

The Wildly, Wonderful, Extravagant, Inclusive Love of God seems to be on call waiting. By Whom this time?

by Howard Warren

This sermon, preached at the More Light Churches Network annual conference, McKinley Presbyterian Church, Campaign, IL, May 22, 1998, is dedicated to a wonderful friend and poet, Glen Fennema.

Scripture: 23rd Psalm and Revelation 7:9-17

Since I am not an E-mail user, many of you think I am technologically-challenged. The original title of this sermon was “The Wildly, Wonderful, Extravagant, Inclusive love of God is on hold”, but to show my ability to handle the new technology. I have changed “hold” to “call-waiting”. The church can be a dangerous place . Just how dangerous is indicated by this top ten list of the ways you know you have joined the wrong church sent to me by Jim Oxyner.

10. The church bus has a gun rack.
09. The church staff consists of Senior Pastor, Associate Pastor and Socio-pastor.
08. The Bible they use is the “Dr. Suess Version”.
07. There’s an ATM in the lobby.
06. The Choir wears leather robes.
05. Worship services are B.Y.O.S. - “Bring your own snake”.
04. No cover, but a two-drink communion minimum.
03. Pastor regularly attends “services” at Las Vegas and Atlantic City.
02. Ushers ask, “Smoking or Non-smoking?”
01. The Women’s Quartet are all married to the Pastor.

Now that we have had a laugh, let us consider what a wonderful, yet dangerous place the PCUSA is for us and those we love. Look around. We have come a long way since David Sindt went up and down the escalator with his sign asking, “Is there another Gay person here?” In the 20 years since the ordination freeze, we have come alive with P.L.G.C., More Light, Shower of Stoles, Parents of Gay and Lesbian Presbyterians, Open Door, That all May Freely Serve and our desire to name and include Bisexuals and Transgender individuals, The Other sheep, the dissenting churches, The Covenant Network, a 47% popular vote for us on the lost Amendment A and now, a merger of P.L.G.C./More Light which is hiring staff to help all of us to build stronger natural and grass roots relationships in our Presbyterys and Synods. We must lay aside the rotting tooth, pull it out and embrace the Open Door of the More Light Puritan Promise. As one of my mentors, Rev. Dan Smith said, “In this merger and new work with all inclusive organizations we are not simply rearranging chairs on the deck of the Titanic.” In our work of reaching out together, More Light will come.

In these 20 years of the ban on ordination, God has whispered and shouted for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgender and Inclusive Heterosexuals in spite of the growth of the relentlessly

repressive repulsive self-proclaimed religious right power in our denomination; we will stand together to proclaim that ordination is open for all who hear God's call. Is that true?

When Rev. James Robinson was thrown out of England in 1620, he said "God hath yet more light to break forth from the Word". We are the children of that proclamation. Will we unite and work and live to see it happen? Chris Glaser in The Word is Out paraphrases 1st Peter 2:10, "Once we were not a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Transgendered people, but now we enjoy God's mercy and we are."

I have been rereading some of Patricia Nell Warren's, The Beauty Queen, a story of a woman politician who hates Gays and finally discovers that her father is gay. These words are alive for us now, "The whole history of humanity boils down to 2 infidels cursing each other. Sometimes I think that what separates us from animals is not that we have souls, but that we are capable of nasty arguments about religion. Can you imagine 2 aardvarks arguing about how many angels you can fit on the head of a pin? How about 2 elephants arguing about whether Moses really wrote the first 5 books of the Bible? Are we today a pulsing nerve of the rotting tooth of American's Puritanism?" Today that rotten tooth of left-over American Puritanism is attempting to chase us out of our church home, but we will not be silenced

Let us relish, renew and grow out of our evening scripture.

When the 23rd Psalm was written, a shepherd could not enter the Temple. The shepherd was unclean because in daily life that shepherd broke two of the ten commandments: working on the Sabbath and going onto another's property to rescue a lost sheep. Both God the Creator and Jesus use the analogy of the shepherd, one who is outcast, one who is "other" to describe the intimacy of their work in us. Such depth and strength underlie the simplicity of this Psalm. Its peace is not escape, its contentment is not complacency, there is a readiness to help us to face deep darkness and imminent attack. Have you been in these situations? Have you used the God given strength inside to let God walk with you toward peace? So many Old Testament words for God are distant: King, deliverer or rock-shield, but here we hear of a shepherd, one who lives with the flock (us) and does everything to be our guide, physician, protector. My security is in God's promise to be near me always. Even now, in a church that doesn't want me and my people unless we repent. You have the same promise from God. And you. And you. God and we are bound together. In those dark early haunting nights of facing AIDS with shame and guilt, my shepherd let me know that God just doesn't "do" disease (or weather for that matter. Seems to have turned that over to El Nino). The Shepherd brings hope, release, healing and unity, exactly what is promised by More Light.

Now this marvelous passage from Revelation. Notice it is Revelation, not Revelations. The one thing that is revealed to us is the knowledge of the wildly extravagant inclusive Love of God, the creator, the Savior/Spirit who is for all of us. John, Chapter 7 proclaims that all people from every race, tribe, nation, speaking every language stand equally before God. Today let us proclaim that every gender and orientation also stand equally before God. We are all the people who came through the persecution. We all serve the Lamb who protects us all. We will not hunger or thirst, we will not burn in sun and scorching heat because the Lamb of God who is the center will be our shepherd. and will guide us to streams of cooling life-giving water and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes just as we do this for one another.

Wow? What about that? Are we using the power of the For All-God every moment of our lives? Emmanuel God is with us not only for Sunday worship, but every moment. God is with us in the

peaks and valleys of life saying, "Hey, you! You are my creation. I am with you. Use me. Give me a chance to smooth the ride now and to lift you to me forever.

I seldom quote Leviticus, but listen to Chapter 26 verse 13. I am God. I brought you out of Egypt so you would no longer be slaves. I broke the power that held you down and I let you walk with you head held high. What do you say we, as former slaves of the PCUSA, rename it the Head Held High Presbyterian Church that ordains all God calls? Our job as God's More Light people is to bring everyone alive, set them free to live and love here and now and forever - MORE LIGHT for all!

What do you say to this? Let me hear you say Alelullia. Amen.

There are 31,110 verses in the Bible. There are 5-6 used to keep us in our place, to keep us out, to keep us from ordination. The repressive, repulsive reprehensible unreligious right is so desperate to find a word from Jesus to make us 2nd class citizens that they now quote, "a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife." Get serious. This is about heterosexual marriage/divorce. The Torah/Law breaking shepherd of the Old Testament and the revelation of John continually speak of the crowd standing around the throne: from every race, tribe, nation, language. All escaped the terrible persecution. When will we? The Lamb is the shepherd who will use us to break through the church walls and provide the springs of life-giving water and we will cry no more. We are fully included in God's love. It is mean spirited, legalistic men and women who would shut us out. Use your imagination. Look at who was in that crowd: Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Jesus' family of choice, lepers, Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, Phoebe and the wonderful women from Acts, the blind, the lame, the beggars, the Samaritan woman, all the people who could not enter the Temple. These are the people of Revelation. Today we are those people who were left out until the word of God was revealed and we will no longer be left out. We will shout with the progressive Presbyterian church:

Jesus Christ is for all!
There are no left out people!

We must hold our heads high and proclaim this love of God for all. We must show that 5-6 verses cannot compare with the 23rd Psalm, the 2 Great Commandments of Jesus, John 3:16, 1st Corinthians 13. Open your Bibles. Where is that pesky asterisk that says, "For Heterosexuals only"? Folks, it is not a lion but a lamb on the throne. The lions of the church focus on the business of the church law to keep us out. The lamb calls us to focus on the business of the Spirit, Soul of the PCUSA so no one will be left out.

I often (daily?) wish I could remove that rotting tooth of Presbyterian puritanism, just give it up. In fact, I have said more than once that this is just what I intend to do. But you know, I will instead stand like you and with you, my head held high and proclaim the shepherd is on the throne for all the sheep and will, will, will wipe away our tears. Feel that! Use that! The Creator, Easter, Pentecost, these are for all of us and we must use them daily, moment by moment, day-by-day to share the For-All-God who is for all with our people, with all people who are left out.

You know, I must get 10 calls a week asking if I know what the Bible really says, or if there is a safe place to worship openly and honestly. A "safe place" to worship. What does this say about churches in this country? Not much. I don't know about you but I am sick and tired of being called "an issue". The only thing being an issue has done for me is to solidify my love for the rainbow colors. I am particularly upset with Houston Hodges, editor of Monday Morning, who supposedly is supportive of us and yet used the words, "I'm very bored with the words about homosexuality. Leave it to the Presbyterians to make sex boring". Also a former moderator, Price Gwen, whose

great theological gift to the debate repeated ad nauseum, “We must get out of the pelvic area”. Excuse me, but who put us there? Isn’t it the church that keeps the debate focused on sex? These hard-hearted men hear and see us only as sexual bunny rabbits creating an issue, but we are not an issue. We are Presbyterian People and in this decade God the shepherd/savior calls on us to concentrate on the uniqueness of our Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender soul/spirit. The Bible gives us the Heterosexual soul, feminist theology gives us the woman’s soul, we must proclaim the unique inner light the Good Shepherd, the Risen Christ has given us so that when the church gets its head and heart together and invites us back, we can give our full soul/spirit so the church will reflect all God’s Creation. We are not defined by sexual acts but by a sexual orientation, a way of looking, seeing, feeling, experiencing God’s grace-filled gift of life, and what a full picture of the For-all_god we will have when all genders, orientations, races can be together openly in the Light.

In these weeks between Easter and Pentecost, the Spirit came and she will not rest until all are freely ordained.

We are so grateful to be in the midst of the Shower of Stoles. Imagine what joy we will have when we are in the midst of a Progressive Presbyterian church, when the stoles are returned to those who were formerly put out, left out because, like the sheep which was lost, they are now back with the flock and we are a whole church. The Shepherd of the 23rd Psalm and the Lamb of Revelation is with us now to make our vision of More Light a reality.

After Easter, there was a sign reading “Christ rose from the dead so we can rise daily”, outside a church which is next to the Indianapolis nursing home that is dedicated to HIV/AIDS patients. Sounds very Christian doesn’t it? The only problem is that this is a church that doesn’t want any unrepentant AIDS people in their midst or their ministry.

Last week I saw the movie “Les Miserables”. In it, the French poor, the outcasts who were seemingly powerless as they stood up to the French army shouted, “Long live the Republic!”. They were shot down. In my heart, I was shouting, “Long live the For-all-Presbyterian church!”

So many of our people have been shot down:

Jane Spahr, Elder Virginia Davidson and the Rochester Church. They tried to shoot you down with church courts and a new interpretation of the ‘78 ban on ordination that said those of us ordained before that date could only serve in specialized ministry.

Look at the ministry of “That all May Freely Serve”. You and the elders have traveled for witness and dialogue and soon there will be four regional centers. What other downtown church has done that?

Scott Anderson. You were shot down and now you are the Executive Director of the California Council of Churches and Co-moderator of the P.L.G.C. How God has used and continues to use your gifts for the PCUSA.

So many of our Seminary students have been shot down: Will sent out 150 dossiers, worked in a book store, and now will go to grad school for a degree in Social work to proclaim the For-all-God. Katie, now in Graphic Arts school will finish her two Seminary courses in the summer. She said, “Wow, Howard, there is a lot of God talk in graphic arts.” The hundreds of teaching and

ruling elders shot down who are now in other denominations, raised by the Shepherd to continue to proclaim the Good News.

The PCUSA continues to try and shut us out with old and new regulations and rules to keep us in our place: unordainable.

The Wildly, Wonderful, Extravagant, Inclusive, God raises us up. The Very Practical Trinity: Creator, Savior, Spirit is, with our help, always creating a Presbyterian Pentecost in which the PCUSA will be brought to its knees as more and more inclusive heterosexuals get to know and see us as Presbyterian people, not “an issue”. We are marching toward the light. Do you see it? Feel it?

O God, sheep Savior, Spirit, we are ready. Bring us more light and life of the For-all-God to heal our denomination. More light! More Light! More Light!

Shalom. Alelulia. Amen.

Thanks to the author for this text in electronic format:

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