

TEXT:

Matthew 11: 28-30

LET OUR LOVES AND FEARS UNRAVEL

March 10, 2019

S T. LOUIS SPECIAL CALLED GENERAL CONFERENCE – UMC

General Conference is held every four years. In 1972 wording was added to the Book of Discipline stating that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teachings.” Since 1972 at every General Conference this issue has been debated. I want to talk about the moment in St. Louis today.

I want to talk about what happened at the General Conference, how the decision affects The Brandermill Church and where I stand as your pastor on the issue of human sexuality. Keep in mind that in the UMC and PCUSA there three camps: Progressive, Traditional/conservative, and Centrists/moderates.

At the Called General Conference of 2016 (the first time there has been a called General Conference since 1970) the Council of Bishops (60 active plus retired) proposed that a ‘Commission on a Way Forward’ be formed to try to resolve this divisive issue about human sexuality once and for all. This was composed of 32 persons (half clergy half lay) from around the world. I Three plans were created after 2 years of meetings:

1. **ONE-CHURCH PLAN** (recommended by Council of Bishops)

This plan is based on the belief that we can be a church with a large enough tent for people to disagree about homosexuality and yet remain together as The United Methodist Church. It

allowed us to affirm that our unity and mission are more important than our disagreements.

One of the key components of this plan: It will not condemn LGBTQ persons. It would remove the controversial statement that the practice of homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching” that has been experienced as hurtful by LGBTQ persons and as alienating by younger generations. Statistics say that 75% of Millennials have no issue with same sex marriage.

2. **CONNECTIONAL CONFERENCE MODEL**

In the U.S., the five geographically distinct jurisdictional conferences would be replaced by three conferences: one traditional conference, one progressive, and one centrist conference. A conference would choose to be a member of one of the three connectional conferences based on their theological stance on homosexuality.

3. **TRADITIONAL MODEL**

(not recommended by Council of Bishops) would affirm the current Book of Discipline statement that the practice of homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching.” Boards of Ordained Ministry would still be prohibited from recommending LGBTQ candidates for ordination. Officiating same-sex marriages would still be a chargeable offense, and being a self-avowed and practicing gay clergy would continue to be a chargeable offense.

Here are statements from the UMC’s Book of

Discipline: *The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God’s grace is available to all.*

Persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living. The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.

Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.

The TRADITIONAL PLAN PASSED in St. Louis. It means that the Book of Discipline, language of human sexuality, has not changed. However, punitive plans for clergy have been added. IF a pastor officiates for a same sex marriage they will be suspended without pay for one year. If they officiate for a second time they will lose their ordination. IF a Bishop ordains a gay or lesbian individual, they will lose their ordination.

There were a total of 864 delegates (half clergy, half lay). 504 from USA (58%); 260 from Africa (30%); 50 from the Philippines (6%); 40 from Europe and Eurasia (5%); 10 from churches with special partnerships (1%).

An attempt was made to bring the One Church Plan to the

floor for a vote. That attempt was defeated 449 against to 374 in favor. 15,000 Methodists under the age of 35 signed a petition asking the Conference to NOT approve the traditional plan.

The Traditional Plan passed 438 votes in favor, 384 against (53% for, 47% against). 2/3 of US delegates voted against the Traditional Plan, 1/3 of US delegates voted in favor. The Wall Street Journal stated that the Africans may hold the future of the UMC. There are places in Africa where it is illegal to be homosexual, so it is no surprise that the global votes defeated something that 2/3 of US delegates were in favor of. Did you know that in many states in the USA before 1962 one could be arrested for being in consensual sexual relationships between same-sex couples.

It is interesting that the UMC in the USA loses an average of 100,000 members per year (not because of their stand on homosexuality). The UMC in Africa gains an average of 100,000 per year. That means that the number of delegates will decrease by 24 in the US while the delegates in Africa will gain by 26.

The One Church Plan was a way to hold all views together, giving local options. The Traditional Plan has been described as a way to say if you do not agree with us, then you may LEAVE. It includes a gracious exit plan for congregations to leave and take their property with them. Latest figures state that 1,000s of UM churches are talking of leaving sooner rather than later. THIS IS WHERE WE ARE NOW.

HOW THE DECISION AFFECTS THE BRANDERMILL CHURCH

We are a Union Church of the UMC and the PCUSA. It's important for you to know where the PCUSA stands on the issues of human sexuality. In 2010 a major change occurred to allow ordination with no issue of sexual orientation: The following provision in the Book of Order is current:

Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. The governing body shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability, including a determination of the candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination. Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture in applying standards to individual candidates.

Those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

In 2014 this change was made about marriage: *Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman, to love and support each other for the rest of their lives.*

At that point there were no longer prohibitions about ordination or same sex marriage. Local churches and clergy would make their own decisions about both ordination and marriages...much like The One Church Plan option in St. Louis. In the PCUSA a fundamental element of our polity comes from 1788, a term "MUTUAL FOREBEARANCE" which means you and I can agree to disagree on matters not significant to salvation.

Nothing has changed in The Brandermill Church, polity wise (except the hope shared by so many in the US that the One

Church Plan would pass). What has changed are the punitive plans for clergy who disobey the Book of Discipline.

AS A PASTOR, WHERE AM I?

Normally, as one who claims to be a 'centrist' I can preach without taking a side, however in this moment I MUST share with you where I am on this issue. As I said in my email this week, I am a Minister of the Word and Sacrament in the PCUSA. In my ordination and wherever I serve I have affirmed that I will uphold the constitution in all its parts, just as a UM Ordained pastor vows to uphold the Book of Discipline. But I must say that I am deeply saddened by the decision in St. Louis. Jesus calls us who are heavy burdened to come, and find rest.

Where you stand on this issue is determined by your interpretation of Scripture. There are 7 passages in the bible that are used to make statements about human sexuality. It would take several Sundays to go through them all. I AM willing to offer a class using Jack Rogers excellent book: *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality*. Jack writes that he was as conservative as he could possibly be on this issue. He was asked to participate in a forum about human sexuality, representing the conservative view. He claims his views were transformed as he listened to research and scriptures given by the other side. He then wrote this book. Chapter 5 is entitled "What the Bible says, and Does Not Say about Homosexuality". I have always kept a copy in my files to give to anyone. And I am now willing to have a study using this book if there is interest.

In the 1980's when this issue was predominant in

Mainline churches, the Presbyterian Church created what is known as “Seven Guidelines for the Interpretation of Holy Scripture.” These guidelines transformed my interpretation about many issues, including the issue of human sexuality. The first guideline states all Scripture is to be interpreted by the centrality of Christ and in relation to the salvation provided through him. No understanding of what Scripture teaches us to believe and do can be correct that ignores or contradicts the central and primary revelation of God’s will through Jesus Christ made known through the witness of Scripture. Christ is my key to interpretation of all Scripture! Jesus is the CENTER of all Scripture! A cartoon that is making the rounds on Facebook has Jesus addressing people standing by him. Jesus says to the people, “You use Scriptures to define LOVE. I use LOVE to define Scriptures.”

People will take the 7 passages and say “The Bible says it and that’s good enough for me.” I always love that statement...REALLY??? What about the Bible’s words that all women should be silent, all women should have their heads covered??? My life has been enriched by women of faith. I do not see many head coverings today. What about the 200 plus references in the Bible to slavery...including how to live with our slaves? The Apostle Paul even talked about managing slaves. Does that mean we are to HAVE slaves?? And what about the statement, “spare the rod, spoil the child.” I do not know about you, but my dad’s rod was my dad’s belt. Proverbs refers to this 4 times. Today we do not think that is the right way to parent. The Bible says all of this!

We are experts at picking and choosing. But can

we really pick and choose about this??? I did for much of my life, but God was at work in my mind. I look back on my faith journey and have no doubt the Spirit was at work.

Please know that the Bible is not loved more by anyone than me. I read it everyday, as a pastor I spend 10-15 hours a week studying Scripture, it is my rule of faith and practice. God has used this book to transform my life so many times.

Let me give you some personal examples of how my “fears and loves have been unraveled”:

First, in Salisbury, NC our Dir of music left after 16 years. We were able to connect with the new Dir of Sacred Music at Catawba College. He became our interim director of music at the same time that the PCUSA was going through challenging conversations about human sexuality. The Director was gay. Everyone loved him. People who were as conservative as you could imagine fell in love with him. Our head usher, the first Sunday he was there asked me after worship, “Did we just get a new organ???” He was one of the greatest musicians I have ever worked with. THEN he was diagnosed with cancer. I asked him one Sunday morning to share, and he did. One of the most conservative and pious couples in the church were present. They got up during his words and left. They could not believe he was speaking in their church and they never returned. He became a spiritual giant to me, as he battled cancer. He had been in a relationship with his partner for 17 years. Leslie and I would rank their committed relationship higher than many heterosexuals.

He left Catawba College for Western Kentucky Wesleyan College. While there he died. I

was asked to come and speak at his memorial service and in my words I thanked God for bringing my life and Leslie’s into the realm of this wonderful, amazing disciple of Jesus Christ. Earlier in my life I could not have said that! God used someone close to “unravel all my fears and LOVES”!

Second was a retired physician in our church in Salisbury. This man was an amazing student of Scripture. He was also an incredible wood carver and the hallways at our church were covered by his wood working pieces. He would only do what he felt inspired to do. You could ask him to carve something, but he only did if he felt inspired to do that.

One day in the midst of the PC(USA) debates about sexual orientation he came to talk to me. He said, “Jim, when I work on a wood working piece, and if it is a little different, I NEVER would even think of throwing it away! In the same way I cannot begin to imagine that God would create someone and then toss them aside!” That led to a great conversation.

About a year later, this man’s grandson came out as being gay! His fears and loves were unraveled.

Finally, was my own mother, probably one of the most conservative voices in my life. My mother always dreamed while in college of being a pastor...but she was female so in her time that was impossible. Her father was a pastor and so she loved to talk about my work...unless we disagreed about Scripture. And we did on the issue of human sexuality. BUT, about 2 years before she died she called me one Sunday evening and we were talking. I can still hear her speaking as she did that night on the phone, “Jim, do you think that being gay is a sin?” I said, “Absolutely

NOT!" Then she said, "I know...how can we say a lifestyle is a sin, when the person's biological makeup, not their own choice causes them to live this way? How can we say it is a sin???" That is one conversation with my mother I will never forget! I have come so far, but even my mother made a huge leap in her own faith journey before she died. The Spirit unraveled her loves and fears, as the Spirit had done so for me.

I want to close by mentioning a story that I have told one other time since I've been your pastor. And please know that you may hear it again about once a year. The story occurs in Europe, during WWII, about three soldiers were close friends. One of the friends was killed in battle. The other two were determined to offer their friend a decent burial. They saw a church with a cemetery, a fence surrounded it. They went and knocked on the door. A priest came to the door. They told about their friend being shot and killed during battle. They wanted to find a place to bury him and saw the church's cemetery. "Can we bury our friend here in your cemetery?"

The priest asked, "Is he Catholic?" The soldiers said, "NO." The priest said, "You can find a place right outside the fence and bury your friend there." They were grateful and did just that. A few days later their platoon was leaving the area so the two came back to check their friends grave one last time. They walked around the fence once, twice and three times. They could not find the grave.

They went back and knocked on the door of the church. The priest answered. They said they had done exactly as the priest asked them to do but now they could not find the

grave. The priest said, "That is because I spent the first half of the other night feeling sorry for what I had told you. The second half of the night, I MOVED THE FENCE!"

When I come to the end of my life, do I believe God will say, "Way to go, Jim. You kept the fence as small as it could be." Or do I believe God will say, "Way to go, Jim. You expanded the fence opening my love to ALL. And you left the judgment to me!" That, my friends, is the risk necessary for me as a pastor!

So, what can you do?

1. *Pray for the UMC*, a church where many are hurting, while some are pleased with the decision. A Judicial Council (of 9) will meet at the end of April to determine the constitutionality of the Traditional Plan passed in St. Louis. Many parts of it have already been approved as constitutional.
2. *Pray for The Brandermill Church*...where many are hurting while some are very pleased by the decision for the Traditional Plan.
3. *Pray for your Council*. We met Wednesday night for initial conversation and will be meeting again soon to discern God's guidance for us now.
4. And, *please stay for our conversation* after worship today!

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take MY yoke upon you and learn from me. You will find rest for your souls."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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