



September 13, 2023

A Note from Rev. Woody Woodward

**Dear Friends,**

I don't remember when it was exactly. To be honest, I don't even remember the year. But I'm guessing it was eight or nine years ago, when I sat in a circle in a classroom in the Sanctuary building with a dozen or so other folks from HUMC.

We had been called together as part of a strategic planning process for the church, and the discussion turned to the idea of a mission and vision statement.

For me, and for most of others in the room, the only mission and vision statement that really mattered was a simple one —

**“God Loves You, No Matter What.”**

And while it really wasn't a “mission and vision statement,” it was a statement about who we were — or perhaps more accurately back then, who we wanted to be as a community of faith.

I'm proud to be a part of a church that has truly grown into living that statement out in the years since that meeting in a little classroom. I'm proud because I know that we have faced some bumps in the road, some criticism along the way. I know that good and earnest people who we love and miss have gone to other churches. I know that it hasn't always been easy.

But I also know this, in the center of who I am. It's always been right! God loves you, no matter what! It's always been right.



**And I know that through those years, this church has become a beacon of hope for those who have been hurt by the church, or shunned by society, or made to feel like they don't matter.**

I know that people — people who may have been afraid to even set foot in a church in the past — have come into authentic and life-giving relationships with Jesus Christ because of the way that we have tried to live out the radical message of no-matter-what-love in this place.

Friends, that radical message of no-matter-what-love is at least as relevant today as it was that night we sat in a classroom in the Sanctuary building so many years ago. At least as relevant.

We have seen that this summer in our own family. One family member visited a church early this summer and felt attacked, felt unloved, because of what was said in a sermon there. That attack, those feelings, caused our family member to question everything about their faith, a solid faith that has been nurtured here at HUMC for most of their life.

To make matters worse, when they raised questions about what was said in that sermon, they were told that their church — Hilliard UMC — doesn't teach the truth.

We've been heartbroken this summer because of this. One of our own went to church, was made to feel unloved, and began to question whether or not God could actually love them. Heartbreaking!

But in the midst of that heartbreak, we've tried to keep in mind a couple of things. Some easier than others.

For one, this kind of thing happens every day. It's been happening for generations, and it keeps happening. And while it exacerbates the heartbreak, **it also serves to underscore the importance of what we are doing here at HUMC.** Because sadly, churches keep hurting people in the name of Christ. (That's an incredibly hard sentence to write.)



And fortunately, places like HUMC exist because they are necessary to offer healing and hope to people who have been hurt by the church. As tough as this incident has been for us, it has made us more proud than we have ever been to be a part of HUMC.

**We ARE teaching the truth! The truth is this — God is love, and that love is unconditional, it is all encompassing, it is forever, and it is NO MATTER WHAT.**

If you read the Bible, the WHOLE Bible, I'm not sure how you can miss that message.

Now here's a hard thing. That no-matter-what love isn't just for us. **God's no-matter-what-love extends to those folks, many of whom are well meaning, who are doing the hurting.**

We've struggled some with that this summer. **We can't affirm no-matter-what-love for ourselves and not affirm no-matter-what-love for those who don't agree with us, or even those who have hurt us.**

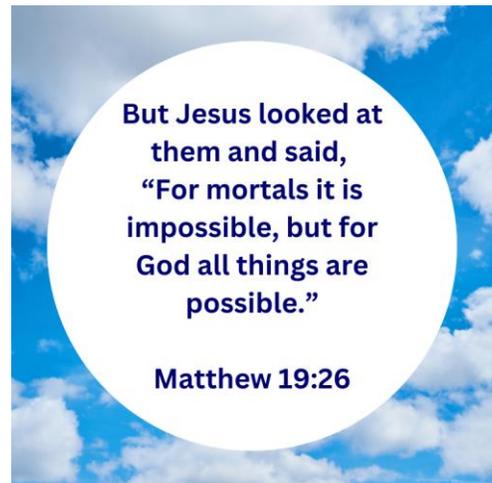
So we're working through that. All of us being works in progress. And I'll admit that for me (and perhaps for you) some days are easier on that front than others. But we know, even on the hardest days, that that is the kind of love God is calling us to.

Our scripture text for this coming Sunday gives me some hope that we can get there! **Matthew 19:26** says, **"With God, all things are possible."**

All things!

Even finding ways and spaces to affirm no-matter-what-love for those who have hurt us? **I try daily to go about trusting in God's grace that even that is possible.**

And I go about daily being thankful for this community of believers at HUMC.



Thankful for the steps that we have taken over these years to live out no-matter-what-love.

Thankful for the risks that we've taken and the risks we continue to take to make that love real in the lives of people who are hurting.

And thankful — in advance — for the work that God is going to continue to do in this place to help transform the world by the power of radical love.

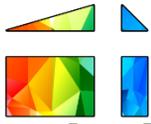
Grace & peace,



Woody

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Woody Woodward (he/him) was ordained an elder in the United Methodist Church in 2003. He and his wife Angie have been part of our church since 2007. While he works full time as Executive Director of the Ohio Parks and Recreation Association, he is a frequent preacher at churches around Ohio.



# Hilliard

## United Methodist Church

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