

## Transcript

### Scripture

Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Will you welcome our Bishop Cedrick Bridgeforth?

### Bishop Cedrick D. Bridgeforth

Well, it’s good to be with you and to have this opportunity to share and worship and just see what God’s going to do with us today and in the coming season. I’ve already heard you participating and singing and even responding in the prayer time. I just invite you to keep all that happening during the sermon time.

So what Pastor Ric did not tell you was that I grew up in rural North Alabama, and in rural North Alabama, everybody talks during the sermon, right? There it is. So the amens, the hallelujahs, the “Thank you, Jesus” — all that is fair game. In fact, it’s what moves the sermon along. Because when it’s quiet, the preacher just keeps repeating themselves over and over again until somebody catches on that an amen is all right. And the amen is actually what creates the pace of the sermon.

But when you just sit and look at the preacher the way you’re just looking at me right now, it means supper’s going to be cold when we get there. So otherwise, you offer an amen, a hallelujah, a “Thank you, Jesus” to let the preacher know you’re ready for things to move along. Otherwise, it just keeps repeating itself over. I think you got it. Thank you, God.

This text — I just want to focus on a couple of the verses that were read for you from Matthew’s Gospel, Matthew 22:37–39. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

That scripture is one of the many scriptures that supports and inspires our new vision that we have for the United Methodist Church. Have you heard this vision? Sorry — it’s a good Methodist right there. Well, here it is — the vision, the new vision for the United Methodist Church. I was sent here for this very purpose.

“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. Can you say that with me? Love boldly, serve joyfully, lead courageously in local communities and worldwide connections. And in this season, we will focus on the first part of that — to love boldly.

And what I like about this is the reality that this vision is not a slogan. It’s not branding. It’s not simply a theme for a conference season, but it is a call for formation. And if we’re going to talk about formation, we must begin with a hard question that whether we’re busy, informed, or productive may not answer for us.

The real question here is: what is forming us? What is forming us? What's shaping our instincts? What's disciplining our hearts? What's training our minds? And what's determining our reactions? Because I know we have many reactions these days. Is it the Gospel, or is it fear? Is it the Holy Spirit? Or is it exhaustion, outrage, scarcity, professional caution, and the constant pressure to keep everyone comfortable?

See, if we're not careful, we'll be deeply informed and poorly formed. We'll know what is trending and still not know what is true. We will know how to sound thoughtful and still not know how to be faithful. That's why this text still matters. Jesus does not give us an abstract principle. He gives us something to live by. He gives us the center.

Love God with all who you are. Love your neighbor as yourself. The center is not performance. The center is not image. The center is not institutional survival. The center is love. And that is not a small distinction.

If we are formed by fear, what we call bold love will look like reactive anger with better vocabulary. If we are formed by exhaustion, what we call prophetic witness will look like burnout dressed up as faithfulness.

The urgency of this moment is not only political — and it is — it is also theological. The question is not whether the church will act boldly. The question is whether the boldness will be rooted in the Gospel or only in the news cycle.

That is precisely why John Wesley refused to let us choose between personal holiness and social holiness. The inward and the outward cannot be separated, because formation that stays inward eventually becomes self-protection, and witness that skips the inward eventually becomes noise. Have you heard any noise lately?

John Wesley held them together. So must we. Worship and witness belong together. Piety and public faithfulness belong together.

And today I want to form this around three questions: Who are we? What is God calling us to now? And how must we order our shared life to do it faithfully?

### **Who Are We?**

We are not simply an institution trying to hold itself together through a difficult time. We are not merely managing decline, preserving property, or arranging for survival. We are the Church of Jesus Christ in this place and time, called to bear witness to the reign of God.

That means our identity cannot be grounded in anxiety. It cannot be grounded in nostalgia. It cannot be grounded in the hope that if we can just recover an earlier version of church life, everything will settle down. You can put that one in the column with Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy — you know, all... The kids are gone. It's okay.

See, we are people rooted in grace. We are people called to witness. We are people sent to embody the love we proclaim. But yes, we are carrying loss. We are carrying fatigue. We are carrying scars. But grief does not get to become our theology. Resurrection still speaks. And resurrection does not erase wounds — it tells the truth about them and still proclaims life on the other side.

So who are we? We are a church being reshaped, not erased. We are a people still entrusted with the Gospel. We are a connectional body still called to serve the common good. And we are called to form a church that looks and loves like Jesus.

If you were concerned about how that sentence was going to end — we are called to form a church that looks and loves like Jesus. That matters because there is a difference between being professionally polished and spiritually formed. There is a difference between ecclesial comfort and moral clarity.

There are moments when the church must decide whether it wants to be admired for being measured or remembered for being faithful. See, I'm less interested in our appearing reasonable to every audience than I am in our being recognizably Christian. Not the kind of Christianity that turns Jesus into a mascot for cruelty, fear, or domination. Not the kind that says little, asks little, and challenges little — but the kind that knows what it stands for and why it stands.

### **What Is God Calling Us to Do Now?**

I believe God is calling us to love boldly. And to love boldly is more than protesting, boycotting, and advocating. It certainly includes those things at times. See, there are moments when protest is faithful, when boycotts are faithful, when advocacy is faithful. But if we're going to engage in those actions, we must be able to say why. What is the Gospel imperative that impels or compels me to engage in these ways?

We do not protest simply because we are frustrated. We protest because love of neighbor will not let us accept harm as normal. We do not boycott simply to make a statement. We do it because we cannot and we will not keep participating in practices that degrade the dignity of God's beloved children. We do not advocate merely because it is politically useful. We advocate because the Gospel has public implications.

We cannot claim to love God while refusing to love our neighbor. And you may say, "But I don't refuse to love my neighbor. I just stay quiet. I stay out of the way. I don't fully understand. I don't want to get caught up in this. I don't want people making assumptions about me and my political stance or position. I don't want to risk my safety and my security." See, that's you refusing — in case you're confused about what refusing to love your neighbor looks like.

See, Paul said it plainly: if I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. The church has no shortage of noise. What the world is waiting to hear is love that actually sounds like something. That's not a partisan statement. That is a Christian statement.

Our social principles say as much. They're reminding us that we seek to love God wholly and desire for our neighbors what we desire for ourselves. You know, I saw something recently that said the U.S. is the only place where poor people vote against health care and food support because rich people told them to.

So bold love in the greater Northwest must take a recognizable form. It must look like care for those struggling with housing and hunger. It must look like concern for mental, physical, public, and community health. It must look like climate care — which means we care for the climate. It must look like honoring the dignity of LGBTQIA+ people without hesitation or qualification. It must look like standing with indigenous communities in truth-telling, in partnership and repair. It must look like justice and liberation-seeking that is clearly rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And it must be trauma-informed. That's not a trendy statement or a trendy thing to say. It is a pastoral necessity in this day and time, because trauma is held in our bodies, in our families, in our congregations, in our communities, and in our histories. So to love boldly does not mean to move carelessly. It means we tell the truth with discipline and move together with courage and tenderness, knowing that we carry trauma, hope, and expectations with us as we seek to love and to be loved boldly.

This is especially important when we speak of indigenous communities and of the unfinished work of repentance and repair. That's why our work with the Truth Telling Project, led by our Circle of Indigenous Ministries and our wider commitments to indigenous and native ministries, cannot be treated as optional or symbolic. It's about the soul of the church.

Bold love must also include those who are too often treated as an afterthought. A church that says all are welcome but can't be entered, heard, navigated, or trusted by people with varying abilities is not yet loving boldly.

That's why I'm grateful for what we already see among us — some bold love already at work. We see it in the work of our disaster response coordinators across the area who keep us trained, ready, connected, and deployed across the wider church. We see it at Atlantic Street Center, AK Child and Family, and Tacoma Community House — ministries with Methodist roots that strengthen and improve the lives of women, children, immigrants, and youth. We see it in the intercultural competency and equity work that helps congregations move beyond discomfort with difference toward real growth and real relationships.

Some of you are looking at me like, "What in the world is he talking about?" Well, let me tell you what he's talking about. Do you know that in 2026 — the year of our Lord, 2026 — we still have congregations where we cannot appoint a clergywoman as a pastor? Do you know that in 2026, we have congregations where a person of color is not safe to serve or to live? Do you know there's a great percentage of congregations that I oversee in Alaska, Washington, Oregon, and Idaho that I could not even pastor?

That's the world in which we live. We haven't even gotten to the red state, blue state politics of the moment. That's just our church's expression of it inside the four walls. And if we're not bold enough to love enough inside the church to create a new reality, why are we shouting it at our statehouses? Why are we shouting it at our public officials? When in private, we're just as racist, just as sexist, just as homophobic, just as quiet.

I'll go back to the manuscript. This is real. This is the air we're breathing. This is the water we're swimming in. This is the dirt we're getting our toes dusty upon.

But we see United Methodists in Idaho who show up for rallies and marches calling for an end to the death penalty. That's bold love. We see United Methodists sponsoring booths and participating in local pride parades and events in support of folks living on the margins. That's bold love. We see United Methodists in Edmonds and Vancouver joining with ecumenical, interfaith, and nonprofit partners to say no to policies that discriminate, divide, and dehumanize our most vulnerable neighbors. That is bold love. We see United Methodists providing shelter for the houseless, food for the hungry, visits for the detained and the incarcerated. That is bold love. And we see it in ministries across the area that have chosen moral clarity over church comfort.

**How Must We Order Our Shared Life to Do This Faithfully?**

If love is the command — and I believe it is — then our common life must reflect it. Let me sharpen a little part of this today.

Laity? Where's my laity? You don't know if you're laity or clergy? You know, between services, somebody asked, "Well, how's Pastor Ric doing here?" I said, "Well, he tells me great." Now I think I know. All right, pastor. No, he's a great, great pastor. Okay. Clergy. So we have this thing called clergy, and everybody who's not clergy is laity — those are kind of the boxes. So, all right, time in.

Where's the laity out there? Let me help you out today. Laity must not wait for clergy permission to use their gifts. The church does not belong to clergy. The imagination of the church does not belong to clergy. The future of the church does not belong to clergy.

Laity should not have to wait around for someone with a title to notice them, approve them, or make room for them before they begin to speak, serve, organize, teach, convene, create, and lead. Unless that's what you're perfectly fine with and that's what you want to do. But you don't have to. Because sometimes the Spirit arrives through somebody we did not expect. And it may just be you.

The bold love that your congregation has been waiting to express may have just been waiting for you to recognize what God has been saying to you — or saying for you to do. And maybe today is the day that you hear it clearly. And today is the day that you say yes. And today is the day that bold love starts its expression in and through you. Maybe today is that day. Amen?

Because our work — our work is not to control every good impulse. Our work is to discern, to bless, to coach and equip. Our work is to form communities where gifts are recognized and released.

This is one reason formation matters so much. Because unless we are intentional, formation does not just happen well. It happens when we refresh our theology, our ethics, our preaching, and our understanding of the world we are called to serve. It happens when we ask hard questions and sharpen one another for ministry.

So when we talk about ordering our shared life, we're talking about more than structure. We're talking about the kind of people those structures are forming. So are we forming courageous disciples or are we forming cautious functionaries? Are we forming communities that look and love like Jesus, or are we forming institutions skilled at protecting themselves? Are we forming people capable of mercy, truth, repentance, and repair?

See, that's why moral clarity matters more than ecclesial comfort. I said earlier that resurrection still speaks. That's why we are a resurrection people. We are an Easter people. Amen? See, the church is being reshaped, not erased.

### **Closing Charge**

So before I close, let me be direct with you. I'm not asking you to leave here inspired. I'm asking you to leave here commissioned. Commissioned to show up in your congregation, your community, your leadership role and name one neighbor your church has been circling around rather than moving toward.

See, bold love is going to cause you to move. And bold love is going to cost you something as you move. So if you're not moving and it's not costing you anything, that's not bold love. That's not loving boldly. In case you're wondering.

So show up in your congregation, your community, your leadership role, and name one neighbor your church has been circling around rather than moving toward. Name one cost your community has been unwilling to pay. And then ask: What would it mean to love that person, that community, that truth — boldly? Not perfectly, not without fear, but boldly enough that it costs something. That is the charge.

And the prayer that I will pray is not a substitute for that charge, but I trust it's fuel for it.

For Jesus does not ask us to admire love. He commands us to embody love. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, and mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. That's not a general principle. It's a way of ordering our lives. It means our worship and our witness belong together. It means our piety and our public life belong together. It means personal holiness and social holiness belong together. It means what we protest, what we bless, what we build, what we resist, what we fund, and how we treat one another should all look more and more like Jesus every single day.

### **Closing Prayer**

So as we begin this season of exploring what it means to love boldly, I pray this simple prayer. Let us pray.

May we be centered in Christ. May we be formed more by the Gospel than by fear. May we choose moral clarity over professional or ecclesial comfort. May we become a church that looks and loves like Jesus. And may our shared life become a credible sign of God's love in this region — not for our sake alone, but for the sake of the neighbor, for the sake of the church's witness, and for the sake of the Gospel that still calls, still challenges, and still sends us. This we pray in Jesus' name, amen.