

“Making the Leap”: My Personal Journey Regarding Same Sex Relationships

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Text: Acts 15:1-21

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In 1994, after a period of reflection, the General Assembly of The PCC re-affirmed its conservative stance on the matter of same sex relationships. While acknowledging that a variety of sexual orientations may be real we took the position that *“homosexual practice was a sin.”* I was content with that decision because I agreed with that position. But my perspective began to change a year later. In 1995 I joined 7 classmates in a 5 year long doctoral program. One of those classmates was Ann: a minister of a different denomination. We quickly became good friends. One day, eight months into the program, Ann was driving me through choked traffic in suburban Washington DC when she let the news drop that she was a Lesbian, and then she got visibly tense and anxious as she awaited my reaction. After a few beats I said, “Oh. Have you been out for a while?” It turned out I was the fourth person she told, after her parents and her boss. She wanted to tell our whole class, and she was testing the waters by telling me first. We spent the next couple of hours talking about her experience: her personal struggle coming to grips with her orientation, the fact that she was an ordained minister in a denomination that (at the time) would not countenance her ever having a same sex relationship. She wondered out loud about how public she should be. A few days later she came out to our whole class and I sat beside her in support. But I was greatly conflicted. On the one hand, I had a Biblically-based, well-reasoned belief that was in accord with the position of my denomination. On the other, a colleague and good friend—someone I truly cared for—was now exploring a way of life I believed was wrong. But our friendship was substantial enough that I could talk to her honestly about the struggle I had. What I believed in my head was struggling with what I felt in my heart. Over the next few years we shared two parallel but different journeys. Ann shared of her experiences: some were hurtful and demoralizing while others were victories. She became more confident and happy in who she was becoming. I remember her excitement when she told me she had her first girlfriend, and I found myself genuinely happy for her.

In my struggles my reflections focused on two questions. First, “Is there an authentic, faithful different way to read scripture that would be supportive of same-sex relationships?” Second, “Could that perspective supersede the viewpoint I had at the time?” I found my answers in the Book of Acts and the story of the church welcoming Gentile Christians into their midst. First, some background. The first Christians were Jews, and as Jews they had been awaiting the coming of God’s Messiah. The first Christians saw Jesus as that Messiah and they believed that Jesus had come to renew the Jewish people (God’s chosen people) in their mandate to be a blessing to the world. For them, it was still all about Judaism. That meant their view about Gentiles hadn’t changed. Gentiles were not the chosen people. The vast majority of Gentiles did not adhere to the Jewish faith nor follow its laws. In fact, in Jesus’ day, it was generally believed that a Gentile was sinful by nature, period. Consequently a Jew could have nothing to do with a Gentile. This was also the view of those first Jewish followers of Jesus.

But one day the apostle Peter’s beliefs about these things were rattled dramatically by an experience. It began with receiving a vision from God that told Peter he was permitted by God to eat foods the Jewish law declared unclean. Peter was astonished because as a faithful Jew he had never, ever broken those rules. Then, the same day, a group of emissaries invited Peter to visit a man called Cornelius. Cornelius was a Gentile. He had a good reputation among Jews as one who worshipped and honoured God but the story makes it clear that he was not a convert to Judaism. He lived as a Gentile. Now, if that wasn’t awkward enough, Cornelius was also an army officer that served the Roman Empire and enforced Rome’s oppressive rule over the Jews. Two very excellent reasons to reject the invitation to visit Cornelius. But Peter agreed and went. When he entered the house of Cornelius Peter first acknowledged that it was forbidden for him as a Jew to do so, “but” he said,

“God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (10:28). Peter was invited to share the gospel. While he was preaching the Holy Spirit visibly came upon the people of Cornelius’ household and they converted. The text pointedly says “the circumcised believers (that is, those Jewish Christians) were astounded by what had happen.” And given what they had seen, Peter and his comrades baptized these Gentiles and stayed with them a few days. Peter had an experience that changed his heart that in turn helped to change his belief. It is hard to overstate the shocking drama of that historic moment because *Peter (who was a Christian and Jew) made a leap in belief to move beyond what their scriptures (the Old Testament) clearly said to have a new belief*, rooted in what he believed was God’s leading and rooted in Jesus’ teaching about love. And I started to wrestle with the question, “are we being called to make a similar kind of leap now?”

This story helped me appreciate Ann from a different point-of-view. She was quite clearly a deeply devoted Christian. She was quite clearly a gifted minister. And over the past 20 years she has had a significant and respected ministry in her denomination, where now she holds a very high executive position in the national organization. As I look at her I must confess that I believe she is blessed by the Holy Spirit, as was Cornelius’ family. This story of Peter and Cornelius was helpful to me, because of my parallel experience. Ann was the first gay person I was close to. My friend helped me understand the realities of sexual orientation and same sex relationships. But it was still not enough for me, because the simplest and most straightforward reading of the Bible seems to say that homosexual practice is a sin. For me, to accept same sex relationships I would have to make a leap like Peter did. If I was to make that leap I needed to have a clear and compelling Biblical point-of-view to leap off from, and I found that in the on-going story of Acts.

Acts 11 through 14 recounts the first conversions of Gentiles in Antioch and then tells stories of Paul’s first missionary journey. When he returned to Antioch Paul spoke positively of the many, many Gentiles that were becoming Christian....Christians who were not following Jewish ways. This brought a response from some Christian leaders in Jerusalem: that what was happening was contrary to scripture. Conflict ensued, between those who believed Christians had to follow the laws found in the Hebrew scriptures and those Christians who thought otherwise. Sounds a bit like our General Assembly meeting of 10 days ago. In both situations faithful Christians were / are trying to do the most faithful thing in their eyes. I think we have to respect that. The early church conflict led to the Jerusalem Council meeting, found in Acts 15. We read, “there was no small dissension and debate”. But at the end of that meeting those early church leaders made a leap in their thinking. They made a leap beyond the simple, most straightforward reading of their scriptures. Gentiles would not be required to follow Jewish religious laws. It was an extraordinary moment, because up until then it was just assumed that being Christian would require Gentiles to follow the plain reading of their scriptures: you must adhere to the Jewish Law. But in that meeting they looked at the growing experience of the church. They examined their scripture, gaining new insights. They spent time reasoning through the issue. All things we are doing about same sex issues today. And they made a leap in belief, based on something more fundamental in their Christian belief.

Now, the Acts 15 account of the Council meeting actually does not tell us what that fundamental principle was that allowed the church to make that leap. But I think we find it remembered and affirmed in Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia....and this is what ultimately made all the difference for me. In this letter (written after the Council meeting) Paul reminded his readers that he himself had been a pharisee: a teacher and promoter of the Jewish law. He wrote, compared to others “I had far more allegiance to the Jewish law” (1:14). But despite this background he did not believe it necessary to impose the Jewish law on Gentile Christians. Then in the middle of this letter dominated by the Gentile / Jewish question, the letter we find a basic principle: “For there is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). One’s ethnic and religious heritage did not matter. Allegiance to Jesus now mattered. That leap they made was truly astonishing.

But the early church did not make similar leaps regarding gender and slavery. Even though Paul could write here, “there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, for all are one in Jesus Christ” the reality is that Paul himself even perpetuated these inequalities. I think, underlying these inequalities were some historic basic presumptions, long held, that Jews were better than Gentiles...Men had more power in society than women...that in a classist society some people could be considered possessions. At its root, prejudices prevailed. Paul wrote, women were to be subservient to men. Women couldn’t be teachers of the Christian faith. That falls short of “there is neither male nor female, but all are one in Christ.” As for slavery, what Paul wrote to his apprentice Timothy is a little eye-popping today. If you are a slave and a Christian, Paul wrote, show your master all respect so others will not speak evil of God. And if your master is also a Christian, then you should work even harder for him because it is a Christian that is benefitting from your slave labour. Wow! Falls short of “there is neither slave nor free, but all are one in Christ.” For centuries after Christians perpetuated these inequalities based on a plain reading of scripture. But in the 19th century Christians made the leap, saying “slavery is fundamentally wrong”. The 20th century has seen Christians make the leap regarding gender equality. In both those situations, the church moved beyond a straightforward reading of scripture to embrace a fundamental principle: if we are one in Christ as Paul says, then that should be demonstrated by equality and mutual acceptance.

Looking at scripture and the history of the church this way ultimately made the difference for me regarding my beliefs around same sex relationships. There have been times—momentous times—when the church made the leap away from a plain reading of scripture to take new directions in faith...new directions that people counted as faithful and necessary. New directions rooted in core, fundamental ideas of our faith that were seen as bigger and more crucial than the plain reading of scripture that perpetuated inequalities. In Biblical times there were social needs that promoted heterosexual marriage exclusively and traditional prejudices against homosexuality. But those social needs are gone. We now have a very different understanding of the biology of reproduction.

“For there is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Christ has made oneness possible. We are called to have oneness in Christ. Rooted in this idea the church has been able to leap from a straightforward reading of scripture and set aside the prejudices against Gentiles, against women, against slaves.

So for me, now, I believe The Presbyterian Church should take another necessary leap, as we’ve left before. Love calls us to. Equality calls us to. And I believe “All are one in Christ” calls us to. So I am grateful for my friend Ann and the testimony and history of the church. They have helped me make the leap to affirm same sex marriage and sexual diversity.

I know some of our congregation are very disappointed that the General Assembly 10 days ago did not agree to change. But there was an over-riding concern this year that is an extension of this verse from Galatians as well: “you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The church is deeply divided on this issue, but at Assembly there was a strong desire to express oneness, maintain oneness, and perhaps have a proposal for next year’s assembly that will allow us to move into the future in oneness. That was the hope and prayer.

So until then the conversation continues. May we find inspiration by the Holy Spirit.