

The Way It Should Be
Open Table Service
March 26, 2017

Last Summer, many of us were glued to our television sets, watching the Summer Olympics broadcast live from Brazil. As I expect is true of most of us, I particularly enjoyed watching the events that I, on a purely amateur level, have taken part in. For me, that means swimming and cycling. And so, I watched with great enthusiasm as Simone Manuel became the first African American Woman to ever win a Gold Medal in an individual swimming event by winning the 100 meter free style. When, after the event, the interviewer asked her, “Simon, what’s going through your mind right now?” her immediate response was “Praise be to God,” and she meant it – Praise God for the blessings of strength and endurance. Praise God for making it possible for her to be there. Indeed, Simone gave witness to her Christian faith. But later, during a more in depth interview, she asked, “Why the emphasis on my being an African American swimmer? Why can’t I simply be a swimmer who happens to be African American?” And isn’t that the way it should be.

In his recent book, *Red Letter Revolution*, Shane Claiborne tells the story of working in India with Mother Theresa in her first home, The Home for the Dying. One day, as he was commuting home on the bus, one of the other volunteers from the home shared that she was a lesbian. She had been struggling with her identity, and how to live a life that honors God as a lesbian. Shane asked if she had ever thought about talking with Mother Theresa about it. She said she had been considering that, and Shane encouraged her to do so. A few days later he asked if she had talked to Mother Theresa, and she said yes. When Shane asked what she said, the young lady smiled and responded, “She really didn’t say much.” Shane pressed her, “Well what did she say?” His lesbian friend responded, “She mostly just listened, as I poured my heart out to her for several minutes. When I was finished, she asked me if I would read the Scripture at Mass tomorrow.” And isn’t that the way it should be?

It’s been a little over three years since I last preached at an Open Table Service. At that time, I used as my scripture, the story of the Samaritan woman at the well with Jesus. I love that story. I love that story because, for me, the Samaritan woman is the symbol of all the outcast, all the marginalized in our society. I find some of the same sentiment in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. I guess you could say that I love Samaritans; and I don’t think I’ve ever known one personally. But you see, when Jesus said, “You must love your neighbor,” and the young lawyer asked, “But who is my neighbor?”, Jesus said, “Those folks over there, those folks over there whom you hate, those folks who you don’t understand,

those folks that you think are somehow different from you, they're your neighbor; and you must love your neighbor?" Yes, I love the Samaritans for all they represent; and, if the Samaritan happens to be a woman in the first century Jewish patriarchal society, all the more so.

Many of us were disheartened this past month when President Donald Trump reversed an Obama policy allowing transgendered students to use the restroom of their sexual identity. Oh, I don't believe we can legislate love. But I do know that by breaking down the walls that divide us, by sharing our stories, by recognizing that we are one people in the family of God, we will come to love our Samaritans.

I will be forever grateful to a former co-worker who invited me to walk with her through several months of the transsexual process, the challenges, the struggles, the surgeries, along with the successes. She shared with me the disapproval of her church and her pastor; and she shared with me the love and understanding that others had expressed. But most of all, what I will never forget is her telling me, at the end of the process, "Mark, all my life I have felt like a woman trapped in a man's body. Now I am finally free." I can never fully understand what my friend was going through; but I'm grateful that she chose to share the experience with me; and I would never, never deny her the freedom she now feels as a woman.

I have been blessed to have had multiple experiences of gays and lesbians coming to me, telling me that they are tired of being alone, that they need to accept who they are, the person God made them to be. In every instance, I have celebrated their coming out; and I have assured them that God does not want God's people to be lonely. Sadly, the United Methodist Church would tell them that they must lead a lonely life; and we need to change that.

It was 1963 when the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. and stated: "I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Now, of course, Dr. King was specifically addressing racism; but I have that same dream; and that dream applies to all the "ism's" and phobias of our society.

Yes, I do dream of a time when all people will be judged, not by their race, or their age, or their gender, or their religion, or their nationality, or their socio-economic status, or their education, or their sexual orientation, or their gender identity, or by any of their other traits that we might use to create our twenty-first century Samaritans.

I have a dream that people will only be judged by the content of their character, by the love that is in the hearts and souls; and I say, isn't that the way it should be?

Friends, we are here today to tell the world, and more specifically to tell the United Methodist Church that it's time to judge people by the love they have in their hearts, their love of Christ and their love of neighbor. Isn't that the way it should be?

It's time to stop judging people by the God-given characteristics of race, age, gender, and sexual orientation. Isn't that the way it should be?

It's time to embrace the wonderful diversity into which God has created human beings rather than trying to force God's good creation into our human one-size-fits-all mold. Isn't that the way it should be?

Those who would stand opposed to my views quote Paul... Paul says homosexuality is a sin. I remind those people that Paul always lists homosexuality along with other sins including fornication. I remind them that sexuality in general, including homosexuality had little bounds in the Greek culture. Indeed sexual activity between a master and his student was considered part of the gymnasium education. Paul spoke against that, and that's the way it should be; but the idea that two people of the same gender could be in a long-term committed relationship with each other was the farthest thing from Paul's mind.

Our biblical literalists state, "But it doesn't say that. It simply states that homosexuality is a sin." To that I ask, "So is it okay to disagree with Paul?" Indeed there are many places in scripture where Paul disagrees, even contradicts himself. But Jesus Christ. . . Jesus Christ told us to love our neighbors, even our Samaritan neighbors. Isn't that the way it should be?

"But Leviticus," our opponents say. "Leviticus also tells us that homosexuality is an abomination." Yes and Deuteronomy tells us, when we conquer a foreign power, after allowing a month of mourning, it's okay to take their women as sex slaves.(Deut 20:14, 21:13) Is that the way it should be?

We've come a long way in the last 2500 years; and I say to people everywhere, and most importantly to the United Methodist Church that Jesus told us to love God and to love all God's people, even the Samaritans. It's time to embrace, indeed to cherish our diversity; because God made all creation, and God said it is very good, and that's the way it should be.

Let us pray. . .

Most Holy Lord,
You created each and every one of us in your image.
You looked at that creation, and you proclaimed it very good.
May we, your children proclaim your love and goodness
to all people.
May we as individuals, as a church, and as a nation

embrace and cherish our diversity
as we welcome into the full life our your church.
This we pray in your holy name.
Amen.

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