

What Now, Part II  
May 22, 2011  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
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Ephesians 4:1-13

If you are wondering about the title of today's sermon, let me start there. You may have walked into church today, read the title of the sermon in the bulletin and wondered, "If this is part two of one of John's sermon series, when did I miss part one." Let me assure you that you haven't missed anything.

It's been an eventful month for us Presbyterians. Almost two weeks ago, as you probably know, our rolling national vote on whether to permit the ordination of qualified gays and lesbians into the office of elder, deacon or minister passed a critical tipping point ... in favor of a more inclusive church.

Now, months earlier, local church officials had set last Tuesday as the date for our vote on this issue in Charlotte. They had no way of knowing where the national vote would stand when it came time for our local vote.

Still, Charlotte's vote mattered. It mattered to Presbyterians in our region. It mattered to prospective new members of our churches. It mattered that our voice be heard, that Charlotte provide its own witness to its understanding of how we are to be the body of Christ. It mattered that we as Presbyterians express whether we would continue to treat gays and lesbians with prejudice, just as we had once treated women and racial minorities.

As you may have read in the paper, the Charlotte Presbytery voted in favor of the new ordination standards, adding our collective voice to the majority of our brothers and sisters nationwide. This time around, 68 local lay leaders signed an appeal supporting the new language, including top business, healthcare, legal, non-profit and elected leaders. That list included several prominent names from this congregation. I'm grateful for their public statement.

So, back to the title of today's sermon – "Now what?" I added the sub-title of "Part II" because I've preached a sermon with that title before. It was the Sunday after I was ordained and installed as your pastor here. That was March 2008. Many of you have joined the Caldwell family since then.

I don't mean to imply that my arrival as your pastor had anywhere near the significance of this month's major shift in our national polity. It didn't, by a long shot. Still, for these last two weeks, that has been the question on my mind: Now what? As I said back in 2008 about my own 20-year personal journey into ministry, it's a bit like the dog who always chased the cars in front of his house. One day he caught one, and he had no idea what to do with it.

Many in our denomination have been pursuing the idea of a more welcoming church since 1998. That was when the language we have just tossed out was added to our constitution. By that time, the church had already been debating the issue for twenty years.

So ... now what? Will we as Presbyterians find a way to move on? Will we peacefully adopt these new ordination standards? Or will we continue to bicker and battle?

Will we submit ourselves to each other as imperfect and broken yet humbly committed to unity and to the kingdom of God as we know it from the preponderance of scripture? Can we kindly agree to disagree on certain matters and, at the same time, embrace each other in service and submission?

Those are mighty big questions, questions that we won't answer today. In scripture, in Christ, the Word incarnate, and in the ongoing revelation of the Holy Spirit, God calls each of us to a lifetime of discernment. God's truths are so large that, with some things, it takes that long for us to see them.

Throughout scripture, we are given metaphors and analogies, poetry and prophecies, legends and parables. These are the efforts of God's ancient people to express their understanding of the scope and depth of God's truth and love. In these last two weeks, I've been wondering: What metaphors or pictures might inform us about the future of our denomination in an era when many are asking whether we need denominations at all? What images might begin at least to answer that all-important question before us, "What now?"

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In a sermon last week, I heard one image intended to describe this moment in time.

The preacher understood the poignancy of the moment. She knew that those listening to her that day would bring a range of perspectives – those who felt disappointed and

disoriented by the national vote on ordination standards as well as those who view the vote with deep joy and new hope.

The image she offered to open her sermon was one from Holy Week. She invited her listeners to dwell in what she called “Saturday time,” as in the day after Good Friday and the day before Easter Sunday. It was the moment when the disciples knew that Christ had been crucified and buried, a moment that would test their faith.

Referring to the date of national passage of the new standards, she opened with this statement:

Last Tuesday, the Presbyterian Church (USA) died.

I understand the metaphor she was using. She sought to strike a balanced tone that made room for those on all sides of the issue. She went on to make important points about how resurrection of anything – our church or our individual lives – is a matter that rests in God's hands alone.

But I have to tell you, I had a hard time getting past that first line.

What about all those for whom the Presbyterian church was, in a sense, reborn that day? What about those who had viewed the divisive and hurtful language of what have been our ordination standards as a cancer or some other life-taking condition.

What about those who had lingered at the bedside of the church trying to decide when and how to say goodbye before the end arrived or before they left because they couldn't stand it any longer ... and who, then, to their astonishment, saw the patient suddenly open her eyes?

I love and respect this colleague and appreciate the challenge of her task of preaching to a room full of church leaders. But her metaphor left me uneasy. So I continued to search for something that would paint the picture of where we stand as a people.

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Now, if anything, we Presbyterians do know how to ensure that our meetings are proper and always in order.

Some of our most committed leaders in this region had planned last week's Presbytery regional meeting with great care and attention to balance and fairness in this important debate.

When it came time to take up this issue of ordination standards, two pre-selected pastors spoke to their differing views on the issue of homosexuality. Next, the moderator allowed all who were interested to step up to one of several microphones and provide their opinion in two minutes or less.

In the blink of an eye, about 30 people lined up behind the microphones designated for those who would speak against adopting the new ordination standards. Their points were familiar to those of us who have followed this issue.

In the way they read scripture, it condemns homosexuality. For them, homosexuality is a preference or a choice and, as such, deviates from natural order. One man said homosexuality can be “cured.” Another said that he and his wife were close friends with some gay folks but he sure didn’t want them to teach his children. I wondered to myself whether he had told that to his gay friends.

The statements at the other mike – those in favor of the new ordination standards - were equally as passionate. The first speaker was a teenager. She fought back tears as she made her plea. She had seen too many high school friends suffer the persecution of those who are different and wanted the church she loves to be a place of refuge and reassurance.

Others at the same microphone reminded us the new language does not force any governing body to elect anyone, gay or straight; it only removes a prohibition. One sage reminded us that a key principle of the Reformed faith is that when people disagree about the meaning of scripture, that the final arbiter is Jesus Christ ... and, if anything, Christ was inclusive. Another speaker who had been part of several investigations into sexual misconduct in churches noted that everyone of her cases involved heterosexuals, not homosexuals. On it went. Necessary but a reminder of the many different worldviews among us.

As I tried to sort out my feelings about these two hours of debate, I searched for a frame of reference, a way to think about what we have become as a church and where we may be headed. Then an image came to mind from last Sunday’s newspaper. It was of two famous Siamese twins who had settled up in Surry County years ago in their retirement.

Chang and Eng Bunker were born 200 years ago near Bangkok, China. A man from Scotland discovered them as teenagers and brought them to America, where they became wealthy through years of being on exhibit for their rarity. Chang and Eng were

joined only by a piece of cartilage just above their waste. Today, simple surgery would separate such a set of twins, but Chang and Eng lived out their lives hip to hip.

They married two Quaker sisters and both raised families, separate families, living three days a week with one family and three days with the other. They were bright, able men who have 1,500 descendents. I worked with one of those descendents, a top executive at Bank of America. Researchers now believe they may have been the first practicing Buddhists to live in America. In the end, after long, full lives, one died in the night from pneumonia. When the other brother awoke and discovered his brother dead, he died three hours later, despite being healthy, perhaps out of pure fright.

Do you see where I am headed here? Is that a possible metaphor for our denomination? Are we who read scripture differently but worship the same God destined to live out our remaining years with two heads and two hearts and two sets of legs to do God's work as best we can? Staying attached, getting along somehow, because we must. Living awkwardly side by side but never really reconciling, never really becoming one?

As with the first metaphor of a dead denomination, this one left me equally unsettled.

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The book of Ephesians gives us yet another vision.

Ephesians was written to an early group of followers of Christ who were working through their own differences. The author holds one truth above all others, that Christ is the model for our lives. Ephesians deals with some of the same issues as the letter to the Colossians. But while Colossians dwells on fear, Ephesians promotes hope and promise.

Ephesians deals with complex social and moral codes of its day and always holds out unity in Christ as true north on the compass.

“Lead a life worthy of the life to which you have been called,” the letter states, “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Then, the author of this beautiful letter assures us seven times over that we can be one in Christ:

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Creator of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

But the image that can speak to us most powerfully is in verse 12, where Ephesians calls us to use our respective gifts “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”

We’ve all heard that phrase “equip the saints,” but its message may be even deeper than we think. The Greek word for “equip” that we find in Ephesians is not one that denotes provision. It’s more akin to the idea of reconciling and repairing, most specifically, of setting a bone that has been fractured.

That is an image we can work with, isn’t it? We all have our own individual fractures, don’t we? Certainly, we are fractured as a denomination. But it is a fracture that can be fixed, that can be realigned, set straight again to heal.

What, then, is the splint we use to set ourselves right as a people? For the author of Ephesians and for us, it is Christ. Christ is the guide and model, straightening out our fractures and places of brokenness, setting us right as a people, calling us to a new humanity that replaces the bent social order and mores of the world. And the truth of Christ is love, a sacrificial, humble, peaceful love that gathers people of all walks of life in and does not push any away. Christ calls us to speak his truth to one another, but to do so in love.

So, friends, let us all seek new ways to set the fractured bones of our lives, our church and even our society. Let us equip the saints, each in our own way. Let us reconcile with others. Let us wrap and strap our lives, our ways to the strong, unbending standard of Christ, who welcomed all.

As that sage reminded us all in last week’s meeting, when Presbyterians interpret scripture differently, we look to Christ is the final arbiter. Christ called his followers to just and right living, to be sure. But Christ never placed categorical limits or prohibitions on groups of people. He saw the potential for good in all those he called to follow our Lord. And I believe Christ cares far more about how we live than the differences in our DNA and how we express the gift of love in the context of faithful, committed relationship.

In your bulletins, you will find the new language of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), to be enacted in July. As much as some of us have dwelt on what was

wrong with the old exclusive language, we are equally called to live by the new. Whether or not we are ever called to serve the church as an officer, it describes the splint we all need to set our fractured lives right. It calls us to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in *all* aspects of life. In doing so, we can be equipped as saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

Amen.