

Some Theological Thoughts On Why Stay in the PC(USA)
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I believe that the church is the provisional exhibition of the kingdom of God. That is to say, the church, with all its flaws and faults, is called to proclaim and live the kingdom of God that dawned in Jesus Christ. That should make us both bold and humble -- bold because it is **God's** kingdom into which we are called, and humble because we are such bumbling expressions of that kingdom.

In Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14) we find two losers. The one, the Pharisee, is arrogant and self-righteous. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." The other, the tax collector, is driven to his knees at the rear of the temple and cries out, "God, be merciful, a sinner!"

As members of the church of Jesus Christ, we must, like the tax collector, confess openly our need for God's mercy, not simply once a week, but every day, if not every moment of our lives. Like the Pharisee, we are not who we like to think we are. While we are and will forever be sinners, the good news of the gospel is that we are God's **forgiven** sinners and may, therefore, discover and experience the freedom that comes with knowing we are captives of that grace. Authentic humility, the kind that is unpretentious, the kind that knows all too well what we are like on the inside, the kind that understands that we do not deserve the grace and forgiveness that God offers us in Jesus Christ, is part of what it means to be part of God's kingdom.

What does life in the kingdom look like? Messy. Imperfect. Difficult. And yet, we are called to love one another, and to love one another as God in Christ has loved us (John 13:34). What does that look like? Paul provides us with a very specific picture in a letter to a church that was confused and divided: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (I Corinthians 13:4-7).

The New English Bible puts it this way: “Love is patient; love is kind and envies no one. Love is never boastful, nor conceited, nor rude; never selfish, not quick to take offence. Love keeps no score of wrongs; does not gloat over others’ sins, but delights in the truth. There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, and its endurance.”

Life in the kingdom does not mean that we all read Scripture the same way. I daresay that none of us read the same passages the same way we did 10, 20, 30 years ago. In that 13th chapter of I Corinthians Paul writes: “When I was a child, my speech, my outlook, and my thoughts were all childish. When I grew up, I had finished with childish things. Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face” (I Cor. 13:10-12a; ***The New English Bible***). As we all grow up, our perspective changes -- several times at least. We see, read, and understand things differently.

The authority of Scripture does not mean that we worship Scripture. We worship Jesus Christ as Scripture bears witness to him. He is the Word behind the words of Scripture. We do not worship the written word. We worship the Word made flesh. As

believers in the Reformed tradition, we agree with John Calvin that reading, understanding, and interpreting Scripture is hard work. His symbol of a spade dug into Scripture reminds us that some of the richest treasures in Scripture are discovered only after much thought, prayer, and struggle. Hopefully, as we grow older, we make more and more of those discoveries.

The church will never be perfect or even, for the most part, agreeable. And yet, at the same time, the church is God's representative, God's ambassador of grace in and to the world.

We are called to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. We are not called to agree on everything. The Apostles' Creed, which many congregations stand and say together week after week, was put together by a council that voted on the wording. The vote was not unanimous. And yet, somehow some act as if it were.

We are called to live with each other. Just as family members may disagree vehemently on certain matters, there is an underlying commitment to one another. They are still family. To separate oneself from that body that has nourished and nurtured us in the faith, that still confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, that binds us together as one in spite of whatever differences may arise, is to reject family.

Even over so profound a difference as the ordination of gays and lesbians, we are family. Why is that issue the breaking point? In his book ***Ethics*** Dietrich Bonhoeffer talks about the Ultimate and the Penultimate. On this issue (and perhaps others) some are acting as if theirs is the ultimate, or final, word. Bonhoeffer reminds us that ours is always and only, at best, the penultimate word. We never, ever, have the final word. That always belongs only to God.

What that means is that the decisions we must make can only be temporary, or penultimate. And that means that, both sides must confess, they might be wrong. “Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror,” So, with humility we do the best thinking we can, the best arguing we can, the best digging we can, and then we embrace one another ... because belonging to each other in Christ is more important than insisting that we are right.

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

We do not choose our family any more than we choose our neighbors. There are certain affirmations that bind us together, the chief one of which is that Jesus is Lord. May all the rest remind us that only Jesus has the final word -- on anything. May we live together with humility, with hope, with joy, with grace, and with gratitude.