

Leaving Town
Romans 8:1-11
July 10, 2005

Last Monday in Atlanta, Georgia, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ passed a resolution affirming equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender. Eighty percent of the voting delegates voted in favor of the resolution. One reporter described the scene this way ...

The UCC, a community of Christians with roots deep in the soil of societal change, took another giant leap on Monday. General Synod 25 overwhelmingly passed a resolution in support of equal marriage rights for all people, regardless of gender. It marks the first time that one of the nation's mainline churches has expressed support of marriages for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons ...

When debate was closed -- with only a whimper of opposition -- a hush fell over the great hall of Atlanta's Georgia World Conference Center. The Rev. Bernice Powell Jackson, executive minister of Justice and Witness Ministries, then asked moderator Eric C. Smith, who led the proceedings, for a moment of collective prayer. Delegates prayed silently.

Moments later, when voting began, a horde of raised hands -- holding green voting cards -- told the world that the resolution had passed overwhelmingly. Afterwards, instead of loud applause, there was a dignified moment of stillness broken only by the voice of the Rev. John H. Thomas who offered a prayer.

"Lord Jesus... We give thanks for your presence, especially here this morning ... We have felt your warm embrace, stilling us as we tremble with joy, with hope, with fear, with disappointment... Let us use our hands not to clap, but to wipe away every tear..."

As the plenary adjourned for lunch, the mood remained as one would expect after a service of worship, rather than a session of earnest debate and serious deliberation ...

I have been a delegate to General Synod myself, representing the Iowa Conference at the synods held in Kansas City in 2001 and Minneapolis in 2003, but I did not experience anything quite like this, nothing quite like this pervasive mood of solemnity and prayerfulness and dignity during a particularly difficult plenary session. I like it! I am glad for the way our church handled this most controversial issue. I am glad ... even though, if I had been a delegate to this General Synod, I would have voted with the minority!

Leaving town ... That's the title of my sermon! Because as soon as today's worship service is completed, I am leaving town. And given the subject matter, that's probably a good thing! I am sure my sermon will manage to push a few buttons and raise the hackles of folks on all sides of this issue.

However, if you are one who pays attention to detail, you will have noticed that there is no sermon listed in today's order of worship! I take the form and function of the sermon very seriously: a sermon is a proclamation of God's word. I bring to the task

my training, my knowledge, my insights, my interpretive skills, my understanding of human nature, my experience, my point of view, but I bring all these things -- I bring myself -- not to say something new, but to say what has already been said in a new way, or better, to let what has already been said be heard again in a new time and place. If I do my job well, if I do my job faithfully, the scripture, the word of God, will speak for itself, and I will have been simply the messenger.

But I am doing something different this morning. This is not titled *sermon*, but *comments*. This morning I am not so much proclaiming and interpreting the word of God, though the word of God informs and shapes all that I think and feel, rather I offer you my own comments, my own reactions, my own thoughts and feelings. Representatives of the United Church of Christ, our church, have made a dramatic and historical pronouncement this last weekend, and I feel compelled to share with you something of my feelings and my struggles.

My struggles ... Yes, I have struggled mightily and continue to struggle over this issue! The issue of the church's response to the gay and lesbian community; to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered folks among its own members; the church's response to a call for equal marriage rights for same-gendered couples -- these are difficult and complex issues. These are issues that are literally pulling churches apart and threatening to provoke schism within Episcopal and Lutheran and Methodist and Presbyterian denominations.

If you have read any of my weblog entries about this issue, you will know that this is my primary concern. My concern is with the integrity of the witness of our church, of our core witness to the unity Christ intends for his church. The great risk, the great tragedy, would be to let differences over this issue shatter our oneness.

There are well-meaning, Christ-loving, neighbor-loving, conscientious Christians on both sides of this issue! There are! And that is what makes this so difficult for me. If we cannot acknowledge that -- that there are good people, faithful followers of Jesus, on both sides of this issue -- then we are lost. And I am afraid there are lots of lost people among us ...

Representatives of a group calling itself a renewal movement within the UCC issued this statement:

God is still speaking, but the General Synod of the UCC by passing the Resolution in Support of Equal Marriage Rights for All, has arrogantly supposed to speak for God. Marriage between one man and one woman is a reality established by God in creation and reflected in the church itself. This resolution does not validate same sex relationships but only invalidates and de-legitimizes the UCC as a religious body. This decision will force many congregations to disassociate and will cause the further decline of this historic denomination ...

And from the other side of the issue came this response to the affirmative vote:

To those who want to continue hating, misinterpreting Scripture and selling our Lord short, see ya! Those of us who have taken on the mission of love, intelligence, acceptance and fair-mindedness our Church will be stronger and our faith will be stronger!! We don't need judgmental hate-mongers and homophobes in our midst. Go join those who can't and don't think for themselves. There are plenty of "leaders" like Dobson will will take your money and teach you how to hate even more.

Solemn? Prayerful? Dignified? This is how we reflect the image of the One who speaks the truth in love? This is how we show our love for God and for each other?

I am passionate about Jesus, and I am passionate about the unity Jesus intends for his church. That's why even though I do not personally support the intent of this resolution, I still love the church that voted for it and can affirm its reasons for doing so!

That they may all be one is the motto that has guided our denomination from its beginnings. That is what is at stake, now and in the future. What is at stake is our effectiveness in offering a genuine witness to the power of the risen Christ to bring us together and make us one, to heal the wounds sin and pride cause in us and among us and make us whole. Our battles over this issue and our inability to love each other as we struggle together to know the mind of Christ threaten to undo that witness.

I grow frustrated because this issue takes time and energy and attention away from the primary tasks and even more critical concerns of the church. Don't get me wrong: I do not deny that this issue is an important one, and that human beings have suffered real abuses of prejudice and judgmentalism and discrimination. And I do not deny that the theological stakes in redefining our notions of covenant and human sexuality are high. There are real issues of love and justice and faithfulness to be addressed here.

Even so, I believe that if we were to do spiritual "triage" on the church and its witness, there are other concerns much more threatening to our spiritual health than either same-sex marriage or our feeling about it. Sex may occupy a great deal of our thought and attention in one way or the other, but other impulses are more deadly in their attacks on the human spirit and on the church of Jesus Christ. Poverty, racial division, economic inequities, selfishness and greed, materialism, parochialism, defiant individualism, pride and envy and apathy and fear -- these are the things the church must address if we are not to fade into irrelevance and impotence.

We do need to struggle with this issue, with the church's theological and ethical understanding of homosexuality and homosexual persons, but we must not let this struggle derail our primary task of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to a world bent on going its own way, even if it kills it ... which it surely will!

But struggle I do ... There are well-meaning, thoughtful, faithful folks on both sides of the homosexuality debate. And there is tension within the gospel itself, between Jesus' radical welcome and Jesus' radical call to righteousness, between unconditional grace and uncompromised obedience.

That is the telling point for me: obedience. To me the debate over nature vs. nurture is secondary. Whether you are born gay or choose to be gay, the issue remains obedience. We are not called to be true to ourselves ... we are called to follow Jesus.

And there is nothing that I hear from Jesus or read in the scripture that would lead me to commend a sexual covenant between persons of the same gender. Many have tackled the issue of biblical interpretation and have tried to explain away or discount or soften some of the direct prohibitions of homosexual activity in scripture. But to me what is more telling is the lack of a positive word, a word that encourages us to listen to the God who is still speaking on this matter in a new time and place, a word that points the way to a new and different understanding of marriage.

Contrary to what some commentators argue, I do not believe the Bible in any way supports the institution of slavery or the inferiority of women. The Bible is written out of a social context that included slavery and that often debased women and sometimes it simply reflects that reality. But even within that context the liberating word of God is proclaimed!

There is no difference between Jews and Greeks, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus.

Scripture unequivocally proclaims the equality of people regardless of race, nationality, gender, or class. Scripture itself points the way to racial reconciliation and gender equality, but I find no hint that sexual orientation is addressed in the same way. By all means, all people are equal in the sight of God, all people are extended the unconditional grace of God, without regard to sexual orientation ... or anything else. But I find nothing in the gospel that speaks positively relationships of sexual intimacy other than between a male and a female in the context of marriage. And there is much in the Bible that does commend the special covenantal relationship between a man and a woman in marriage and does affirm the importance of fidelity and chastity and purity.

So I could not in good conscience perform a wedding for two persons of the same gender. And nothing in the General Synod vote says I must. I remain a loyal member of this church even when I may be in a different place on this one issue. I still love the church and I trust the church still loves me! I can live with a church that has disagreements, even serious disagreements, among its members, as long as we are together genuinely seeking the mind of Christ and acknowledging our oneness with brothers and sisters who are doing the same.

Those are my comments ... and now comes the sermon!

There is no condemnation now for those who live in union with Christ Jesus ...

There is no condemnation for gay people who live in union with Christ Jesus. There is no condemnation for straight people who live in union with Christ Jesus. There is no condemnation for wealthy people who live in union with Christ Jesus. There is no condemnation for poor people who live in union with Christ Jesus.

What is the common denominator here? In union with Christ Jesus! In union with Christ Jesus, there is no condemnation!

In union with Christ Jesus. That is what makes things right between us and God, that is what holds us together. And these aren't just pretty words! This is the reality: in union with Christ Jesus -- by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, by committing ourselves body and soul to follow Jesus, by making Jesus our first priority, by literally placing ourselves into Jesus' safekeeping -- in union with Christ Jesus we are made one. Not by trying to think nice thoughts of each other, not by working on being more tolerant, not by ignoring whatever differences there may be among us, but by joining ourselves to Christ Jesus! Whoever we are, whoever you are, this is how you will live ... by joining yourself to Christ.

And when you are joined to Christ, whoever you are, whatever you are, whatever you may think or feel, you are my brother, you are my sister!