

Being the Church

John 13:34-35 NRS I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Being the Church

Sometimes it seems like the simplest things can be really difficult. As we've studied the Sermon on the Mount over the past several weeks that has become more and more apparent. Loving neighbors like we love ourselves is rather difficult – and then we find out that everybody is our neighbor! We're told to control our anger and our lust. Don't retaliate or worry or judge. Treat other people like you would like to be treated – and like you have been treated by your Lord. In today's text, Jesus once again tells us to love each other. He seems to recognize that this will make us oddballs, so much so that other people will notice and say, "Christians are easy to spot, because they love each other so much, and oddly enough, they love other people in the same way."

That's what Jesus tells us to do. That's the standard before us. Sometimes we've been really short of the goal. We tend to think of the New Testament church as peaceful and perfect, but unfortunately that wasn't always the case. Things were so bad in Corinth, that Paul heard about the situation clear across the Aegean Sea in Ephesus, and he wrote the letter that we know as First Corinthians to try to get them to stop squabbling. In the 1500s, the conflict between Catholics, Lutherans, Anabaptists, and the Reformed branch of the Reformation caused the death of thousands upon thousands of people as Europe was at war for thirty years.

For roughly the same length of time, we Presbyterians have been discussing, and sometimes quarreling, about the topic of homosexuality. We try to deal with issues of importance in an organized and decent manner, just as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 14:40. This past week, adhering to our orderly process, we changed the wording in the constitution of the Presbyterian Church regarding ordination. I said **we** did this. Who exactly is this "we?" This congregation elects elders who sit in session and guide this congregation. And our elders have term limits. The regional body that includes many congregations is the presbytery. Presbytery is made up of all of the ministers in the region and an equal number of elders. Every two years a national General Assembly meets and it is made up of an equal number of ministers and elders. Each presbytery elects one minister and one elder for every 8000 members in their presbytery. The General Assembly meets every two years and then goes home. In two years, another newly elected General Assembly meets. The point is this: There is no permanent ruling body. There is no council or bishops handing down rules. There is no "they" or "them." Both presbytery and the national General Assembly are comprised of people from local congregations, people like me and like you.

Changes in the rules of the constitution have to be proposed by a presbytery. When the General Assembly meets, they consider the proposals and vote to approve or reject them. If they don't approve a proposal, it dies right there. If they do approve a proposal, then it's sent to all of the presbyteries all across the country, and a majority of the presbyteries have to approve the proposal in order to change the constitution. So, I repeat, these decisions are made by us, not some distant and disconnected "them."

I heard a minister say, one time, "I completely agree with and uphold everything that Jesus said about homosexuality." And until about twenty years ago, one could say that everything Jesus said about homosexuality was in our constitution, which was nothing. Jesus never mentioned the topic and neither did our Book of Order, our constitution. But the subject of homosexuality was being discussed, starting back in 1978 – and there were strong feelings in opposite directions on the topic.

About twenty years ago, using the orderly process I outlined a minute ago, an amendment was added to our constitution that specified that those who were ordained were to live in fidelity if married and chastity if single. Please note that there is no specific mention of homosexuality in that requirement. At first glance it seems to set a high and equitable standard for those being considered for ordination. For a heterosexual candidate, the possibilities were: being a sexually faithful spouse or a celibate single. For a homosexual candidate, marriage wasn't an option, living in a committed and faithful partnership wasn't an option, and only celibate singleness would qualify. In applying the rules, heterosexual candidates were rarely if ever asked if they were faithful to their spouses or if they

were single, asked if they were virgins. Homosexual candidates who lived in loving and committed relationships were disqualified, as were many others because they were not completely celibate.

Four times over the last twenty years, the same orderly process has been used to try to change the wording. As you might imagine, a lot of discussion has taken place during that time. All too often it degenerated into quarreling, with lots of heat generated and very little light shed, which has served to polarize rather than to reconcile. Where discussion has been characterized by politeness and by listening on the part of both sides, people have generally come to a couple of realizations. First, they've found that people on both sides of this issue respect, love, and study the scriptures. Second, both sides have come to understand that those who are on the other side of the issue don't have horns, nor are they seeking to do evil. Those against the ordination of homosexuals are not hate-filled, self-righteous bigots. Those supporting gay ordination are not promiscuous libertines seeking to entice others to become the same.

Having rules about a specific area of behavior in our constitution raises some interesting questions. For instance, is celibacy or faithfulness just required from the date of ordination going forward, or must there be some track record? If so, how long a track record? And, does the inclusion of one specific part of life elevate it to greater importance than other behaviors? Should an affair twenty years ago as a single college student be considered more disqualifying than drug abuse, slugging one's wife, child abuse, or some other behavior not listed specifically?

As part of our orderly process, this past week the Twin Cities presbytery met and cast their votes on an amendment to change the wording in our constitution regarding ordination. As the 87th presbytery to vote in favor of this change, they cast the deciding vote. There was no applause, no cheering, no celebration, no victory lap or spiking the ball. On July 11th, there will no longer be any specific reference to sexual conduct with regard to ordination in our constitution, just as there were none before twenty years ago.

A lot does not change. As always, presbyteries and sessions will be responsible for examining candidates for ordination to determine their fitness for office, their gifts, their commitment, and their suitability. The Book of Order continues to require that candidates be "persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus as Savior and Lord." It also says that "Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates."

Without sensationalism or exaggeration, what will happen now? Some presbyteries may ordain gay ministers – some will not. Some sessions may ordain gay persons as elders or deacons – some will not. Some congregations may call a gay pastor – no congregation will be forced to do so. Some years ago, there was a lot of dissension and anxiety about the ordination of women to the ministry. I'd like to point out that in the hallway there is only one woman pictured among the ministers. She was an associate minister and she wasn't here very long. I don't think that's a reason for pride, but it does illustrate the point that the congregation votes to call their minister of choice.

We Presbyterians are not alone in dealing with this issue. Other denominations who accept gay clergy and church leaders are the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the United Church of Christ. The United Methodist Church has been discussing the issue for some time.

I know some of the people sitting in these pews are strongly in favor of this change. I also know that some of the people sitting in these pews are strongly against this change. The same is true all across our denomination. There are large numbers on each side of the fence.

My counsel to you is this. Expect news reports to be incomplete and sometimes sensationalized, getting some facts right and some wrong, and sometimes drawing wrong conclusions. That is why I chose to speak about this today. No matter whether you are for or against this change, I suggest that you pause. Take a deep breath, or two, or twenty. Pray fervently. React moderately. Give each other space. Work for reconciliation. Listen more than you speak – and listen carefully. If you're grieving, take time to live with this and see how it plays out. If you're rejoicing, understand and respect those who are upset by this change.

I would urge everyone to refrain from hurling bolts of scripture at each other. Scripture is to be used with respect, with wisdom, with humility, and with caution. When we aren't cautious in our use of scripture we might note that, at this very moment, more than half the people present in this sanctuary are in blatant violation of First Corinthians 11:15 which clearly requires that women have their head covered in worship. A bit of humility about our certainties will allow us all to hear each other rather than spending our time building our verbal weapons for when we next speak.

A few years ago this congregation was in some turmoil. But you decided to love and respect each other rather than fight. We would all do well to remember how much more there is that we hold in common in our faith than there is where we differ. The Statement of Faith and the hymns this morning were chosen to help us remember how very much we have in common.

Each person was given a rock when they came this morning. If you are without sin then you may throw your stone. If you are not without sin, I hope you will take your rock home and set it somewhere to remind you to be slow to fly off the handle.

Let us pray - Almighty God, we give thanks for the rich heritage of faithful witnesses to the gospel throughout the ages. We offer gratitude for not only those who have gone before us, but for General Assembly commissioners, ministers and elders across the church who have sought diligently to discern the mind of Christ for the church in every time and place, and especially in this present time.

May your Spirit of peace be present with us in difficult decisions, especially where relationships are strained and the future is unclear. Open our ears and our hearts to listen and hear those with whom we differ. Most of all, we give thanks for Jesus Christ, our risen Savior and Lord, who called the Church into being and who continues to call us to follow his example of loving our neighbor and working for the reconciliation of the world. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen

1 Cor. 1:10-11 NRS Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

1 Cor. 14:40 NRS but all things should be done decently and in order.

Eph 6:5 NRS Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ;

1Co 14:34 NRS women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. **1Cor 11:5 NRS** but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head-- it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved.

Titus 1:5-6 NRS I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you: ⁶ someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious.

John 8:4-7 NRS ⁴ they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵ Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶ They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."