

What sermon will get you thrown off a cliff?



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January 31/16 Jeremiah 1:4-10 Psalm 71:1-6 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 Luke 4:21-30

Sermon preparation is a strange thing and it takes you to places you'd never dream of – at least not willingly. I doubt Jesus woke up one Sabbath day saying, 'I wonder what I can say today that will have folks wanting to throw me off a cliff?' Wanting to or not, that's what happened in the unfolding story we began last week which comes to a surprising climax with the words: 'When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage..' Now it's hard for us to get a handle on what set them off since it isn't an issue in our culture and context... but whatever it was absolutely enraged a little country church – a small town synagogue – to have them want to throw Jesus off a cliff. I've actually wished to wake up a congregation like this a time or two but have never succeeded in such spectacular fashion as did Jesus this morning. What got them so riled up? However you frame the answer it has to do with inclusion and exclusion – inclusivity and exclusivity were important touch stones for the people of Israel in the day of Jesus... who was in and who was out, who collaborated with the Romans and who fought them, who was Jewish and who was Gentile – actually a lengthy list might emerge from such a conversation ... and that conversation might be a bit dangerous.

You miss what caused the madness. You miss it because today you couldn't care less who was Jewish and who was Gentile. It hasn't really been an issue for us for millennia, but you couldn't say that in Jesus day. Then it was all about 'us' and 'them'... and it is here Jesus messes them up with their own history. Luke's focus, according to my study bible, is on the 'universalization of the gospel'. Listen again – see if you can get the point that enrages them: "...Elijah was sent to none of them (that is, the widows of Israel) except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." The great prophets of old went to the Gentiles and did these things and not to the Jews – and did that ever tick off everybody in the synagogue when Jesus told them this truth. It was all about inclusivity and exclusivity – about 'us' and 'them'. Do you

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get it yet? Do you have any idea what is happening? Long held walls and barriers come tumbling down as Jesus identified with any and all of God's people.

And that is where scripture takes me today – to the place where I just might be thrown off a cliff for even suggesting we boldly go where few have gone before. But it is scripture that has taken me there. So, let's begin...

The conversation is now deeply engaged as to the nature of Human Sexuality within the Presbyterian Church in Canada, inclusive of topics ranging from same sex marriage to the ordination of any regardless of sexual orientation. Our Session spent hours on the topic last Saturday.

The denominational study begins: "Sexuality is an essential part of who we are as human beings. In the past year, there has been renewed conversation and questions around human sexuality, sexual orientation and the church. The subject of human sexuality and sexual orientation was a significant focus for The Presbyterian Church in Canada's highest court, the General Assembly, (when the Assembly met in June of 2015). As a result, the church is invited to look at the biblical texts, think carefully, talk together, and prayerfully consider this important subject."

Our Session spent a Day on retreat last Saturday. For two and a half months each member has been read a document entitled Body, Mind and Soul which is the study document of our denomination on Human sexuality. There is much in the document that is challenging and much that requires us to consider next steps in this process of welcoming all God's people into the common life of faith. The amazing thing about our day together was the unanimity that was expressed by each and every member. And the Session is moving on to consider what can be done to be more welcoming, more affirming of any and of all who wish to be part of Christ's community of faith. And when they have taken that step they will soon be ready to welcome you to explore this issue and take the next steps. I've long ago determined that this is the next justice issue I must address in my ministry, and it can no longer wait while many suffer and are in distress.

And so I asked myself a simple question – what message would I share if and when the church finally takes the next step in the process before us.

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And the real title of the sermon for this morning is simply called: “When love is found” and it comes from that beautiful hymn composed by Brian Wren of the same name. This is the hymn that I would use to take us to the message of the day when partners come and seek God’s blessing on their life together. In an interview a few years back Brian reflects that as we sing and pray we shaped and change and become what God would have us be. So, listen for how God might speak to you today... in the name of the God who creates us, the Christ who loves us and the Spirit who lives in us.

WHEN LOVE IS FOUND

Brian Wren has been one of my favourite – and controversial - hymnists during the length of my ministry... I actually organized a week-long workshop twenty years ago to explore with him many of the hymns and songs he created... you’ll know him as the author of “Bring Many Names” and “The God of many names” both found in the book of praise where there are 22 hymns in total from Brian... and he is still writing dozens of amazing hymns. His hymns are notable in raising awareness of theology and theological issues and he addresses them head on.

One hymn we’ve never sung until today is #600 and I invite you to reflect on it this morning. I hope you notice some beautiful imagery and metaphor in the verses, and just maybe you’ll also begin to notice what’s missing in this hymn which is found in our marriage section.

Now walk with me through the ‘more excellent way’ given us in the Corinthians passage we just read. I cannot begin to tell you how often this has been the central biblical text at a marriage... and, of course, marriage was never in the mind of the author of these words... and some believe that Paul simply inserted a contemporary hymn into his discourse on the gifts of God and indeed made it the centre piece of his understanding of what giftedness is all about. It was theologian Walter Wink who said, ‘There is no biblical sex ethic.’ The only thing that can be found in scripture is a love ethic. Whatever else may (or may not) be said on any (and indeed in ever) issue, if love is not first and foremost, then it is not of Christ. *Period.* If any conversation in whatever context does not begin and end with the motivation of love for the other and love for God, then

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we dishonour the way of Christ. Jesus was emphatic when he pronounced before his friends and disciples – “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

As the message at Nazareth caused the community to seek to kill, this take on the biblical text that Jesus quoted surely was just as revolutionary a message in a world dominated by ‘us’ and ‘them’ thinking back in his day as is the issue of human sexuality amongst us in 2016. The post-resurrection disciples got the message and one of the first debates and decisions of the emerging community was to get rid of inclusive and exclusive divisions – Acts 15 is the final nail in the coffin of such thinking of ‘them’ and ‘us’ in reference to Jews and Gentiles when the decision was handed down: “And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.”

And so in 1 Corinthians 13 comes that wondrous hymn to the place and purpose and power of love in human lives and relationships. And anything and everything love is meant to be is expressed in these few simple words that transform any and all human relations no matter what the issue or the relation... and so this text will surely follow the singing of the hymn, ‘when love is found’.

Every phrase is worthy of a sermon especially as love is pledged in life-long devotion, but for this first message maybe I better use - ‘If I have not love, I am nothing’. That’s pretty simple and straightforward no matter the context. Augustine simplified it even further – ‘Love God and do what you want.’ I would then remind the couple that God knows them intimately – ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,’ and such a realization overwhelms them – and us - with gratitude for our unique creation. The real secret to love is that it needs to be lived out daily – ‘Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.’ Whatever bonding is done in the name of Christ, it will be bound by such love where two will become one and will pledge to be true, and to respect, and to

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grow through the years together. Time may pass, fortune may smile, trials may come; no matter what they may encounter together, the vow they make will be the first step on a life long journey of love and commitment. OK, that sounds like a message I can share anywhere, anytime with anyone in any situation or circumstance. And so a service is complete with hymn and scripture and message.

And love endures... even the fumbblings of a church groping forward in faith seeking the leading of God in issues that can be deep and troubling. We don't have clear sight or insight at the moment... at least there is no clear sight or insight for many. Sadly it is all too clear for those whose minds are completely made up whatever the conclusion to which they've come... for the rest of us we stand with the scripture which says 'now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.'

Let me state the obvious (at least for me): seeing dimly is not the same as not seeing at all – we have indications and directions and yes, we have decisions that need to be made – and love needs to be lived.

Brian Wren's hymn ends with a doxology of praise: "Praise God for love; praise God for life, in age or youth, in calm or strife. Lift up your hearts! Let love be fed through death and life in broken bread."

Yes, that might be the gist of such a sermon I might preach somewhere and sometime in God's future. Not a terribly radical thing you may say but maybe just enough to find myself on a cliff edge waiting for a foot to send me over the edge... or maybe not. Maybe what I have to say about human sexuality is tame compared to what Jesus said about God's love for Jews and Gentiles alike...

I'm writing a letter... I'm not even certain where I'll send it or if I'll send it but I often write things simply to help clarify my own thinking... and maybe it will help guide us into God's future in some small way. Bear with me as I end with it.

----- In response to the Moderator's Pastoral message -----

"I thank God for the guidance of wise leaders, courts that take time to discern God's will and all God's people open to the leading of the Spirit.

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The study on Human Sexuality, at the least, is asking the church to think outside comfort zones no matter what preconceptions are brought to the conversation.

I am grateful to the moderator of the General Assembly who commends in her pastoral letter ‘congregations who are taking risks to share Christ in ways that are appropriate to their context’. And we all find ourselves in 2016 in different places and spaces.

We also found ourselves in different spaces in our discussions on children at the table not that many years ago (1987). In its wisdom the church came to a consensus that it would be both wise and biblical to encouraged congregations to find ways to share at the table appropriate to their context, and to this day we have congregations that wholeheartedly welcome children at the table and those who have decided that such an invitation is not appropriate at the present time. And the church lives with such diversity over the inclusion of children in a matter crucial to our understanding of scripture, theology, tradition and experience. We can only pray that this has happened though the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

And now another discussion is taking place that appears to have the potential to divide us and force us to take sides on an issue just as crucial as that which welcomes children to the sacrament of our salvation. Can we not be just as creative in finding a way forward as those who came to a compromise on children’s participation?

‘When love is found’... then what? And in the meantime, life will go on whoever and wherever your life is lived... even when such a life is green.

I am green and it’ll do fine

It’s beautiful and I think

It’s what I want to be