

July 24, 2005
Acts 10:1-48
Genesis 29:4-11

A Pilgrim People

I'll admit to some trepidation. There it was, among the slips of paper that you gave to me to nominate sermon topics for the month of July: "The role of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons in the church." Wasn't there some way I could lose it? No, no. So I took a deep breath, whispered a prayer that it wouldn't prove a popular choice, and put it on the ballot. My prayer was not answered.

Maybe not yours, either. I suspect there are many folks who just wish it would all go away. Many others have their minds made up, one way or the other. For them further talk is unlikely to persuade. Some are even willing to go to war --figuratively if not literally -- willing to split a great denomination in two rather than live with people who disagree.

It's hard to see how a preacher can win in a situation like that.

But there are others. There are some, like me, whose journey to where they are now has been a long one with many detours. There are others who are confused about one aspect or another of this issue and wish that someone would step off their soapbox and answer their questions. And above all there are gays and lesbians and bisexuals and transgendered folk who wonder if the church will ever stop talking *about* them and start talking *with* them. For those others I'll take the risk of preaching.

I should say that, on this issue, I find myself at odds with my denomination, painfully at odds. So, I am bound to tell that what follows does not represent the teaching of the United Methodist Church but my understanding of this issue.

And let me say, as I begin, that I am willing, even eager, for this conversation to continue. I am convinced that the church has a lot of work to do and we had best get at it.

So where and how to begin?

The first lesson suggests one possibility. I could walk through the Bible and lay out what I believe it says and why I've come to the conclusions that I have.

Genesis 19:1-11, for example, is a famous text that is trotted out in conversations about homosexuality. It's one of seven texts¹ that people point to when they say, "The Bible clearly teaches that homosexuality is a sin."

But it turns out that, on closer inspection, this story from Genesis about the wickedness of Sodom, doesn't say that, certainly not clearly. Angels come to visit Sodom. They propose spending the night in the town square. Lot persuades them to come to his house. The men of the town hear about this and come knocking at Lot's door. They demand sexual access to his guests. Lot offers them his daughters instead, with every reason to believe that this will be an acceptable substitute.

"Do nothing to these men, for they have come under my roof," Lot says. In other words, I am their host; they are my guests; they are my responsibility; yours too, since they are guests in your town. It is not *homosexuality*, but the *failure of hospitality* that is the great sin of Sodom. We just have a

¹Genesis 19:1-11; Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13; Judges 19:22-30; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 7:9-10; and, 1 Timothy 1:8-11

hard time believing it because for us hospitality is a social grace rather than a core ethical mandate.

So this text does *not* clearly condemn homosexuality as such. And so it goes with each of the six others. None of them is simple or clear; none of them is untroubled in its interpretation. I could have proceeded in that way, making my case, one text at a time, weighing in on the on-going argument.

But I have come to believe that by having the argument that we're having in the United Methodist Church we are missing God's point in all of this. And we're having that argument precisely to distract us from what God is trying to say.

So I chose a different text and approach.

The tenth chapter of Acts tells the story called 'The Conversion of Cornelius.' As 'the conversion of Cornelius,' the story goes something like this: Cornelius was a regimental sergeant major who, while stationed in Caesarea, became interested in the Jewish religion. He was probably attracted to Judaism's high moral standards. He might even have considered becoming a Jew, except that would have meant circumcision. The deliberate mutilation of the body was something that Greco-Roman culture just couldn't handle. So he remained what was called a God-fearer.

One day an angel appeared to him announcing that his prayers had been heard and telling him to send for Peter. He did that and when Peter came, he met him outside (because good Jews wouldn't go into the house of a Gentile) and then there was preaching and there was the Spirit descending and then Cornelius was baptized.

The only thing wrong with this telling of the story is that Cornelius is never converted. Sure, he begins the story as a God-fearer and ends as a baptized Christian. But if conversion is about a change of heart, I simply don't find one in the story. Cornelius begins the story as a man who loves God with everything he has. And he is the same man at the end. No conversion there.

There *is* a conversion in the story, but it isn't Cornelius'. It's Peter's.²

Peter begins the story at noon prayer. He was hungry and so he had a dream about food. But it wasn't kosher food. In fact, it was abominable food: all sorts of reptiles and other unclean animals and birds. A voice told him to kill and eat and Peter refused. "I've never eaten anything unclean!" "What God has made clean, you must not profane," the voice replied. Three times this leader of the Jesus community refused to obey God's voice.

In the meantime the messengers had come. "I've sent them; go with them," said the Spirit. So Peter went down and met them outside the gate. Of course they were outside the gate. They knew that good Jews wouldn't allow Gentiles into their homes. He met them there and they told him their story.

And Peter took his first step toward conversion. He invited them to come in and spend the night. (You see, he was starting to get the point about the food dream.)

And the next day he went with them to Cornelius' house and he met Cornelius at his gate and he took another step toward conversion and went into his house. Inside Cornelius' house he made some preliminary remarks: "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." (Even

² I am indebted to Justo and Catherine Gonzalez for this reading of Acts 10.

you.)

And then he went on to preach the good news about Jesus. While he was preaching, the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentile audience and they began to speak in other languages just as the disciples themselves had done on the day of Pentecost. "Who can withhold the water of baptism?" Peter asked. Apparently no one. Another step--or is it a slip?--toward conversion.

And if you've gone this far, why not go all the way? In for a penny, in for a pound. So our story ends with these earth-shattering words: "Then they invited him to stay for several days."

So ends the story of Peter's conversion. Of course he still has to answer to the rest of the church for what he has done. So he had to appear before the Judiciary Council on charges of subverting *The Discipline*. But, unlike some of our folk today, when he told his story he was acquitted and *The Discipline* was changed.

Not without opposition. There were some who were perfectly happy with Gentiles becoming Christians --as long as they became Jews first. That way the Jewish character of the Christian movement would be preserved. But that's not how it turned out. From then on the gospel would be open to Gentiles as well as Jews. Becoming a Christian would no longer mean becoming Jewish first. The Christian movement had jumped its sectarian boundaries and was now free to go anywhere in the Empire and beyond. For the Book of Acts, this episode is a major turning point.

But the Book of Acts overlooks something. It's not just Peter who was converted. Peter took the whole church with him. Because of what Peter did, the Christian movement would no longer be just one of the dozens of the Judaisms of his day. The character of the church was changed forever in just two days as Peter took the steps that added up to his conversion.

Our church's struggle with issues around homosexuality is being carried on as a legal debate. What is permitted? What is not? What is clean? What is not? --pitting strict versus liberal interpretations of the Bible and church law against each other.

But that's not what is at stake. What is at stake for us is the same thing that was at stake for Peter: Will we obey the Spirit of God? What will the straight church do when confronted with gay God-fearers-- no, gay *Christians*?

There are some who say that gays may become Christians, as long as they become straight first. In this way the straight character of the church will be preserved. And, God love them, there are some gay Christians who are willing to attempt that psychological self-mutilation in order to have a place at the table.

But I say, who can withhold baptism from those who "fear God and seek to do the right thing," those who have "received the Holy Spirit just as we did"? Who can withhold baptism? or ordination? or marriage?³

Make no mistake, it will be no easier for the straight church to lower the walls that separate us from gay Christians than it was for the Jewish church to lower the walls that separated it from Gentile Christians. A lot of what we just assumed were settled questions will have to be revisited. New ways of being Christian will have to be imagined and lived and assessed and revised. The straight

³As if these things were ours to give or to withhold. If it is the Spirit that is at work, then refusing to listen will simply mean that the Spirit goes elsewhere. We will be left out of what God is doing in our midst. We will even be found to have opposed God (Acts 5:38-39).

church will have to be converted. It isn't going to be pretty or neat or easy.

But instead of hearing God's call to begin that challenging journey, for the last quarter of a century we've been having a running church fight, complete with anger and suspicion and heat and noise.

I'm convinced we're making all the noise to drown out a voice that will never speak louder than a whisper, "What I have made clean, you must not call profane." It's time to awaken from our dreaming. There is someone waiting for us at the gate. It's time to go and greet them. It's time to hear their story. It's time for the next part of our journey to begin.

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