

Letters of ENCOURAGEMENT

God Loves You  No Matter What

January 8, 2025

A Note from Pastor April

Dear Friends,

Those of you who spend a lot of time around young children know that there are two words that get repeated over and over again.

The first is NO. Children at this age are figuring out how to exert their power and will in the world, and they soon discover the power they have to refuse whatever is in front of them.

And the second is WHY.

Children are trying to understand how the world works. They want to know why they can't have their way, but they also want to know why it snows sometimes and why it's warm other times. They want to know why the birds fly south or why their older sibling gets to do something when they can't.

Young brains prefer very basic cause and effect explanations for the world.

Why is it so hot outside? Because it's summer.

Why do the birds fly south? Because it's winter.

Why does my older brother get to have a phone? Because my parents said so.

As we get older, we begin to understand that there is more nuance than these simple cut and dried answers. There are multiple things that can cause the temperatures to be high, depending on where you live. Birds only fly south in certain locations, and not all parents have the same rules about phones (much to my youngest son's chagrin).



When our kids are young, the simple answers of summer and winter are fine. As they grow older, they are ready to know more about latitude, proximity to large bodies of water, the way the Earth rotates on its axis as it orbits around the sun, climate change, and how all of these can impact the weather and the flight patterns of birds.

The hope is that they learn to see, understand, and make sense of the patterns of how the world works themselves, perhaps even noticing when the patterns become disrupted and inquiring further about what it is that has gone awry.



The same is true when it comes to talking about God.

God loves you... no matter what.

This is a great place to start in the beginning.

If you ask our Godly Play team, they'll tell you that it's not long before our young people want to know WHY. Who is this God, and why can't we see God? Why does God love us, and why does God do what God does?

As a young adult, early in my faith journey, I was filled with questions — questions that I hadn't really explored in childhood but was eager to understand in my early 20s as I was trying to find my way in the world.

I landed in a Bible study with a wonderful group of women.

What they seemed to have were ANSWERS.

Answers for just about any question I'd have.

What I heard there was simple.

God loved me. I liked that.

AND

I had sinned. In fact, I was such a sinner that there was no way I could ever make things right on my own.

Luckily, Jesus had died for my sins.

If I simply believed in Jesus and asked for forgiveness, I would have salvation.

God would live and walk with me.

Life would feel different.

Then I could help other people learn the exact same thing.

Straightforward and simple answers.

At first, I was grateful. I took those answers, and I followed the formula of what they had taught me. I woke up each morning and asked God for forgiveness. I prayed for others and for myself. And I prayed that others' hearts would be open.

For a few years, it calmed my anxiety and gave me a sense of purpose and direction. I remain ever grateful for those years of support and the foundation it laid.

I learned a lot about basic facts of the Bible, and I could recite the "sinner's prayer" along with the best of them.

What I wasn't taught to do was to think for myself. To allow my own questions to uncover new questions. To listen and reflect on how God was speaking to me in a new way, and to discern what that might mean for my life.

I wasn't taught to do the work of THEOLOGY.

The simple definition I was given in seminary was this: Theology is simply "faith seeking understanding."

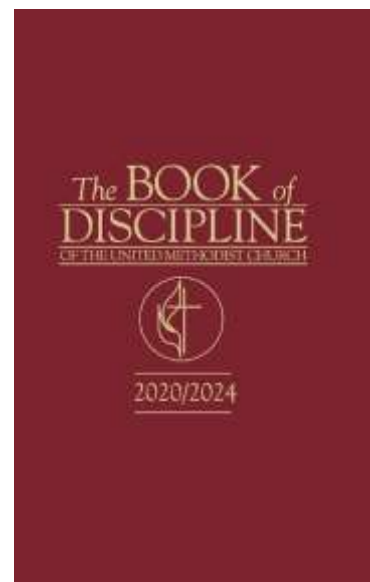
The United Methodist Church offers a little more.

Theology is our effort to reflect upon God's gracious action in our lives.

Our United Methodist *Book of Discipline* — in addition to containing all the polity and doctrine for our church — contains an incredibly helpful section entitled "Our Theological Task."

Since I'm sure not many of you have a copy of this delightful book on your nightstands at home, we've reprinted this section for you to have and utilize during this next season. You can find a copy online or pick one up at church.
(<https://hilliardumc.org/current-message-series/>)

Here's a highlight: "Our theological explorations seek to give expression to the mysterious reality of God's presence, peace, and power in the world. By so doing, we attempt to articulate more clearly our understanding of the divine-human encounter and are thereby more fully prepared to participate in God's work in the world."



This isn't just work for those in seminary or academics or clergy.

Theological reflection is the work of all Christians.



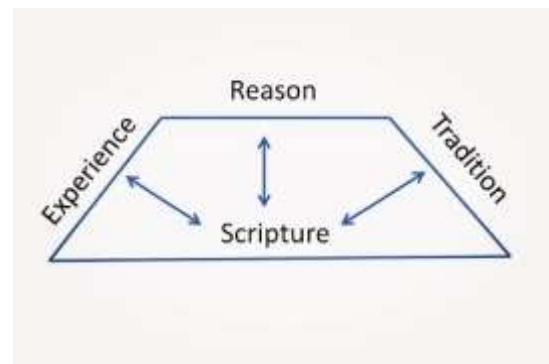
This is at the heart of the work we are doing as we begin our new series, The Whole Story. (<https://hilliardumc.org/current-message-series/>)

Many of us have been told certain things about the Bible, about faith, and about what it means for our lives. Not all of us have been taught what it means to do the work of reflecting theologically, to make meaning of that for ourselves.

Last week, we introduced / re-introduced one of the traditional Methodist tools for doing theological reflection, the **Wesleyan Quadrilateral**.

We will continue to draw wisdom from our theme verse for this series, Romans 12:2 (NIV):

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — God’s good, pleasing and perfect will.”



This week, we'll dive a bit deeper into the work of theological reflection and how it is that we know what we know, as well as how we test our assumptions, and allow our minds to be renewed and transformed.

God has important things for us to continue to learn and understand as we share the good news of God's love in the world and reflect on what it means today.

I look forward to being in community with all of you this week.

In the spirit of renewal,

Pastor April



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