

Rocking the Boat

Psalm 133 & Mark 4: 35-41

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 25th June 2006

Before I left for the General Assembly, I selected a passage from Hebrews to be this morning's text, a text that was the theme for the entire Assembly, that we are surrounded by "so great a cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1)." But the lectionary passages for this Sunday, amazingly, speak directly to the current state of the Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.): the psalmist speaks of how good it is to live in unity, how blessed and beautiful it is to be held together as one. The gospel reading suggests that the disciples needed to trust Jesus in the midst of the storm, a storm that might have broken their boat apart. Our lectionary readings for today are perhaps the words we need to hear, especially now in the life of our denomination.

When the 217th General Assembly gathered in Birmingham, AL, we were reminded, almost daily, of that city's troubled history – not during the Civil War (the city was founded in 1870), but during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. The 16th Street Baptist Church, which was bombed by racists claiming to be Christian, was only a few blocks away. Throughout the Assembly we were reminded of fear of division. Even though we celebrated 300 years of Presbyterianism in America with worship services with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in the U. S., which split over racial division in the nineteenth century, even though we were reminded of our shared heritage and Presbyterian identity in worship on Sunday evening where thousands gathered and celebrated Holy Communion, we were still reminded of our division. Sadly, Presbyterianism has a long history of being schismatic. We celebrated the 50th anniversary of women ministers, the 75th anniversary of women elders, and the 100th anniversary of women deacons – bold steps of human rights and justice. Throughout the Assembly the struggle for equal rights, for human rights, indeed, biblical views of humanity, seem to permeate our time together.

The Assembly was held in the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley – named for William (1865-1927) and Lucy Sheppard (c.1863-?) and Samuel Lapsley (1866-1892), the first Presbyterian missionaries to the Belgian Congo. William was the first African-American mission sent to Africa and established schools, churches, and hospitals along the Congo River, especially in the Kasai where the Presbyterian witness is still very strong. Kananga and Lubondai are both in the Kasai. The Presbyterian Congo Choir was present in worship and sang periodically throughout the Assembly with such joy. The communion chalices and plates used in worship were copied from a wooden set

William Sheppard brought back from the Congo. I bought two sets to be used in worship here.

The struggle for equal rights was especially true with regard to the Congo. I was asked by Baltimore Presbytery to be the overture advocate for one of our overtures calling upon the United States government to ensure free and transparent elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which are scheduled for the end of July. If the elections are not deemed fair there's a great fear of civil war in a county that has lost four million people since 1998. The Presbyterians of the Congo (more than 2 million strong) are crying out to the American church to help. Two other presbyteries concurred with our overture and after we were finished testifying the General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of the Congo, Dr. Mulumba Mukundi, stood and spoke passionately about the plight of his people. After he finished, the vote was taken and overwhelmingly passed in committee. A commissioner requested a point of personal privilege and asked for prayers for the Congo. It was very moving. Then, after the prayer as I was getting ready to leave the committee room, Nancy and Mike Haninger came by and said hello. I was so excited to see them (In fact, I was told to go out in the hall to visit.). I got to know Nancy and Mike in Tshikaji, both Presbyterian missionaries, in the Congo. I spent an afternoon with Nancy visiting the health projects for people living in the bush near Tshikaji. Mike is a medical doctor who was with me when I got sick and suggested that I had the symptoms of malaria. Mike and Nancy are home on medical leave. Mike is fighting Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and has been on our intercessor list for months. Thankfully, they are both scheduled to return in October and are grateful for our prayers.

A minister from Greater Atlanta presbytery, Joan Gray, was elected moderator, a centrist candidate whose job it will be to interpret and uphold the actions taken by this Assembly. Such as the Trinity report affirmed the orthodox definition of the Triune God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (especially in baptisms), yet encouraged Presbyterians to explore other images and metaphors from scripture, using gender-inclusive language. The paper was received, but not adopted. There was a lot of inaccurate information in the press regarding this report, as if we've given up on the Triune name of God. That's simply not true.

The Assembly also backed away from its very controversial decision made two years ago to begin divestment from companies that profit from Israel's involvement (such as Caterpillar, ITT, Motorola, and United Technologies) in the Palestinian territories. That action has done much to erode strong Jewish-Presbyterian relations. The Assembly overwhelmingly approved a resolution that said divestment would be a "last resort," but emphasized positive, not punitive step the church can make toward a

peaceful Middle East. The statement makes clear we're not targeting Israel, not abandoning our commitment to peacemaking, and not abandoning Palestinian Christians.

The item that has drawn the most attention in the secular press and throughout the church was the approval of the Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force report. Commissioned by the GA in 2001, the Task Force Report was charged to address the most polarizing issues facing the denomination, which can be clustered around the following questions: Who is Jesus Christ? What is the nature of Biblical authority? What are the standards for ordination? What is the appropriate expression of power? All of these issues are tearing us a part and they're all related. Actually, they all come under the rubric of Biblical interpretation: *how does one read and interpret scripture?* The question regarding ordination speaks to the different views in the church regarding the ordination of practicing gay and lesbian Christians to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, elders, and deacons. The long-awaited PUP Committee, made up of people from across the theological spectrum (liberals and conservatives), presented a unanimous report that was affirmed by all the presidents of our Presbyterian seminaries, and most of the former moderators. The PUP Report did not tackle the question of sexuality, *per se*, but chose to focus on Presbyterian polity and draw insight from the Adopting Act of 1729, an act we have turned to many times in our history, especially during times of intense turmoil.

In summary, the PUP Report asked that the current ordination standards (including the "chastity and fidelity" amendment whose presence in the *Book of Order* for almost ten years has only deepened our divisions) remain intact (at least for the next two years until the next GA), but stress that local congregations and presbyteries determine who is best qualified to serve. The Adopting Act of 1729 permits people who cannot in good conscience ascribe to these standards to declare a scruple. The local body – congregation or presbytery—would then determine whether that scruple is an essential of the faith.¹ 57 % of the Assembly approved this recommendation of the report, this interpretation of the *Book of Order*, after almost five hours of debate. Debate in committee lasted for three days. This interpretation of the Constitution is effective immediately, and does not require the approval of the presbyteries. So, in many ways nothing has changed, and yet we are in a new world as a denomination.

I was in favor of the report, although after the vote was taken I didn't feel jubilant. Many are and will feel hurt by this action (even as others have been hurt by

¹ The PUP Report was very clever in stressing the significance of G-6.0108, which reflects the possibility of declaring a scruple, as a way through our denomination impasse using the *Book of Order* as our guide.

previous GA actions). Some in the denomination are saying that this action has left us with no ordination standards and that people are free to declare scruples on any item of belief they disagree on. Some are saying this is “local option,” smacking of Congregationalism, and a dismantling of Presbyterian form of polity. *All of these charges are blatantly wrong and intentionally fanning the flames of dissension.* The *Book of Order* has not been altered; neither have our historic standards for ordination. The national standards still remain, but the report called upon local bodies to discern whom God is calling. The communities that know the candidates best, who can discern the Spirit’s call in their lives, should have more power to decide. Does this mean practicing gay/lesbian Christians can be ordained to serve? Yes. Does this mean that all practicing gay/lesbian Christians will be ordained? Absolutely not. One of the principles of Presbyterian polity is that each body has the right to choose the women and men who will lead them.² We have national standards, with local applications. For example, our nominating committee doesn’t call Louisville to get clearance when we’re offering a slate of elders and deacons for election, right? We have national standards, with local applications. That’s the way it was before Birmingham. And this is the way it is after Birmingham.

An overwhelming majority, 80%, affirmed the part of the report celebrating our covenantal partnerships, our common theological roots, the need for prayer, and the desire to hold together. The question for the denomination is, will we hold? There are some, calling themselves Constitutional Presbyterians, who are claiming we have entered a constitutional crisis. I think they’ve been planning to leave for years and might use this as their excuse.

A storm was raging all around the Assembly on so many issues last week in Birmingham, especially around this PUP report, a storm that can easily break apart the boat that is the church. But that’s not God’s will for us. The Assembly took a courageous act, calling for trust as we seek to move beyond divisions that have weighed us down as a denomination for more than thirty years.³ In the many hours I spent listening to the debates and conversations, I found that those who were against the PUP report were anxious and terribly afraid, and they were trying to get everyone else afraid

² “That the character, qualifications, and authority of Church officers are laid down in the Holy Scripture, as well as the proper method of their investiture and institution, yet the election of the persons to the exercise of this authority, in any particular society, is in that society.” *Book of Order* (G-1.0306). Also, “...the right of God’s people to elect their officers is inalienable.” (G-6.0107)

³ Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: “The Church is called to undertake [its] mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ.” *Book of Order* (G-3.0400).

too, crying, “We are perishing.” What the disciples needed in their storm-tossed boat was trust in the midst of the storm. “Why are you afraid?” Jesus asked. I wonder if Jesus isn’t asking the same of us, “Why are you so afraid?”

Scripture tells us that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4: 18). The opposite of love is not hate, but *fear*. Many years ago an elder in my previous church said to me one day, “We act either in love or fear.” I think this is true, both personally and collectively, maybe especially in the life of our denomination. Jesus is in the stern steering this boat. We need to trust each other, to hold on to each other, to love and not fear each other, and most of all, trust *Jesus* to take us all where we need to go. Fear not! Fear not!

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