction. But it is still destruction.

Using the name of God to bless war is not devotion. It is blasphemy. Using the language of faith to market violence is not righteousness. It is a violation of the commandment itself. That is not what it means to love God with all. It is the opposite.

And maybe that is exactly why Jesus never gives the commandment to love God by itself. It always comes paired with another commandment: love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus says, “The second is like it.” Like it. Equal to it. Joined to it. Love of God and love of neighbor belong together like two sides of one coin. You cannot separate them.

You cannot claim to love God while hating your neighbor. You cannot claim to worship God while wounding your neighbor. You cannot claim to honor God while destroying your neighbor in God’s name. That is why love of neighbor is not some secondary issue. It is not a side topic for people who are “into justice.” It stands right next to love of God.

In Leviticus 19, we see what that love looks like in practice. God says: when you harvest your field, do not reap all the way to the edges. Do not gather every last grain. Leave some behind for the poor and for the foreigner. What does that mean? It means what I have is not just for me. It means my abundance must make room for someone else to live. It means love has economic, social, and communal meaning. Love of God and love of neighbor begin there.

## **Love Boldly**

So what does it mean to love boldly? Bold love often means stepping outside your comfort zone. It means showing kindness to people who are different from you. It means welcoming those whom society overlooks. It means building bridges when the world keeps building walls. It means refusing to judge people by race, gender, religion, legal status, class, or anything else the world uses to sort human beings into worthy and unworthy. That is what love boldly means. And I pray that this season of change in the church will become a season for practicing exactly that kind of love—a season of unconditional welcome.

When a pastor comes to a new church, there is usually what people call a honeymoon period. But that period is also a time of careful observation. “What kind of pastor is this?” “What kind of congregation is this?” “Can I trust them?” “Will I be safe here?” That is natural. That is human. We keep a little distance. Just enough distance not to get hurt. Just enough distance not to be disappointed.

But love boldly means breaking that safe distance. It means opening your heart first, even though you may be disappointed or even hurt. It means taking one step closer before you have all the guarantees. It means risking welcome.

C. S. Lewis once said, “Do not waste time bothering whether you love your neighbor; act as if you did.” That is wise. And that is deeply Christian. Because when we begin to act in love, something mysterious happens. Love begins to grow in us.

We often think the order is: first feeling, then action. But in the life of faith, it is often the other way around: first obedience, then feeling. First action, then affection. First opening the door, then grace walks in. That is the mystery of love as commandment. What begins as duty becomes delight. What begins as obedience becomes life. What begins as a choice becomes joy.

I do not yet know who your next pastor will be. But when that person comes, love boldly. Welcome that pastor the way you welcomed me. Offer the same generosity, the same grace, the same patience, the same kindness you gave to me. If you do that, the new pastor will be able to open their heart more quickly and settle into this church more deeply. And just as we have shared a long and beautiful journey together—maybe even a honeymoon period that lasted seven years—I trust that you and your next pastor will also walk a blessed road together.

But I hope your love will not stop at the church door. I pray that you will widen that love toward neighbors in this society who are marginalized, excluded, silenced, and oppressed. Because in an age full of fear, hatred, and cruelty, to love is itself a holy act of resistance.

When the world builds fences in the name of safety, we are called to set a table of welcome. When politicians stir up fear for power, we are called to practice mercy. When the powerful use the name of God to justify war, we are called to say, with clarity and courage, No. No, God is not glorified by destruction. No, you do not love God by crushing your neighbor.

And then we are called to do more than say no. We are called to say yes—yes to the hard, risky, beautiful work of loving with all. With all our heart. With all our soul. With all our mind. With all our strength. In John 13, Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

That is how the world will know. Not by our slogans. Not by our religious branding. But by love. By bold love. By embodied love. By costly love. By love that crosses lines. By love that opens doors. By love that refuses to make peace with cruelty.

The One who loved us first loved us boldly. Jesus did not love us from a safe distance. Jesus gave everything. Jesus loved with all. And now, strengthened by that love, called by that love, and changed by that love, let us go and do the same. Let us love boldly. Amen.