

Rescuing Our Church

A sermon by Rev. Don Fado, preached at Elk Grove, UMC, August 4, 2013
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The Supreme Court and the Pope have shown us in the past couple of weeks that there have been monumental shifts in the way our society views homosexuality.

I want to share with you briefly, how those shifts have happened in my personal journey. When I was a boy in Redding, CA in the 1940s there was a man named Francis on my paper route. The newspaper office told me to never collect money from him as I did from the other subscribers; nor was I ever go into his house or spend any time with him for he is a queer. And he looked queer to me: He wore thick glasses and dressed in pastel shirts, which real men in the 1940s did not do. I saw him often but never spoke to him. In high school, there was an obviously developmentally challenged boy named Tommy, who liked to stroke the top of the heads of us boys who wore crew cuts. We called him "homo" right to his face. Those are the only two people in those early years I remember thinking were homosexuals for sure. I also thought Betty, the PE teacher in junior high might also be one; she wore her hair short. There were around 12,000 people in Redding then. Almost 4% of the population is believed to be gay or lesbian, which means there were probably around 500 closeted gays and lesbians living there. But as I look back on my knowledge of homosexuality, the ones I thought were queers, Francis, Tommy, and possibly Betty, could well have been heterosexual; but I believed I knew what homosexuality was.

In my college and seminary years, I never had my assumptions challenged. I do not recall meeting anyone on those campuses I considered queer. I don't remember homosexuality even being discussed in seminary.

I recall in my first Church in Fresno in 1958 preaching a sermon on Sodom and Gomorrah as a sign of God's displeasure with homosexuals and I quoted from Leviticus that they are abominations to God. Bible commentaries actually taught that; I didn't question it. The thought of two men making love to one another disgusted me. It was like the disgust I felt when I first learned how men and women made love to each other. Yech! With my attitude it is no wonder that no one confided in me that he or she or any member of their family was other than heterosexual.

There was an older man, Carl, whom I momentarily thought might be gay in that first congregation because one evening, after a meeting, he walked me to my car and put his arm around my shoulder. I stiffened. I had been taught by the culture of the 1950s that men did not touch other than by shaking hands or a slap on the back, unless they were wrestling or playing football. Oh, how uptight my culture and I were. It would be a few years before I could learn to hug men, including my father. I doubt Carl was gay; he just cared about me, his young pastor and showed it with an arm around the shoulder.

It would be different in my later churches as I discovered glbt, (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) people in the church and in the community who did not fit the stereotypes of old. They were ordinary fine people. Also in depth biblical studies I learned how our homophobic

society had misinterpreted the scriptures. Part of the story of Sodom (Genesis 19) is an attempted homosexual gang rape which has been used to show God's judgments of homosexuals for all time, but in the same book of Genesis, there is the horrible story of the heterosexual rape of Dinah and the revenge by her brothers. Israel condemns their actions, but no one has ever interpreted that a condemnation of heterosexuals for all time. Jesus refers to Sodom and Gomorrah not to show God's anger with homosexuality, but God's anger to those who mistreat the stranger in their midst. Just the opposite of how we have used it. The condemnation is against those who misuse and violate others, as we have done to glbt people over the ages.

And in the book of Leviticus (18:22) the words, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" need to be seen through the eyes of that culture. Everyone was assumed to be heterosexual, so if a man was found sexually atop another man, it was obvious that he was raping the victim using him as if he were a woman. In a culture where women were considered the property of men and inferior to men, it would be an abomination to treat a man as if he were a woman. You are not to "lie with a man as with a woman." This has nothing to do with two people of the same sex being in love. In fact there is nothing in the scriptures that condemns the act of sex between two people of the same gender who love each other. No matter what interpretations people give to the scriptures, it just isn't there.

A pivotal time for me was at the retirement party for Bob Cary. Bob was our annual conference Youth Director when I was in high school and college. A study revealed that during the 1950s, 80% of those who entered the ministry in our Annual Conference had worked directly with Bob. I was one of those. He made a profound impact on my life and ministry. After he left youth ministry he came on the staff with me at the First UMC, Burlingame and then became the Executive Director of United Methodist Mid-penninsula Parish.

At his retirement banquet I sat at a table with Bob and some friends. It was in October of 1978. We began discussing proposition 6, known as the Briggs Initiative which would have banned homosexuals from being employed by public schools. I voiced my opposition, as did others, but then offered that the only job I would not allow homosexuals to perform in the church was counseling the youth group because they would be poor role models. A few minutes later I was at the podium telling everybody what a profound influence Bob had on me and my ministry. I extolled him as being the finest youth leader imaginable. The next morning he took me out to breakfast and told me "Don, you can't have it both ways. I am a gay man. Don't praise me as a youth worker and then declare people like me should not be youth workers." I was stunned. It never had crossed my mind that Bob might be gay. He was one of my role models.

Bob told me had tried not to be gay; but finally accepted that as his birth orientation. He said it was like being left handed. "You can learn to use your right hand, but you are always left-handed; it is the way you are born."

I loved Bob. I knew I had been wrong. I would work for equality for glbt persons in the church and community the rest of my life. Wesley UMC in Fresno, where I was pastor, hired Bob, after his retirement, as church administrator knowing he was gay. He led that congregation to become the second reconciling congregation in our denomination. I became founding co-chair of the national Reconciling Ministries Clergy of our church.

I share my personal journey with you because I assume that all older persons here were raised in the same type of homophobic environment I was and have stories to tell of the shifts in his or her thinking. Most likely, there would have been no shifts if glbt people remained closeted as they still are in Africa, where homosexuality is illegal in 38 countries; still closeted in Russia and Latin America. How sad it is that there are still areas of our country and pockets in California where glbt people still remain closeted and people have not had the opportunity to know someone like a Bob Cary. I am assuming that each of you who have shifted your feelings toward gays can attribute it in large part to knowing and caring about someone who is a glbt person. Thank God we have had that opportunity.

Wendy, and Tom Montgomery had that opportunity and their lives were changed. They were Mormons from Bakersfield who were leaders in the fight for California's proposition 8 defining marriage as only for heterosexuals. The person who changed their view was their son Jordan, now 14. They read in his journal that he knew he was gay and he was contemplating suicide because his church and his family believed that to be a homosexual is a sin that would cut him off from his family on earth and in the afterlife. Their love for their son opened their eyes. Tom and Wendy knew then that they had been wrong and their church was wrong. "Amazing grace... I was blind but now I see."

They have apologized for what they have said and done against gay, lesbian, bisexual transgender people. Jordan opened their eyes. Bob opened my eyes.

I apologize to Francis and Tommy and Betty and Carl and Bob; and to all of those people I humiliated by preaching that they were less value than had they been born heterosexual; and to all of those straight people who had their biases reaffirmed from my pulpit. "Amazing grace... I was blind but now I see."

Our denomination continues to live in the past and humiliate glbt people. In late June, Justice Anthony Kennedy, writing for the majority in ruling the Defense of Marriage act unconstitutional, said that limiting a marriage to opposite sex couples "humiliates tens of thousands of children" now being raised by same-sex couples. The Supreme Court has said stop humiliating. But the Church continues humiliating.

Who in the Sacramento area would want to join a church that teaches "We do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching." and "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches." (*The Book of Discipline, pp 161f and pp341.6*)

These views are destroying our church, its credibility and its prophetic voice. What if a church declared that some races are inferior to others and that church would not perform interracial wedding ceremonies nor such ceremonies for divorced people. Who would join such a church? At one time, many people did, for all those prohibitions were in our *Discipline* but have been expunged as against God's will, cruel and racist. The language denying full membership rights to glbt people will one day be expunged as well. But the soonest that could happen is 2016 when our General Conference meets next. But we cannot wait that long. The message of our denomination is a major albatross around our neck in any attempt to reach out to new members, especially among the young; it is a detriment to teaching about a God of love who loves as Jesus has shown us.

To be relevant in our culture, United Methodist Churches must disclaim the unjust parts of our *Discipline* that continue to humiliate glbt persons – just as you have done here at Elk Grove UMC. You are a shining example, along with Fair Oaks and St. Mark's UMCs, of extending hospitality to all and allowing same-sex-marriages to be celebrated in your churches. Now we need to get that word heard throughout our communities.

I have an idea of a way to help that happen. The Church Council of each of these 3 churches, vote on a common proclamation of where they stand that will then be distributed to California churches throughout our Annual Conference asking them to join in the proclamation. When we have at least 50, hopefully more, we could call a press conference and distribute the proclamation to get the broadest coverage possible. I have talked with all of the pastors of these three churches and they are in agreement with this plan.

Leadership of these 3 churches will need to get together to agree upon the wording of the proclamation. I have a rough draft as a starting point. It might read,

We proclaim that in order to be truly a church of *Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors*, we, the (name of governing body) of the (name of church) UMC, proclaim that no one will be denied the ministry or services of our church because of sexual orientation, including the use of our property for same-sex marriages.

I suggest the clergy abstain from voting. This will keep this as a lay statement and cleaner if there were to be repercussions. While clergy can be punished, what could the Annual Conference do to punish lay people? They are not about to kick any church out of the denominations that pays its apportionments, especially if there are at least 50 churches making this proclamation. There is more to the proclamation.

It is essential for the proclamation to include,

These actions are in accordance with *The United Methodist Book of Discipline* which states “We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons...

All persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured.” (Paragraph 161F)

The question confronting a church seeking to be in ministry with glbt people is not whether to break church rules, but which rules to break. The *Discipline* tells us we must reject requests for same sex-marriages but then tells us we must not reject or condemn lesbian and gay members. When we obey one of the rules, we disobey the other. We need to make it clear that in order to obey the inclusionary part of our *Discipline* we are required to ignore the exclusionary part. When a TV station reported on the statement of retired clergy willing to do same sex-marriages last week, the headline on the screen read “Clergy to Defy Methodist Church.” We are not defying the church. We are calling the church into accountability for the inclusion of gays and lesbians which it has declared to be its policy.

In addition, I think the proclamation needs to include

These actions are in accordance with our scriptures: A scripture we might use is a portion of this morning's reading: Galatians 3:24-28]

Paul lists the major divisions and alienations of his time: Jew and Greek; slave and free; male and female. In Christ the wall is broken down. The divisions are no more. Regardless of which division we were in, we are one in Christ. There are no second-class children of God in the Church of Jesus Christ.

We might also include a scripture such as: **By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.**” (John 13:35)

This paragraph not spoken: [There are hundreds of scriptures we could use affirming love and justice for all. We might want to include such a list in our proclamation. We would also want to include the option for any council making the proclamation to declare itself a reconciling congregation, thereby instantly defining their openness to all people. I look forward to a gathering of leaders from these three congregations who will take it from here.]

In our other scripture this morning Isaiah envisioned a time when God would gather the outcasts of Israel and the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord and “bring them to God's holy mountain and make them joyful in God's house of prayer. their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Isaiah 56:6-8

When Jesus threw the moneychangers out of the temple, he quoted Isaiah: “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.” And Jesus cleansed the temple.

Now it is our turn: to cleanse our church of anything that robs people of their dignity as children of God; anything that robs them of their true value and humiliates them. And while we are at it, it would serve God and us to cleanse the temple of our own souls of any vestiges of sexual prejudices and discrimination as well.

O God, cleanse us and our church from all that keeps us from being true disciples of Jesus. Amen