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Meaningful Work  
First Presbyterian Church, Brooklyn  
Isaiah 49: 1-7  
January 20, 2008

There was something that happened in the national Presbyterian church this week that has received a great deal of press. You may have seen an article floating around the internet or in a newspaper. One of my dear friends and colleagues, a woman who is an unbelievable poet and preacher, a woman of quick wit and a brilliant mind, a woman who is tremendously faithful and called to ministry of Word and Sacrament, a woman who was gifted with a quick tongue and a giant heart was moved forward in the ordination process. Lisa also is a lesbian. Hopefully one day you can hear her preach and she can bless you with her words.

The official story from the LA Times:

For nearly 23 years, Lisa Larges has sought to become a Presbyterian minister, but she has twice been formally rejected because of a long-standing ban on gay ordination by the Presbyterian Church USA.

But in what appears to be the first national test of a 2006 policy change by the church, Larges, of San Francisco, has moved a step closer to joining the clergy.

After a debate that lasted deep into the night Tuesday, the San Francisco Presbytery, a regional governing body of the national church, voted 167 to 151 to support Larges' application for ministry, despite opponents' warnings that the action violated the church's constitution and would immediately be appealed.

"I'm in shock," Larges said Wednesday. "I still feel stunned, honestly, and deeply grateful both to the folks who supported me and to the presbytery for stepping up."

Larges, who came out soon after her graduation from a San Francisco seminary in 1989, must yet pass a lengthy oral examination by the presbytery before she can be ordained.

That review, known as the "trials of ordination," could come as early as April but is likely to be delayed by administrative challenges, according to all sides.

"We are taking immediate steps to stop the process," said the Rev. Mary Naegeli, a seminary professor who argued against the ordination during Tuesday's meeting. "This really is the defining case for the Presbyterian church on this question."

In praying with our scripture this week and after reading countless articles written about Lisa and speaking with her personally, I am left wanting to scream from the mountaintops as Isaiah did: "Listen to me, O coastlands, O Presbyterian Church, pay attention, you peoples from far away, all the way even to Lisa's Presbytery in California and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church! God called Lisa before she was born, while she was in her mother's womb God named her! Lisa is God's servant, pay attention, wake up and recognize Christ in your midst!"

In addition to being a good friend of mine, Lisa is a member of the group of 40 plus individuals who Presbyterian Welcome has gathered together who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender and are also pursuing ordained ministry in the Presbyterian Church, despite the church's homophobic and heterosexist practices. Your very own kind and patient brother Paul Mowry is also in this group, as after many years of skirting his call to ordained ministry has begun the process to answer the call placed upon his heart. God's faithfulness cannot be more apparent than in this group of gifted and called individuals.

Lisa is one of our group, though, who has been so open and, frankly stubborn for the cause. She feels just as called to the process of ordination as to her ordination itself. She feels called to casting truth onto the hearts of those who are so fearful of us, so scared of what we may do and who we may be. I see Lisa in similar ways as Isaiah is described in our reading today, as someone who has been given a mouth like a sharp sword. When she speaks, when she preaches, the words that come from her are as beautiful as a sharp and sparkling as a refined but cuts to the heart of the church.

One of our mentors has said numerous times that if one is GLBT and in this church we also must get used to being curriculum for the church. This is the case I believe for any of us who are marginalized, we are used as curriculum for the world we live in. It is on our backs that education happens, that trials are conducted, that through us change is manifest. The only problem with this is that there are many of us who do not want to be equipped with a mouth like a sharp sword, there are many of us who are not called to be curriculum, who are not called to be an Isaiah. And so many leave the church altogether or we lose them to other denominations, or they live silently in holding patterns for many years. I have witnessed the damage that this lack of a choice holds on us, how the silence turns to depression, how the lack of response to the call placed on our hearts leads to severe disappointment, how the hiding has lead to deeply destructive behavior to the point of even suicide.

I have to admit to you that it is rare that I talk directly about my work, about my call to Presbyterian Welcome in sermons. I wonder if that is somehow my internalized homophobia speaking. I wonder how much I have bought lines I have been fed, hook line

and sinker. Lines like: people don't want to hear about sexuality from the pulpit, if you talk about it you will just create unnecessary conflict. Or it is more powerful for people to just know that you are a lesbian but preach about something else, your in-between silence is more effective, and so please if I invite you to preach, do not speak about, you know, sexuality of homosexuality, because that will turn people off and they won't listen to the words that come from your mouth. So I don't like to preach about my work with Presbyterian Welcome because I have too frequently hooked onto the lines and ingested them. I am a good girl. I don't like to cause trouble.

It is confusing for many people how I was able to be ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, how Cheryl Pynch, a previous Candidate from this church was able to be ordained while we were open about our sexual orientation and yet Lisa sits waiting for over 20 years. The reality of our church, the unofficial story, is that regardless of national church policy our practices are very local. What I can do in New York City or what Paul can do, cannot be done in San Francisco or Austin, where one of our candidates for ordination, a gifted and passionate woman, was removed because she spoke about how God moved through her life in relationship to her partner and their children. She has left the Presbyterian Church. And while our denomination has its own local cultures and practices, I knew what words I could say and could not say to get me through, to not ruffle too many feathers. I was out but only so out, I was honest but there were only certain things I was willing to discuss, I was bold, but not too bold. And so while we don't live a cake walk here, while we consistently live internal struggles about our own worth and the meaningfulness of our work, and at times doubt our calling, or internalize what is said about us, the lies about us, the accusations about us destroying the church, it is more possible here in New York for validation of our deep sense of internal call and desire to serve God's people than in other places.

I have too often, actually, I think we all too often forget that God works through us as a whole people, including our experience of marginalization that scare others, that scare ourselves, that keep us from remembering that we were baptized and encouraged and called to be God's children.

Isaiah was convinced: "The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb God named me."

God calls Isaiah to be a servant, to serve God's people, to say things that make God's people so uncomfortable that at times they would rather just get rid of him. He calls the people out for their exclusiveness, he commands them to tell their truth, he calls them names to get them to start turning around and acting like the people God believed they could be. He told them to trust God in their time of extreme transition, as they found

themselves in exile without a physical place where they call home, in between without a place they knew they could trust that God would show up.

And yet, I love that Isaiah doubts himself, I love that Isaiah isn't so sure that his work is meaningful. This is what I love most about the Bible; the stories we read and hear and ingest are about humans who have gone before us who had the same struggles we have now, that have lessons for us on how we can handle our struggles. As King said: We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. That inescapable network of mutuality goes way back through generation after generation and goes way forward through all that will come after us. Isaiah is human too. He can't just have a loud mouth without wondering if he is doing the right thing, or the right thing in the right way. Verse 4: I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.”

Maybe he was turning 30 or 45 or was on the verge of retirement and was looking back. Maybe he was tired. Maybe he had felt like he was screaming at the top of his lungs for so long and just couldn't do it anymore. Maybe he was really lonely because, well, the prophets, they aren't exactly a dime a dozen and it wasn't exactly a traditional path that he choose.

I have labored in vain.

He could have said: I have worked diligently to be a good parent and my kid is just floundering, isn't talking to me anymore, I am afraid of what she may be into these days.

Or: I spent my life devoted to my work and I am realizing that I just didn't enjoy life enough. I wish I could have laughed more.

Or: I have worked tirelessly for justice in this country, for all people to be treated equally and to have equal opportunities and yet, oh yet, I know the statistics about jails and prisons, about poverty and housing and hunger and education. The racism we were infected with years ago hasn't gone away but is simply imbedded and systemic and sometimes more obvious than others.

Or: I have sold my soul to doing the right things and saying what everyone wants to hear, and then have just been left again feeling alone and without any purpose.

Or: I have seen so many dear friends and colleagues leave the Presbyterian Church, their gifts squandered, them being told they their service is not valued, potential pastors thrown to the sidelines, dumped off the coastlines. Am I screaming up an empty pipe whose only voice I hear back is my own echo?

Martin Luther King Jr.: Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.

Injustice creates doubt about our own gifts in our hearts, encourages us to believe that our work is in vain, that our strength has been given for nothing.

While doubt is a perfectly good and wonderful part of the Christian journey, it is a constant challenge to reject doubt about our own self-worth, about the contributions that we have made to this broken and troubled world, about the biblical and traditional and historic claim that each human being has been chosen as God's very special Ones, as called to God's work, whatever that may be from before we were born, before we were even dreamed of.

And so we together live into who a church has called us to be. As Lisa said in another article: "The church is a beautiful, messy thing. It's about loving the church in spite of the church. It's about being part of a movement to call the church back to its best self." And I think also that the world is a beautiful, messy thing. It's about loving the world in spite of it. It's about being a part of a movement to call the world back to its best self.

And in this movement we value the contributions of each and every individual that God dreamed of as a glimmer of heaven before even reaching their mother's wombs. We are deeply grateful for the contributions of those who have gone before us, those shoulders on which we stand. We give thanks for those who are called with tongues as sharp as swords and those who are called with gentle rocking hands. We marvel at the diversity that God revels in, and the beauty that each one of us is in God's miracle of a world.

Beloved of God. Thanks be to God for you. Thanks be to God for each of you. Thanks be to God for what we can do and be together.

Amen.