

COMMITTED CONVERSATIONS: WITH GOD

1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-11

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Some preliminary comments: I want to take the next weeks to talk with you about what is, I believe, *the* defining issue for the church today – the struggle over inclusiveness. The church wrestles in every age with what we might call “boundary issues.”

Dietary laws were the dividing line for the Hebrew people from olden days. Christians have used the Lord’s Supper, the experience of the Holy Spirit, the interpretation of scripture, slavery and the role of women to determine who is in and who is out. Recently, in the church, freedom of choice and human sexuality have emerged as boundary issues.

But in addition to the issues themselves is the symbolic power we give to the issues as gate-keepers, defining what it means to belong.

Three weeks on this subject may seem like I’m pressing my luck. But we can do this! First, because this generation, you and I, are shaping the church for tomorrow. We are in a thicket in the Presbyterian Church. Not making our way along a well-worn path. We are *finding* our way and that of the next generation at the start of the new millennium.

Secondly, the larger society is wrestling with the very same issues.

The way we sort through these matters could profoundly impact the wider society.

Finally, Westminster is uniquely equipped to take a leadership role in discussing tough issues. A friend of mine in another city said simply, “there is no way my congregation could do what you are doing at Westminster.” Given our make-up and resources we have an opportunity to help the wider church, maybe even this community find its way.

Probably most of us would rather not have to deal with controversial topics. Can’t we just go about our business and let people do what they want to do quietly and discreetly?

But maybe you remember *Cider House Rules*, a story about abortion but much more than abortion. One of the best scenes in the story is when Homer is trying to sort out his vocation. He realizes an old truism “not to act is to act.” Not to act is the cowardly way out. Not to act is to let circumstances control you rather than claiming the courage of your convictions to change your circumstances.

Many say religious leadership these days is choosing not to act.

That, for example, the ambiguity of the church’s stand – especially on homosexuality – contributes to the hatred of homosexuals rampant in our society. A hatred that leads to crimes of discrimination and violence.

One more preliminary comment before we delve into the theme of our series. I sense the Holy Spirit at work among us. A deepening sense of mission and purpose with regard to matters of social justice here at Westminster.

On the one hand, we have a venerable tradition with regard to tough issues and a perennial openness in the pews and among the elders for tackling tough issues.

On the other hand, is the present leadership of the Diversity and Inclusion Committee – chairperson Sawrie Becker and co-chair Peter McNally and the entire committee. A committee that started quietly, almost reflectively two years ago, identifying its mission then burst out of the blocks this fall.

With regard to race relations and sexual orientation – two issues as relevant for Buffalo as I can imagine – the Diversity and Inclusion Committee has put together a year of events for our congregation starting with the Theatre for Change next week, our gathering for clergy and clerks of Session on the 23rd of January and other events for our region perhaps as far as Albany to Cleveland. Events designed to help us speak clearly and listen carefully to one another – the necessary prelude to any action.

What the committee so wisely realizes is this: the way we speak and listen to one another is as important, right now, as what our particular stand on a given issue might be. Things are rarely as simple as the rhetoric sometimes makes them seem.

On the present church debates, only a few people are to be found on the far left and right. Most folks are in the middle. Struggling, torn, wondering how to reconcile what often appears to be opposites. The aim of the Diversity and Inclusion Committee is to get us to reflect on some tough issues, share our reflections, then discern together what it is we need to do.

How do we get started this morning? What I want to propose is a larger framework for talking about tough matters. That framework is our covenant with God. I want to consider the nature of our covenant with God today then in the weeks ahead consider how this covenant affects our discussion of the boundary issues the church now faces.

Walter Brueggemann, pre-eminent biblical scholar of our age, professor of Old Testament at one of our fine Presbyterian theological institutions – Columbia Theological Seminary says this, he says, “I understand [the biblical notion of] covenant in our own time and place to be a radical alternative to consumer autonomy – the reigning identity of our time.”¹

Consumer autonomy could be summed up in the familiar slogans: if it feels good do it; if it doesn't hurt anyone it's OK; look out for # 1. But the identity of the faith community, rooted in covenant with our God does not permit us to be Lone Rangers. Through covenant God called Abraham and Sarah to a new land; through covenant God called Moses and the people out of slavery. Through covenant God makes clear that we are not independent, autonomous agents. We are called to new life and purpose by the One who is radically other than and different from us.

What I am saying today is that understanding who we are individually and as a family of faith is rooted in our commitment to God. Not the clock-maker God of the Deists. Not the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God of the medieval scholastics. Not the warm-fuzzy, indulgent God of the insatiable, self-satisfied consumers.

Rather this God is an endlessly demanding, giving, surprising, problematic God. The Other in Israel's life and the life of the church. Our relationship to this God is what drives and determines and shapes who we are as God's people.

What Brueggemann sees so clearly as a Bible scholar and what is central to how the biblical covenant works is the “otherness” of God. This otherness of God shapes our identity as believers and as a church. It is an otherness we experience as a mystery that disturbs us for we can neither escape, nor seduce, nor capture, nor possess the God who always stands free from us and over against us.ⁱⁱ

Perplexing, inscrutable, mysterious and yet the One who woos and pursues and courts and celebrates us. The One who breaks his own law to remain in relationship with us. The One with whom the people engage in a dialogue of praise and lament.

The Psalter, is the laboratory in which Israel works out in praise and lament its unpredictable life with this significant Other upon whom all existence depends.ⁱⁱⁱ

Praise for God, is the act of letting go, of self-abandonment. For example, St. Paul’s “rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.” Lament before God is the act of self-assertion that can only come because we have been the object of God’s love. Jesus’ words on the cross, “my God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?”

Spirituality is coming to terms with this Other, this God in a way that is neither excessively submissive nor excessively resistant. This is no small matter. For God is an endless threat to our flimsily constructed lives. To our self-fabricated safety and integrity. This God is always drawing beyond whom we have chosen to be.

The presence of God in our lives is a constant reminder that we are works in progress, unsettled, unfinished, underway not fully either whom we or God intends us to be. And so much of our life is spent fending off this God. Yet, just when all our barricades are in place and made to seem legitimate the Holy One of Israel pushes against us and our convenient arrangements cave in.

Nevertheless, this condition of fending off and letting in, of praising and lamenting is the process by which we become who God dreams for us to become. To attempt to escape this terrible inconvenience is to seek to avoid the essence of what it means to be fully human.

Several years ago a group of sociologists wrote a book called *Habits of the Heart*, in which they quote a young California nurse named Sheila. Sheila became a sort of poster child for those Americans for whom religious faith is largely an individual matter – about four out of five people in the United States – according to various studies.

Sheila said this, she said, “I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way.

It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.”^{iv}

A lot of people put down Sheila as shallow but in fact she was trying to do what she thought best.

Yet without the presence of an awesome, surprising, mysterious Other in her life Sheila is not likely to be challenged to grow. Her own little faith is not likely to leave her perplexed or disturbed. Unless she opens herself to something far bigger than herself and challenging to herself she is not likely to feel herself a work in progress.

If she remains encapsulated in her own limiting philosophy, Sheila is more likely to surround herself with people and gods who do not resist or challenge her but mirror her fears and her convenient compromises.

And so if Sheila is anti-semitic she will surround herself with anti-semites.

If she is homophobic she will surround herself with homophobes.

If she is bigoted in any way she will gravitate for the company of like-minded people.

But those who are in covenant with the Holy One of Israel don't have it so easy.

They will find themselves in a dialogue of praise and lament with the One who is intimately at one with them and yet never one and the same as them.

They will find themselves moving from consternation to transformation.

As the One who is so utterly other and different from them and yet so completely devoted to them upends their attempts to protect themselves from God's destiny for them.

We started talking today about boundary issues. A boundary issue is like a fence – we stand on one side or the other.

And we have to decide whether we will speak only to people on our side of the fence – which means that we are really only speaking to ourselves, repeating what we have decided – in order to preserve what we have determined is the truth.

Or we must decide whether we will also speak to the people on the other side of the fence in order to let God instruct all of us about what God has determined is truth.

This process is a process through which those in covenant with God discover themselves changing – giving up even cherished assumptions and convenient attitudes for enlarged understanding and newly vibrant faith.

Each one of us is tempted to withdraw into a Sheila-like shell. Our Scripture lesson today talks about the spiritual gifts needed for the people of God.

In closing, let me draw your attention to two interesting parallel Old Testament texts that highlight the spiritual gifts we need today.

Deuteronomy 23 is the Mosaic teaching that lists the people who were excluded from the covenant community, “no eunuch shall become a member of the assembly of the Lord; no descendant of an irregular union shall become a member of the assembly of the Lord; no Ammonite or Moabite shall become a member of the assembly of the Lord....you shall seek neither their welfare nor their good all your life long.”

Then, remarkably, in Isaiah 56 Moses' teaching is overturned. Isaiah lists those included in the covenant community: “eunuchs who keep my Sabbath, who choose to do my will and hold fast to my covenant, they shall receive a name in my own house – better than my sons and daughters – an everlasting name, a name imperishable for all time. So too with foreigners – Ammonites and Moabites – who give their allegiance to me, the Lord, to minister to me and love my name and become my servants...them I will bring to my holy hill and give them joy in my house. This is the word of the Lord who brings home the outcasts of Israel.”

Somehow, you see Isaiah's community was able, by the grace of God, to look across the fences that divided them. And in doing so, they became transformed.

The spiritual gift we need for our time is to be able to look across the liberal and conservative and other fences that divide us.

Fences no less intimidating that those Isaiah had to peer over.

I invite us this Martin Luther King holiday to become that kind of people.
Amen.

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ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, The Covenanted Self (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999) 1.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., 6.

^{iv} Barbara Wheeler, "Who Needs Organized Religion?" – an address delivered in Columbus, Ohio September 29, 2000. 6.