

Who speaks for God?
February 1, 2009
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
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Scripture:
Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Mark 1:21-28

Last week, I started a three-part series of sermons focused on important turning points, moments when there is, at the very least, the potential of moving forward in ways that break with the past.

We considered the new day for our country signaled by the inauguration of our nation's first black president. With Barack Obama's Biblical call to put away childish things still echoing in our ears, we reflected on how our President's call on us as a nation intersects with Jesus Christ's call on us as the church.

One sign of this new day is a renewed commitment to inclusion. President Obama models it well, so far at least. He has shown that he values multiple points of view.

Witness how he included a diversity of pastors in the inauguration events, from civil rights leader Rev. Joseph Lowery, to the conservative evangelical Rev. Rick Warren to Father Gene Robinson, our nation's most visible gay religious leader.

Today, we tighten our focus to a major issue facing our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA). Now, Presbyterian polity and parliamentary procedures are often as dry as unbuttered toast. Many congregations never hear about the issues and decisions that make up the agendas of church government. And many count their blessings for it.

But, in two weeks our presbytery, which is the seven-county jurisdiction of our national church government, will vote on an issue that directly touches the identity of this congregation. And I believe, as does your session, that we should talk about the important things.

As many of you know, our denomination has been debating for 30 years whether it should permit the ordination of homosexuals to the office of elder or minister of word and sacrament. It's become an enormously complex debate that has dominated our national Presbyterian dialogue for the last decade.

There's risk in even trying to summarize its many twists and turns – a risk that I might unintentionally fail to express one side or another fully or fairly. But I will do my best. So, with that disclaimer, I'll proceed and I ask for your grace.

In short, our church constitution currently includes language that bars the ordination of gays and lesbians. That language was added to the constitution in 1997. To be very clear, it does NOT prohibit membership. Its prohibition deals with ordination, those whom our Book of Order says are 'set apart' to serve the church in particular leadership roles.

Through the years, Presbyterians have voted at least six times at the national level on this issue, each with the effect of keeping this language in place. Two years ago, the church authorized ordaining bodies to discern for themselves how to apply the "essentials" of our faith and polity and to determine when a departure from those essentials disqualifies a candidate. This provided local churches more flexibility.

Most recently, the General Assembly, which serves as our congress, voted to send out for a vote substitute language that would enable the ordination of gays who are in committed and faithful relationships. For later reference, you can find both versions of the language on the inside last page of your bulletin. It's the language marked "proposed" that our Presbytery will consider in two weeks as part of this rolling, national vote.

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Beyond all the mechanisms of polity and parliamentary procedure, there is a much larger question that concerns each of us. How do we – as individuals and as a church - go about reaching a position on major issues like these? In short, it is a matter of faith.

How should we inform our faith, you might ask? That's an even bigger question.

Historically, our denomination has used a hierarchy of resources. First, the life and witness of Jesus Christ, God's very manifestation and the head of the church, according to our constitution. Second, the account of God's relationship with humanity found in the Bible. Third, our Book of Confessions, a collection of statements on the identity and purposes of God offered by believers at key turning points in our faith over the last 2000 years. In addition, and not to be overlooked, we are instructed to use our individual conscience as shaped by all of these resources.

In the end, it boils down to one question: Who speaks for God? And that is a question that darn sure ought to make us shake in our shoes and drop to our knees in prayers for humility.

In that wonderful way that the lectionary can provide helpful scripture readings just when we need them, our two readings for today speak directly to that question. These readings don't tell us everything we need to know about who speaks for God. But they do show us how God provides direction for God's people in different ways and at different times.

In the Old Testament passage from Deuteronomy, Moses' days of leading the nation of Israel are coming to an end. We don't know if Israel measured approval ratings as we do with American presidents. As for Moses, he had led Israel out of bondage, through the wilderness and to the edge of the promised land. Sure, the people had had some complaints. But Moses probably went out with a higher approval rating than some of our recent presidents.

"So," the people of Israel wondered, "who will lead us now? Moses is all we've ever known."

But it never really was about Moses. Moses would be the first to say that. It was about God. Just as God liberated Israel, God promised Israel a new leader, a prophet authorized to speak for God as Israel embarks on the next phase of its life. In that pledge, God makes an even larger promise – that God's people will never be without a word from the Lord. All God's people have to do is to listen thoughtfully and courageously.

The New Testament passage that Gina read from the Gospel of Mark picks up the story just after Christ calls his apostles, the text we considered last week. Christ enters the synagogue on the Sabbath and begins teaching. Right away, the religious officials know something is up. "There were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority." (Mark 1:22)

This story, however, is not so much about what Christ says. It's more about what Christ does. A man with an unclean spirit appears. He reveals Christ's identity as "the Holy One of God."

At that point, Jesus might have basked in the moment. Maybe just for a *little* while. After all, it was the Sabbath and all the important people of the town were there. Jesus might

have said, “Yeah, that’s me. That’s who I am. The Holy One of God and don’t you ever forget it.”

But he didn’t. He acted. He healed the man.

There, Jesus’ ministry began, according to Mark. In fact, throughout his gospel, Mark makes a point of emphasizing Jesus’ actions over Jesus’ words. In his actions, Jesus reaches out to a variety of people others had rejected or relegated somehow to second class.

As the synagogue officials said that day. Jesus offered a “teaching ...with authority.” Jesus’ ministry was nothing if not one of inclusion, love and justice. That was Christ’s authoritative witness, the clearest witness to God’s love we have, the witness on which we are called to build the church.

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As these two readings demonstrate, God moves throughout scripture. God promises that the people will never be without a Word, a sign of God’s love. In scripture, that Word points to and finally comes into being in Jesus Christ. That is good news for all believers.

What makes the debate about ordination standards so complex is that both sides root their arguments in the authority of scripture.

Those who oppose ordination of gays and lesbians point to several passages in the Old Testament. For example, they cite the second chapter of Genesis, which says a man shall leave his parents and cleave to a woman. This is God’s intent for the order of creation, they believe. But, the other side says, scripture’s affirmation of male-female relationships doesn’t amount to a declaration that loving, committed homosexual relationships are a sin.

Opponents of changing our constitution point to the story of how God destroyed Sodom, where men wanted to have sex with other men who were visiting. Those who want to change the constitution, however, interpret that story not as a condemnation of homosexuality as we know it but as a condemnation of rape against men, women and children – acts our own modern laws punish.

Opponents of ordaining gays and lesbians also draw from the New Testament. Read Romans, they say, where the Apostle Paul says God condemns homosexual acts. Not

so fast, more progressive interpreters of scripture say. Paul is NOT talking about relationships and commitment. He's talking about acts of cult temple worship meant to honor idols not God.

I could go on. We would miss the Super Bowl. But I could go on. My point is simply to say that both sides in the debate find authority in scripture. So it is a good thing that we also have the witness of Christ, who never said a word about homosexuality, and our individual conscience.

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If you want to know more about the details of how the Presbytery vote will work, that, too, might keep us here until at least the first quarter of tonight's game. OK, I am exaggerating, a little.

But if you would like to know more about any aspects of this issue, we will hold a congregational conversation about it Thursday night beginning at 6:30 in the Fellowship Hall. I hope that it will be an opportunity for us to gather as brothers in sisters in Christ and for us to grow in our faith and our understanding of the vast kingdom of God.

As Christians and as Presbyterians, we live with tensions of several kinds. We are loyal to our church polity yet we hold room for the freedom of our individual conscience. We all read the same Bible yet we come to different conclusions about what it says. We agree we are all children of God, yet some would disqualify some of those children from leadership in the church based on how God made them.

History bears evidence that we Presbyterians have been able to extract the spirit of God's intent from its captivity in language that reflects dated understandings of humanity. The church can and does confess that it used scripture to defend slavery, to subordinate women and to condemn divorce and remarriage as well as interracial marriage. Lord, on us, have mercy.

I say that not to defend the church's failure to move more quickly to include all of God's children equally in the church. Rather to say that there is enduring truth and hope in our tradition's other confession - that we are a church that is "reformed and always being reformed."

As I have said many times before from this pulpit, we have been given a remarkable gift at Caldwell. We are a diverse church. A church not of any one homogeneous group, but a church where we all come to be with and learn from people of other walks of life.

In the spirit of that gift of grace, let us remember that being inclusive means welcoming all points of views and perspectives with respect, especially those we may not share.

I will have more to say about all of this next Sunday. In the meantime, let us join our brothers and sisters across the nation in prayer and confession as we all seek to discern God's will without doing harm to the body of Christ.

Let us open wide our minds and our hearts to our God, who never leaves us without a Word and whose Word made flesh in Jesus Christ is the head of the church for all time.

Thanks be to God. Amen.