

Making Good on the Purple Ticket
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Feb. 8, 2009
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture

First Reading 1 Corinthians 12:4-13
Second Reading 1 Corinthians 12:14-31

It was the chance of a lifetime – four tickets to attend the inauguration of a president of the United States. So Kelly and I took our daughters out of school and we hit the road to Washington.

It wasn't long before we started seeing others on the road, clearly going to the same place for the same reason, with license plates from almost every southern state. Some bore one or more "Obama for President" bumper stickers. Others were decorated with American flags and messages like "Washington or Bust" scrawled in big white letters across the back window. It had the feeling of a shared national road trip, as if everyone was headed to the same party and no one wanted to be a minute late.

Our instructions were to go to Capitol Hill to pick up our tickets. So, the day before the inauguration, Kelly and I went to the Rayburn House Office Building. The feeling that we were experiencing history grew even more palpable. As white folk, we were very much in the minority.

When we got the tickets, we found we'd been even luckier than we imagined. The viewing area in front of the Capital would be divided into different zones, each with a designated color. Our tickets were for the Purple zone, an area just behind the seated VIP section. We would be close enough to have a great view – if we got there early enough.

So on the big day, we were out of the house at 4:30 a.m. We found the one gate that would be the access point for everyone with Purple zone tickets. We took our place in line at about 5:00, a little before dawn, guaranteed, we thought, to have a good spot when they opened the gate.

There is not much to do when you have a six-hour wait ahead of you and it's 20 degrees outside. So we scrunched up close together and struck up conversations with the others in line with us.

Kelly and I thought our children would never forget it. There we were - witnesses to history at a turning point in the life of our nation.

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If you were in church last week, or if you attended our congregational conversation Thursday night, you know that our denomination is at a turning point of its own. Rather, I should say, a *potential* turning point.

Nationwide, Presbyterians are voting on whether to change our constitution to remove language that prohibits homosexuals from becoming leaders in the church, either as elders or as ministers of word and sacrament.

All 179 Presbyteries in the denomination will vote on the issue with their collective results determining the outcome at the national level. So far, 27 Presbyteries have voted in favor of keeping the existing language that bars the ordination of gays and lesbians. Fifteen Presbyteries have voted to change that language. The Presbytery of Charlotte votes on the issue next Saturday.

We've been around this track before and the differing opinions may be familiar to many of you. Those who oppose ordination of gays and lesbians cite scripture and our tradition's historical confessions of faith as evidence, they say, that homosexuality is immoral and stands against Biblical standards.

Those who want to change our constitution say gays and lesbians who are in loving, committed, faithful relationships and who pledge to lead their lives in obedience to Jesus Christ as head of the church are every bit as qualified as heterosexuals who live by the same commitments.

To help sort out matters like these, our denomination looks to a clear hierarchy of resources. First, Jesus Christ, whom our constitution calls the head of the church. Second, the account of God's creation and interaction with humanity that we have in the Bible. Third, our Confessions of Faith. But that is not all. In addition to all of these, we are to use our individual consciences as they are shaped by these sources.

As I said last week, both sides of the debate find evidence in scripture to frame their position. That's one more sign that holy scripture is alive, that God uses it to speak to many people and that we hear God speaking through scripture in different ways.

What I also said last week is that, while many church polity issues don't merit one sermon (much less, two), this one does. Especially here at Caldwell. We are a community of heterosexuals and homosexuals. Of white and black, and even a little Mexican and Korean. Of mothers and fathers of school-aged children. Of single men and women of many ages. Of senior citizens and tottering toddlers.

As so many of you have said to me, you come here not because we are a church of any one group but because we are a weave of many groups. We strive to be inclusive and diverse because we desire to live and walk together, to learn from each other about how we are touched individually by the love of God in Jesus Christ.

So when we any one of us is held back from full service in the church, it is an issue for each of us to understand and to consider prayerfully with our hearts and with our minds ... as we strive for the kind of unity amid diversity that Paul described in our scripture in Corinthians.

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Paul was writing to the newly formed church in the city of Corinth because its members were demonstrating anything but unity. Divisions roiled the congregation. Rival groups jockeyed for position, one group judging the next. The majority took advantage of the minority. Flagrant acts of immorality, including sexual acts done in the name of worship, shook the church.

So in writing to respond to complaints and appeals from the Corinthians, Paul employed a widely used metaphor in Greco-Roman society.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews and Greeks, slaves and free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:12 & 13)

Paul goes on in the verses that follow. He drives hard to make three points.

First, that all who are baptized are part of the body of Christ, the church.

Second that that body is the strongest, the church the most unified, when all of its members believe that each person is an indispensable part of the body.

Third, that the body functions only when all the parts work interdependently, one being no greater in value than the next, but all needed to work together toward the common good.

In other words, Paul says there is no spleen in the Body of Christ, no member that is present but useless or inferior or less needed, somehow lacking the potential to do great things for the body.

But, you might say, this is Paul you're talking about. Remember what he wrote in Romans, how God condemns homosexual acts? Here we must understand that Paul and other voices in scripture saw homosexuality not in the context of faithful relationships and modern science but simply as the basis of immoral or violent acts, whether in the Roman bath houses, as practiced by heterosexuals as an act of some kind of indulgence or as some form of violent oppression that today we would call rape.

Harvard theologian Peter Gomes says it this way:

“All Paul knew of homosexuality was the debauched pagan (worship) expression of it. He cannot be condemned for that ignorance, but neither should his ignorance be an excuse for our own.”¹

What Paul did know – and what he so clearly expressed in 1 Corinthians 12 – was that love is the key to the unity of the church. Love, as demonstrated and inspired by Christ himself, holds the body of Christ, the church, together, love that is rooted in the inclusive spirit of respect and understanding of all of our innate differences, the kind of love that is, finally, unconditional, as shown to us most purely on the cross.

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Perhaps you saw the results of the recent study that found that protestant Christians care less and less about denominational differences. Researchers found that Protestants would change denominations before they would change their brand of toothpaste or bathroom tissue.

I know what you’re thinking. There are plenty of times when brushing our teeth leaves a far better taste in our mouths than some denominational debates. (I considered putting that in terms of toilet paper but I stopped short so I would not be defrocked.)

But given that we have been at this debate about ordination standards for 30 years, it’s a fair question: Why stay in a denomination that appears to spend so much of its time on an issue like this when there are hungry people to be fed, poor families to be housed, children to be educated and sick to be healed.

First, I’d say, because it’s important to us at Caldwell as a church that still strives for that unity and equity that Paul had in mind in his letter to the church at Corinth. Paul wrote: “If one member (of the body) suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” (v.26)

Second, because leaving the denomination is not the right answer. If our constitution is changed, now or later, tens of thousands of Presbyterians who support the existing constitutional language have vowed to leave the Presbyterian Church (USA). Cries of schism will ring out and disputes over church property will escalate. That would be a sad day for all Presbyterians and for God.

It’s harder to stay together and commit to learning from one another, across our differences. But to do so is to be the Body of Christ as Paul described it. “To each,” Paul wrote, “is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (v.7)

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As for our own actual body parts that morning of the inauguration, we had started to lose feeling in our hands and toes after standing out in that 20-degree weather for

¹ The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart, p. 158

several hours. For a while, we warmed our spirits with the anticipation that we would have a clear and close-up line of sight to the podium as the historic event took place. That didn't last, though.

As the sun rose, we saw there were no event officials or police or security to help us keep the integrity of the line to the purple gate that had formed so nicely. People kept coming, for hours, streaming into the tight space in front of the purple gate. We never knew whether they had purple tickets or were just trying to get in some way, somehow.

The honor system broke down. Soon, it was a mob scene. Having waited too late to get the rightful ticket-holders to the gate and through the security checkpoint on the other side, whoever was in charge decided the purple gate simply would not be opened. Everyone with a purple ticket was out of luck. We would not be granted our place to be a part of history that day.

I'll be the first to admit, my reaction was less than pastoral. But Kelly and the girls took it with far more grace and perspective.

"Maybe now," Kelly said, "we have a taste of what it means to have something taken away, to do everything we were asked and still be denied. Maybe now we know a little better about what discrimination feels like. Maybe this time, it was our turn to stand on the other side of the fence."

Friends, in our baptism, through the Holy Spirit, each of us received a ticket to become a part of the body of Christ. The color of our tickets varies, just as Paul described the diversity of the church and the variety of our spiritual gifts. None of us holds a partial, second-class admission ticket. They are for full admission, even to the ordained offices of elder and pastor for those who "pledge to live lives in obedience to Christ as head of the church ... to strive to follow where he leads through the witness of the scriptures ... and to understand the scriptures through the instruction of the confessions."

In this matter of ordination, each of us must arrive at our own conclusion about what is right. As for me, to say we invite all who believe in Christ as Lord and Savior to be members ... but then to close the gate to leadership for some, just because God gave them a purple ticket, falls short of truly being the church of Christ.

In the name of the God of our many understandings, Amen.