

A sermon preached on March 3rd, 2019 based upon Luke 9:28-36. This was the Sunday following the deeply disappointing pronouncements coming from the Special Session of the United Methodist Church.

This week I realized a certain naiveté on my part. I did not expect the vote of the special session of the General Conference this past week to turn out the way it did. The “One Church” option endorsed by the Bishops was voted down and instead the “Traditional Plan” which keeps the present prohibitive language of the Discipline – that Gay and Lesbian folk can’t be ordained and that same sex weddings can’t be officiated by UMC clergy was reaffirmed with punitive measures added to boot.

I didn’t see this coming. I thought we were past this. My naiveté in retrospect has to do in part with the fact that I have been blessed to be the pastor of this particular church for thirty years and that for a long, long time now this has been a non-issue for us – a non brainer – of course, Gay and Lesbian people are fully welcome and equally called to ministry and marriage.

I felt the need to distinguish ourselves from the well-publicized condemnation of the LGBTQ community coming down from on high so I reached out to Pastor Amanda from the cross town UMC of Mount Tabor and we quickly crafted a joint statement that I posted in local social media sites. Our statement said the following:

Recently you may have seen headlines in major newspapers such as the following -- “United Methodist Tighten Ban on Same Sex Marriage and Gay Clergy” -- regarding legislation passed at a Special Conference of the governing body of our denomination. We would like to publicly state that we are appalled by these rulings. We grieve for our LGBTQ brothers and sisters both inside and outside of our congregations for the cruel message of rejection you have received in these pronouncements. We want you to know you are welcome in our congregations and we look forward to the day when these prohibitions that grieve the heart of Jesus are removed. Both of our churches are “Reconciling Congregations” who proudly proclaim that homosexuality is not a sin and celebrate the ministry of ALL people as blessed children of God.

We signed our names and listed our worship times. Once more my naiveté was revealed when to my surprise within five minutes of having posted on “Next Door” a local Parsippany online community bulletin board I had three angry responses:

Mike: Wow, are you Christians following Jesus Christ from the Bible? You must be some other sect that worships another Jesus. Homosexuality is not a sin? good luck with that... When you go to meet Saint Peter at the pearly gates you'll be set straight!

I replied: Thank you Mike for your thoughtful response. The Jesus we worship is the one who never said anything about homosexuality. His reference to "Sodom" if read in context makes it clear that the sin of which he was referring was that of inhospitality which is precisely the sin that churches that publicly condemn gay and lesbian persons

are guilty of. We worship the Jesus who sought out the outcasts who weren't welcomed by people confident in their own holiness. And yes, I'm look forward to meeting Saint Peter.

A second Person named Anne came next: If I were you I would hold scripture in high esteem and preach the truth in all it's fullness, not what peoples itchy ears want to hear! Your on a slippery slope....

I responded: Thank you for your thoughtful response as well, Anne. I do hold scripture in high esteem.

Then a third person named Em chimed in: It's sad that we have gotten to a point where we ignore sin for the sake of "being progressive". The Bible clearly speaks on this sort of sin as well as other types of sin. God is God he doesn't change with the times.

I responded: Thank you, as well, Em for taking the time to respond. My one request of those of you who are taking offense with our post is that you share, as we have, what church you attend so that Gay and Lesbian people in our community can know what to expect. Thank you and God bless.

I left the conversation at that point. None of three took me up on my invitation to share what church they attend, which is interesting in itself. Others people joined the conversation to argue with these three. The tone got pretty ugly. I didn't want to be a part of that. Like I said last week, I try to take that "love your enemy" thing seriously. No sense getting dragged down into the sewer.

Nonetheless I was struck and somewhat stunned by the fact that the hostility all came from people who identified themselves as Christians. I think I wanted to believe that the hatred expressed at the Special UMC session arose in places like the south and Africa and that up here in northern New Jersey we have gotten past this since we deal with diversity routinely.

I shouldn't have been surprised: I invited Maidie to serve communion this Sunday. She wasn't able to be here this morning because of a prior commitment to be at a church event involving her God son, but in her email response she reminded me of how it was about ten years ago she came to be a part of our church: She wrote:

"With all the noise about the UMC decision, being able to serve communion really hit home. If you remember, I came to this church after being told by my previous church of four years that I could not even take communion after they saw that I had posted on Facebook that I was gay. Both the pastor and assistant pastor knew that I was gay. It was only when the "higher ups" found out that I was outcast from Christ's table. I was told I could no longer work the slides at church or be around the children. My heart was saddened cause I have known Jesus since I was thirteen and he truly is in my heart. I pray for God to soften hearts and that those that don't understand will be give

understanding. The one thing I can do is to continue to be Christ-like and show the love that Christ has for us all, no matter what color, what creed, what sex, what sexual orientation, or what social status.”

That church’s loss was our gain. I don’t know anybody more Christ-like than Maidie.

I want to address the issue of the Bible, which was brought up by the responders to my post and then again by one guy on the Parsippany Focus Facebook page who posted simply: “READ THE BIBLE!”

The people who voted for the “Traditional Plan” uniformly claimed they were standing on Biblical truths.

There’s a good deal of hypocrisy here, and frankly, it irks me.

People who have actually read the Bible cover to cover as I have know that there is a whole lot of stuff in there; much of it contradictory, a good deal of it frankly appalling. There are places where God commands the Jewish people to slaughter all of the inhabitants of particular cities so the “chosen” people can live there instead. Commands to stone to death adulterous women (not men). Lots of stuff like this that nobody would give credence to today.

Here’s the deal: Everybody who reads the Bible make choices regarding which scriptures speak more authoritatively – which passages we will use to evaluate other passages with. People who claim to take the Bible as the inerrant word of God dictated straight from the mouth of God with no human distortion do this as well – they just aren’t as up front about it.

So how do we make these choices?

This week’s Gospel lesson provides some guidance. On the Mount of the Transfiguration with Peter, James and John watching Moses and Elijah (long since departed from this world) appear to Jesus as this radiant light of heaven shines forth from him. A cloud descends leaving the disciples blinded at which point the voice of God is heard, echoing words spoken earlier at Jesus’ baptism, but this time they are directed to the disciples: “*This is my beloved son. LISTEN TO HIM!*” The point is pretty clear when the cloud disperses and the only one remaining is Jesus that Jesus is the beloved son to whom we are to listen. He is our interpretive key – the one we listen to first. Not Moses. Not the Law. Not the prophets. Not Paul. Jesus!

There are only a handful of passages in the Bible people turn to in order to condemn gay people. These passages refer to particular actions – they make no reference to what we have come to understand in regards to homosexuality being an unchangeable orientation.

None of this passages involved something Jesus said. He mentions the city of “Sodom” which some people reference as his condemnation of homosexuality but if you look

carefully at the context as I said to my trolls on the bulletin board he was talking about the sin of inhospitality.

So if Jesus is the key to our Bible interpretation then are obliged to notice this consistent pattern on his part of him reaching out with compassion -- not condemnation -- to the social outcastes of his day – the people that the people confident in their holiness condemned.

When Jesus spoke those gracious words, *“Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest”* he was specifically extending this invitation to the poor, oppressed people that the Pharisees had loaded down with burdens of guilt and shame for their failure to keep their Law.

Jesus extends the same invitation today to LGBTQ folks.

So back to our story: Peter and James and John had wanted to stay up on that mountaintop with the heavenly vision they were granted, but Jesus led them back down into the valley to be with real people suffering in this broken world. Jesus immediately meets a distressed father whose son is plagued by seizures and Jesus heals him.

Maybe if people followed Jesus’ lead and spent time with real people living in the valley – actual LGBTQ people, for instance – rather than staying aloof with their self-assured and self-righteous reading of the Bible they might learn a thing or two. They might come to realize that homosexuality isn’t a “lifestyle” as they like to call but an orientation established very early on in a person’s life – an orientation that is immutable – a fact demonstrated by all the harm caused when Gay and Lesbian people are forced to go through so-called “Conversion Therapy” which has consistently been demonstrated not to work but does succeed in causing tremendous harm. They might hear the stories of rejection that LGBTQ people tell – they might hear about the rates of suicide among homosexual teenagers as a result of having been told they are an abomination to God.

As I mentioned in the letter I sent out this past week, a week ago Thursday along with Andee Mihalko, Pat Winz and Charlie Kinsely I went to the Nursing Home for our monthly worship service. Several people routinely show up and I preach for a good while and they put up with me and when I’m done we do the part I think they especially like and that is when the four of us go around to each person and with their permission lay our hands upon them for a time of prayer, giving them opportunity to express a particular need they have.

There is this kind and gentle man in his eighties who has been coming regularly to our services. He is always very honest about how he suffers from anxiety and depression. This past week he shared for the first time that he is gay. He said that when he was a teenager his mother told him he was a “freak of nature.” He said he believed God rejects him. The causes of the man’s anxiety and depression may well be varied, but it seems clear that these wounds he received early on regarding his sexual identity play a large role in the oppression he suffers under.

We testified to him how this wasn't rejected by God -- that God created him with his orientation and God cherishes him. Charlie told him about what a blessing his two gay sons have been to him. We prayed over the man that he might experience this love. He told us it was comforting. But you could tell that the wounds run really deep.

In a few minutes we will share Holy Communion. It's like a little trip up the mountaintop where we are given a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven where all are valued and loved. We bask in the light of God, and then we prepare to go forth into this broken, wounded world to follow Jesus empowered by the Holy Spirit to be about the work of setting the captives free.