

Those Comforting Words

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Romans 8: 26-39

Prayer: Holy God who speaks to us through your never-ending Word, we give thanks that you speak through us and with us. We pray the proclamation of this Word be a source of healing and transformation. And may the words that come from my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your understanding. *Amen.*

A few years back I found myself talking with a colleague and friend about the relevancy of our Book of Confessions in today's world. The Confessions are a section of the Presbyterian Church Constitution, the book which contains historical documents that speak to how God is consistently moving within the world, that speak to how God is transforming the world, even and especially in the midst of the deepest and lowest places in our community lives. The title: "Confessions" is to refer to how we confess or how we witness, how we experience God to be working in the world, in the face of heresy, in the face of Christians using the Word of God for destruction, often death.

For instance, one of our Confessions, the Declaration of Barmen was written in response to those who considered themselves "the German Christians" in Nazi Germany. These people were using Scripture to justify the killing of Jews and anyone who did not fit their bill. A group of theologians and pastors gathered and wrote this Declaration that claimed that this was not appropriate, this was harmful, heretical, not *Christian, this was a scandal to the Gospel*. For some who signed the Declaration of Barmen, their punishment by the "German Christians" was death.

Our Confessions were not born out of a church that has always had it right, or good, or easy. They were born out of disease, they were born out of great pain, they were born as cries for help, they were last ditch efforts to save us from our own sinfulness, to save us from the many ways we try and act God, the many ways we try and claim a corner of the truth of God, the many ways we think we can make judgments on Christ's behalf, in ways that smack untruth to our morning reading.

So, my friend and I, we were debating the relevancy of the Confessions, in a world, in a church that tragically, in the grand scheme of things barely knows they exist. We were debating whether or not they hold meaning to people any more, or were they just dead historical documents that pastors like us spent our time studying and appreciating and drawing strength from.

And then my debating friend, he brought us around to remembering a time sitting at bedside with a dying parishioner. He read her Scripture. He prayed with her. Tears fell down his cheek to accompany hers as she hesitated in her last moments with confessions and regrets and grasping for peace, memories of joy and sorry, as she dwelt in the land of the living in her years.

She turned and asked him, of all things, to recite with her A Brief Statement of Faith, the most recent of our confessional documents. She must have been alive and active in our Presbyterian Church when this was written, in response to our Northern and our Southern Churches reuniting again in 1982, in response to the great theological and experiential rifts dividing our denominational identity, divisions that persist today, perhaps even in this very congregation. A Brief Statement was written to provide for us a unified theological identity on which we could base our lives. This parishioner must have been proud of her church at one point and spent the time studying this document, taking in its beauty and the promise it held for her, the comfort that comes from the promise of new life out of desparate situations.

The beginning and end of this Confession, A Brief Statement of Faith comes from our passage this morning from Romans. Perhaps you, like she, have been to numerous funerals and heard such comforting words like these: “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

We hear this refrain as A Brief Statement begins and ends:

“In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit...we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord. Glory be!”

This past weekend I was with a group of tremendous individuals. For the past four years I have co-led a retreat for almost 80 folks, who are pursuing ordained ministry and also happen to be lesbian, gay, bisexual and /or transgender. By your Session’s decision to join Presbyterian Welcome, you are supporting these amazing people in their journeys when they too often feel alone, when they too often wonder at the completion of their seminary careers and ordination processes if they will ever find a congregation that will call them to serve. In our denomination, it is not such an easy task, this pursuit to ordained ministry, because we have created policies and procedures restricting an entire class of people based on sexual orientation from serving the church in the capacity of ordained service. Our decades-long policies have kept us from knowing each individual in their uniqueness, in their gifts and their callings that God has implanted in each person, every person.

Our policies have effectively told us that we are not fit to teach our children that “nothing in life nor in death can separate them from the love of God.” We are not fit to hold babies in our arms and proclaim through their Baptism the presence of God already inside of them. We are not fit to stand behind Christ’s Table as we acknowledge the ways that God graces our lives, in the middle of it all, the highs and lows of this life we have been given. Our policies restrict based on a categorical definition that fences the whole church from knowing the individual gifts and callings placed upon our hearts. Our policies restrict our burning desire to share the Gospel, to exemplify the forgiveness and extension of the grace of Jesus Christ. Our policies make us all of one thing—lesbian or gay, rather than whole people whom God has called.

And in this restriction-keeping, in this fencing, we fence out immeasurable gifts and talents. We fence out the ability to celebrate with our whole hearts the time and treasure that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have been giving to our churches for thousands of years, indeed since its beginning. We fence out knowing the wholeness of how God speaks to so many musicians and organists, preachers and theologians, visitors of the sick and teachers of Sunday School.

At the retreat this weekend, as I was sitting with those most directly effected by our policies, this question was asked: “when in your life have you known God’s welcome in the most unwelcome of places? In essence the question revolved around when it was that we knew that despite the reality of our lives, maybe even because of the reality of our lives Nothing in Life Nor In Death Could Separate Us from God’s love?”

And so in the face of a denomination, a strong Christian tradition actually, that has effectively convinced many of God’s children that based upon our sexual orientation and expression, we are not promised God’s unconditional love, we answered the question: “when in your life have you known God’s welcome in the most unwelcome of places?”

One participant spoke to the retreat itself in response to this question. That within our community we are filled with such gifts and talents, such love for God and compassion for God’s creation. And so in the face of denominational policies and generations of inherited homophobia it was here that we find God’s welcome, at this retreat, where we worshipped and prayed and laughed and ate together. It is here that we know how Christ intercedes for us, through each other, it is here that we know no matter what nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And I stand before you today, wondering when in the most unlikely of circumstances you have felt this assurance, have known the promise of God's welcome despite the unwelcome world in which we live.

I wondered then and I wonder now about Paul, the writer of Romans, and his choosing of these words to his community. Paul, as many of us know, was an unlikely suspect for God to call, for God to work through, at least by earthly values. Success was not his claim to fame. Moral, upright values were not how he lived, wealth was not his gift. I am sure he was not welcomed by many, valued by dominant society, appreciated by the masses. Indeed, these words he wrote and we read this morning smacked as a kind of Confession of whom God is, of what Christ promises in the face of the Roman Empire in which he lived whose practices and policies were as much a scandal to the gospel as was the actions of Nazi Christians.

Episcopalian Bishop Gene Robinson is [blogging](#) now about his time in England, at the Lambeth Conference, the time when all the bishops throughout the world meet together. Because he is gay, when he was elected Bishop he was forced to wear a bullet proof vest for fear of death threats he had received coming true. Because he is gay, he has been uninvited from the proceedings in Canterbury, so he is holding vigil in that space and writing down some of his thoughts for us to read. I was struck as he wrote about preparing to preach at a congregation in England that welcomed him. We writes about his call to preach, considering the circumstances.

He writes: "God says "I will put my words in your mouth." I'm holding God to His promise about that one, because everything I think of saying sounds short of the mark, so inconsequential to the awesome task. I worry less about the people who will quarrel with whatever I say, than about those whose hopes and dreams and view of God (and God's church) seem to be at stake. They are beginning to believe that God loves them, after years of being told otherwise, and they are looking for a word of hope from me. I so want to deliver that word of hope -- that the God they've had the courage to believe really loves them, really does."

The sermon he agonized over preaching came the next day and it was before he was to preach that a young man stood and screamed in the sanctuary: "Heretic! Repent!" An overwhelming sadness came over Bishop Robinson's heart as he imagined the great pain this young man must be living with. The young man was drowned out by the singing of the next hymn and was escorted out. After the service the Bishop was greeted by people like Nick, who worked at the café that was built right into the entrance to the church. He had served the Bishop lunch the day before, and then later told him that he was gay and Christian. He said his mother was Catholic and had told him that although it made her sad, he was going to hell. Nick was there to receive the Body and Blood of Christ with a large congregation who did NOT think he was hellbound.

It is these stories that we hold in our hearts.

At the most recent General Assembly, or denominational meeting, we came much farther in correcting the great wrong of our policies that have plagued us for many years. The Assembly voted to recommend to the presbyteries, or our local governing bodies, the removal of the part of our Constitution that most directly discriminates against lesbian, gay and bisexual people who feel called to ordained ministry, as Deacons, Elders and Ministers of the Word and Sacrament. I pray the Assemblies actions can help transform us into a body which no longer uses the Word of God to alienate and abuse.

I have sat through almost more Assemblies than I can count, knowing deep in my heart that I am called to service in this denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA, that I call my home and that constructs such a significant part of my identity. I have sat through Assemblies and have heard, right alongside many others whom I love, of my sinful nature because of my sexual orientation and expression. It is not easy to hear hatred, sometimes masked in fear of division, sometimes masked in so-called compassion for our community, year after year, especially when I know, in the midst of it all that nothing in life nor in death, nothing, not even myself or any other people who rise to speak against me, can separate me from the love of God.

This year, we heard more of similar rhetoric, but this time, this Assembly I noticed a strong change of wind, the Holy Spirit perhaps?...a new confession forming, a new witness to God in our midst? People got up to speak on our behalf over and over again, calling our policies a scandal to the gospel, witnessing to the immeasurable gifts that our denomination silently and selfishly has received by those of us who are sexual minorities, speaking stories of those who were forced to live in the closet and who suffered deeply in silence...they witnessed to their experience, in this regard, of the church not as a place of refuge or welcome, but instead a place of condemnation and abuse. They spoke about how it is time to change the tide and repent of our sins. This was their Confession, and in it I felt the Spirit of Christ blowing through the Assembly in ways that I had never experienced before.

Presbyterian Welcome will be working hard for the ratification of the recommendation to remove all of our discriminatory policies throughout the presbyteries this year and we are so very, very grateful for the support and love of and partnership with Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church as we move forward in that effort.

It is not going to be an easy year moving forward. We as a church are not unlike churches throughout our history, fraught with division and mistrust. And yet, and yet, I can see us moving forward, knowing our past, and freeing ourselves from that past to seek God's will in unity and grace and humility. And so let it be our confession today, in our agreements and especially in our disagreements, we are convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not a single thing.

Amen.

[1] See Bishop Robinson's blog at <http://canterburytalesfromthefringe.blogspot.com/>.