June 12, 2016   
Joel 2:28-29   
A Place at the Table: Blessing the Table

Rev. Kerry Smith   
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Joel 2:28-29 New Revised Standard Version

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

We love to help other people. We love to bless other people. We are blessed to be a blessing we say. But, how are you about asking for help? How are you about receiving help? How are you about asking to be blessed?

This week I celebrated the tenth anniversary of my ordination as an Elder in the United Methodist Church. The way that it works in the United Methodist Church is that you go through all of these committees. It took me ten years from the day that I told my pastor at Chapelwood UMC in Houston, Texas that I wanted to be a pastor to the day that I was ordained. After I had finished seminary I was commissioned and began my 3 year residency as a pastor before I was ordained. But it didn’t take me 3 years, because when I went for my ordination interview I did not pass.

Another pastor shared with me the news that I did not pass and was not going to be ordained with all of my friends who I had been journeying with in those three years of residency. He told me that in the interview I had presented myself as a beautiful tapestry that was unraveling. I still don’t know exactly what he meant, but he told me that 11 years ago and I still remember it. When I tried to understand what had happened and why I had failed, my mom said it was because I had a 6 month old child and I was sleep deprived. Which was very true. That pastor also shared with me that they wanted me to be more confident. But I think I had been too honest. Being a pastor is hard, and I shared my doubts with that group that was trying to decide if I was ready to be ordained as a pastor in the United Methodist Church.

The next Sunday I walked into the pulpit at Krum United Methodist Church and I tried to be confident. I told them that I was not going to be ordained as they had prayed and hoped for. I was still going to be their pastor though and I was going to try again the next year.

A few months later I was at Annual Conference, the yearly meeting for laity and clergy in the North Texas Conference and my friend Vivian Crowson and I sat together as we watched Bishop Rhymes Moncure wash the feet of all of our friends that we had been in residency together. Vivian and I were the only women in that group who were serving as Senior Pastors at churches. The other women were associate pastors and they were all approved, but we were not. As each one of our friends were ordained, we stood in love and support of them as tears ran down each of our faces.

And through the journey of that next year I knew that I wouldn’t have my monthly residency meetings with my friends because they had gotten ordained. But then I received a phone call from someone named Shannon Hamrick. Shannon was a counselor at the Pastoral Care and Counseling Center on Lemmon and was in the residency group the year behind me. She was coming up to Denton for her monthly residency group and she wanted to know if I wanted to eat breakfast with her at IHOP before her meeting. She created a residency group for me. She helped me. She supported me. She loved me. But I didn’t ask her for that, she offered. I was wondering this week what would have happened if she had not reached out to me. Would I have gone before the Board of Ordained Ministry again? Would I have passed the next year? Would I be standing before you today?

We love to help other people. We love to bless other people. We are blessed to be a blessing we say. But, how are you about asking for help? How are you about receiving help? How are you about asking to be blessed?

We have spent the last few weeks talking about Communion. I shared with you that I needed healing after the General Conference. General Conference is the worldwide United Methodist Church that was in Portland, Oregon in May. General Conference meets every four yours and is the top policy-making body of the United Methodist Church revising church law, adopting resolutions on current moral, social, public policy and economic issues and approving plans and budgets for church-wide programs. No changes were made to our United Methodist policies that currently discriminate against LGBTQI people. In our Book of Discipline it says that any “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” and “a self-avowed practicing homosexual cannot be ordained.” In our Book of Discipline it says that “ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches”. The consequence is that I can be charged, have a trial, and lose my credentials that I received when I was ordained.

At General Conference those restrictions did not get worse. What happened instead was that the Bishops of the United Methodist Church were asked to provide a way forward. The General Conference, somewhat similar to our Congress, asked our Bishops, sort of like our President, to help us. This is the first time that has ever happened.

The Bishops were asked to lead and so they recommended that all of the votes on human sexuality be deferred. We would not vote on any legislation which in a way was good because the votes were not there to make anything better. In fact what was going to be voted on would have only made things worse. The Bishops proposed a special commission to look at all human sexuality legislation and if they finish their work before 2020 to have a special called General Conference. The Bishops said that “our Discipline contains language that is contradictory, unnecessarily hurtful, and inadequate for the variety of local, regional and global contexts.” The Bishops said that we as a United Methodist Church should explore “options to help the church live in grace with one another – including ways to avoid further complaints, trials and harm while we uphold the Discipline.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

I have been working with a group of pastors for the last couple of months to do something, to let our voices be known that we are not okay with the current United Methodist discrimination. We had a letter that we were going to put out before General Conference, but then we decided to wait, and then after General Conference there was another letter, and then a third letter as the annual gathering, called Annual Conference, for Methodist churches in North Texas began this week. This third letter said that we as clergy “desire to prayerfully and actively work toward full inclusion” in North Texas.[[2]](#footnote-3) Full inclusion means that there is no more discrimination. More than 120 pastors signed that letter.

That same group of pastors that I have been working with created a resolution saying that we would “prayerfully and actively work toward a new reality in which space is given for a diversity of theological reflection, preaching and practices surrounding ministry with LGBTQ+ members of our congregations that is authentic to the call of pastors, parishioners and their contexts for ministry as they do their best to ‘make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world’”.[[3]](#footnote-4)

You may think this doesn’t sound like much. I didn’t. However, for the first time something positive concerning LGBTQ persons was passed at the North Texas Annual Conference. For the first time ever. The resolution said in the whereas at the top, we “share the acknowledgment that ‘our Discipline contains language that is contradictory, unnecessarily hurtful, and inadequate for the variety of local, regional, and global contexts;’… and we are heart broken for those who have been denied full access to the ministries of the church”[[4]](#footnote-5)

There were two attempts to add amendments that would have gutted the resolution, and they both failed overwhelmingly. There was an amendment to add the words that we will “uphold the discipline” which you might expect to pass by 690 to 10, but it passed by 31 votes. 356 to 325. They had to take that vote 4 times, 2 by hands raised. The third vote had the amendment failing by 4 votes, but the tellers weren’t sure so we voted again and it passed by 31 votes. 52.3% of the voting members of the Annual Conference of the North Texas Conference voted to “uphold the discipline.” With that amendment added, the resolution passed overwhelmingly, by an estimated 85%. This is a huge first step.

For me, when we come to the table of grace, when we come to table of love, we realize that to say “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” is in fact incompatible with Christian teaching. We have spent the last weeks talking about the table of love and the table of grace as we have talked about Communion. We talked about setting the table and the invitation to everyone to come to the table and today we talk about blessing the table. In the Great Thanksgiving prayer that we say before Communion we say, “Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here…” We don’t just bless the food, we ask the Holy Spirit to bless us. The food on this table is not just nourishment for our bodies, but it is full of the presence and ministry of Jesus. We are to be transformed into the presence and ministry of Jesus Christ for the world, following in the footsteps of Jesus. We ask the Spirit to bless us.

Romans 8:16 tells us that the Holy Spirit bears witness with us, with our spirit, that we are children of God. The scripture we read this morning from Joel reminds us again that the Holy Spirit will be poured on us. We will prophesy, we will dream dream, we will see visions. The Holy Spirit is poured out on our spirit. It is like when Jesus began his ministry and stood up in the synagogue reading from Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

We are made in God’s image. We are good and the Holy Spirit is with us. Sometimes we need reminders of that Spirit. We need friends like Shannon Hamrick who check on us and create community for us. We need this place and this community of faith that reminds us that we can be a community of faith for those who have been hurt by church, for those who have been hurt by Christians, for those who have been hurt by the United Methodist Church.

“Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here…” Transform us, Holy Spirit. Help us follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Bless us, Holy Spirit.

1. http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website\_Properties/general-conference/2016/documents/council-bishops-statement-offering-way-forward-may-18-gc2016.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. http://ntcumcunity.blogspot.com/2016/06/dear-north-texas-annual-conference.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. http://ntcumcunity.blogspot.com [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. http://ntcumcunity.blogspot.com [↑](#footnote-ref-5)