

People of the Comma

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Jeremiah 31:7-9 "I will lead them back."

Mark 10:46-52 "Your faith has made you well."

Preface

Last Sunday, Rev. Dr. John Thomas, President of our United Church of Christ, spoke to us about the UCC's journey to the General Synod 25 (2005) overwhelming vote in favor of "marriage equality." This morning, I would like to speak on Rock Spring's journey with this same issue.

I.

Blind beggar Bartimaeus, begs Jesus to restore his sight.

Rabbi, Let me see again! -Mk. 10:51

There is desperation in his voice.

I do not want my life to continue as it is.

I know life can be different, better.

I want to be regarded as a full, productive person who need not beg for survival. I want to be first class, not second class or third class or last class.

In this earnest desire, Bartimaeus joins other biblical figures who strove for healing and the unleashing of their potential- the Samaritan woman at the well; the ten lepers shunned by their fearful society; the Ethiopian Eunuch, enslaved to his queen; Cornelius, an bound officer of the Roman Empire, to name but a few. Each, through Jesus or early Christian missionaries, caught a glimpse of a new more just and hope-filled life. What the Hebrew Bible calls, Shalom.

My teacher, let me see!

We share the beggar's yearning for new vision of a dynamic world in which people no longer suffer imprisonment to old assumptions of to how things are. The discouraged father in Fiddler on the Roof may be satisfied with following Tradition! but we who believe in God's love for us through Jesus Christ do not have to. Tradition, though comforting, can also become enslaving.

Young priest of the Roman Church, Fr. Martin Luther was jolted to this realization. As he struggled over the injustice of key Catholic traditions, Luther encountered Christ anew. Fearfully at first, later with boldness, Luther accepted a new vision. His spiritual eyes were opened and he could see God's redemption of all humankind for the very first time. Luther realized that-

His parishioners had a right to hear the Mass in their native German for their understanding and inspiration.

The Bible should be printed in their language so they could read it for themselves.

Only God can forgive sins. No amount of indulgences paid nor any amount of good works can assure us of salvation. Only God's free grace can do that.

On the eve of All Saints' Day, October 31, 1517, Luther posted on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg a series of propositions for debate, ever since known as the Ninety-five Theses. They were soon circulating everywhere in Germany (Roland Bainton, Christendom). The consequences for Luther and European society were momentous. Luther himself went through excommunication from the Church. War broke out and many died.

But what Luther's ministry gave to us is nothing short of essential to who we are today. As Protestant Christians, children of protest, we understand what Luther's church did not- that faith is dynamic, not static. That, as Bishop Robinson, Separatist Church leader declared, There is still more light and truth to break forth from God's Holy Word.

Robinson and Luther came to realize that God is alive and always working with the Church. So the Church is a living, changing Body...quite literally Christ's body in the world.

II.

We in the United Church of Christ, who are among the inheritors of this stunning Reformation heritage, have recently borrowed a phrase from comedian Gracie Allen to describe this concept- Never place a period where God has placed a comma!

Now there are those today who wish to argue with us. For them, the famous phrase ought to say, Never place a comma where God has placed a period!

These folks are stuck in pre-Reformation thinking. To them, God has spoken for all time and God's words are recorded once and for all in the Old and New Testaments. So, the Bible must be read literally, word for word.

I'm not sure where God's Word is in all of those words. But I do know that God continues to reveal more light and truth as we understand scripture according to context, tradition and faith. For Progressive Christians, the Bible must be taken seriously, but not always literally. When I read scripture seriously, I find that God has much to say to the challenges of our time.

For example, in Rock Spring's studies in the late 1980's and '90's leading to creation of our Open and Affirming statement, we found that God was still speaking about human sexuality. Through study of problematic biblical texts and modern psychological understandings of human development, we were led to affirm the sanctity of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation. This insight opened our eyes to the terrible, centuries-old injustices faith communities and secular societies have leveled against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons.

Now we realize that God has more to teach us about ONA; that God is still speaking concerning marriage. Back in 2000, when we voted our ONA statement which officially declared that Rock Spring to be Open and Affirming, we thought it fair to provide for ceremonies of traditional marriage and of committed union (Rock Spring Open and Affirming Statement, 2000). But General Synod 25 (Atlanta, 2005), our yearlong marriage equality study which culminates this afternoon, and the witness of Rock Spring members and friends have open our eyes to another insight. And this realization is painful to admit.

In our ONA statement, we sanctioned what amounts to a separate but equal position on marriage. That is, we said to same gender couples that we will withhold the marriage rite from you because you are not heterosexual. But we ought to have learned from school desegregation days that separate cannot be equal. And the Gospel of Jesus Christ always is on the side of justice for all people!

It is not enough to say, as many do, that centuries of tradition trump marriage justice. In fact, the weight of religious and secular tradition on marriage argues just the opposite. Marriage is intended to ground stable societies. How can we deny marriage to some sincere, faithful, committed couples who yearn to make a long term commitment to one another while permitting it for others? Where in scripture do we find authentic justification for discriminating against certain classes of people? Did not Jesus himself work for the equality of all people under God?

And now, we who live in the Commonwealth of Virginia have an added concern. Ballot Question #1, on which we will vote one week from Tuesday, seeks to write into the state Constitution and Bill of Rights that marriage can only be between a man and a woman. This measure would institutionalize the denial of legal benefits and protections to same gender couples and families

(in addition to other types of relationships). How does a law that discriminates against one group of citizens benefit the state?

Rock Spring is called to leadership. We can begin by amending our ONA statement to permit marriage here for all people. The fact that Virginia will not recognize a Christian marriage between same-gender couples is irrelevant to what Rock Spring, of faith and conscience, must do. Because we know that all people are first class! God is still speaking to us and we need to listen.

III.

Six centuries before Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah preached to exiled Hebrews that God would soon “lead them back-

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
those with child and those in labor, together;
a great company, they shall return here.

Today, with Jeremiah’s people and once-blind Bartimaeus, with Martin Luther and so many others who have sincerely struggled to find and follow God’s voice for their times, we gather here, a people brought back from ignorance and the slavery of destructive traditions, a people among those who have been given clear vision and a firm faith to follow our just and loving God.

Let us have the faith and the courage to live as a people of the comma.

Amen.