

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
September 16, 2007

*Closing the Gap*  
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The series: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary says this about Jeremiah's reading this morning;

...the life of faith is inextricably linked to the larger order of creation. In Jeremiah 4 the relationship between God and the people of God has a direct bearing on the well-being of the entire creation. The text explores the cosmological implications of human sin."

Sin. Seems to be on the minds of many, lately.

Over the last two weeks, the low steady beat of "homosexual sin" has crossed tempos with our more typical progressive beat.

Two years ago this past week, 88 of the 98 votes cast at my ordination were favor of ordaining a candidate who was (and still is) gay, there were nine who said "no" and one who abstained. It is easy to feel good about 90% of the presbytery clearing the way for Palisades Presbyterian Church to call a the candidate of their choice; still, the outcome meant that in our presbytery and across our church – there are those for whom this continues to be a painful choice, full of ominous forebodings of the ultimate end of the church, as it has been known. For some, including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender persons in the full work and worship of the church – is a cause of and invitation to – future destruction.

This morning's reading of Jeremiah is like so many others in the Old Testament that are used to herald the end, unless we change our ways.

In the next few days, we will see whether the Presbytery of Hudson River chooses to remain the prophetic voice for a welcoming, inclusive church.

In response to the overture sent to presbytery by this church, the presbytery will the Palisades Presbyterian Church Overture of Palisades, NY – which calls for the presbytery to send to General Assembly a call for the deletion of G-6.0106b, the amendment that is used to exclude Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender persons from serving in our church.

This amendment, voted into the Book of Order following attempts of Bill Silver, an openly gay candidate from the Presbytery of New York to be ordained – states, in

part, that in order to be ordained, an individual must be living in a state of fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness.

This is the amendment:

G-6.0106b: Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

While many groups can fall into the description here, the unavailability of marriage to same-sex couples and the specific language identifying marriage as being between a man and a woman – excludes people who are gay or lesbian. It is for this reason that I refused to abide by G-6.0106b, stated so clearly and many times, and was still cleared for a call. In effect, the presbytery took the position that agreed with this amendment – or lack of obedience to it – as unnecessary.

Still, not all agree.

The Rev. Dr. Allen Kemp of Suffern recently re-posted a statement that followed my ordination in November of 2005, as a response for the overture that will be considered on Tuesday. It can be found online at <http://www.suffernpreschurch.org/id85.html> . In part, it says the following:

For 3500 years, since Moses gave God's Law to the world, homosexual practice has been deemed sin. But in the last 25 years some "progressive" theologians have stated that modern homosexuality was unknown to the ancient world and that the Bible really does not speak to the idea of today's "committed" homosexual relationships. This is not true. Both traditional and "progressive" pastors (and rabbis) today love to reference the Mosaic Law in Leviticus 19:18 "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But is it not uncanny that the contextual injunctions in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are ignored: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination, " and "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination..." These passages are quite clear about the "practice" of homosexual sex- it is prohibited.

While Leviticus does not address the origins of the homosexual orientation nor the elements of a "committed" relationship, the prohibition stands for the practice of homosexual sexual relations, just as it does for incest

(18:9), pedophilia (18:10), bestiality (18:23), adultery (20:10), theft (19:11), hatred (19:17), and mistreatment of the poor (19:13).

Dr. Kemp and I have actually sat on a panel in one of The Rev. Susan DeGeorge's graduate classes at Mercy and addressed her class on this and other related questions. His letter and presentation are much the same as he presented that day.

Would it surprise you to say that I like Allen and respect his opinion and beliefs, as wrong as I believe them to be? Even though for him and others, people who are LGBT/Q are the enemy from the North in Jeremiah's scathing warnings to the Israelites today, they are as steadfast in their place of exclusion as we are in our place of welcoming.

The gap is wide.

I sent a response to Allen early this weekend. All of this is or could be public, so there are no confidences here, but part of it read:

Thanks for your response. I hadn't read this for a while; it took me back a couple of years. Seems so long ago, having served this parish in Palisades for two years: worship, sermons, 14 memorial services, weddings, baptisms, hospital visits, and all that you know so well.

When I am bit worn out from teaching school full-time and the demands of a parish as part-time (read full-time) minister - I get strength from reminding myself that a while back I offered myself to God to do with me as God would. Being easy was never part of the deal.

And so I follow God's call, which has led me here. I'd like to believe that in some ways our church has been helped a bit by that, but I know others would disagree. Not much I can do about that except be who I am and pray for all of us.

It is easy, actually for me to agree that "sin" – as I often like to say, "distance from God," is at the root of the cosmological dimension of the world's troubles. Jeremiah's descriptive language about the heaving-up of nature itself at the sinfulness of the times, clearly connects his understanding of God's anger as primordial in all of creation, so that when God is angry – the heavens shake; when God laughs – they shake as well: one in terror and one in joy.

The prophet interprets the events for God; and this morning, what quivers is anger - there is no mistaking Jeremiah's words. And, there is no mistaking the hurt and disillusion many feel when individual churches, local presbyteries, synods, and the national church attempt to change written law – or dissents from said law.

When that happens, many are filled with joy that what is seen as a “wrong” is in the process of being righted: an attempt to bring hope and welcoming to millions who are marginalized; others see it as the reason for the decline of the church and our slipping from Scripture and the Holy Codes...and reason to leave and believe the end is near.

Are the hills alive with joy or trembling in sadness and fear.

It's a gap no matter which way we look at it. So what do we do to close it? **Do** we attempt to close it – or will it always just be; as when Jesus said “The poor will always be with you,” will “...the gap always be with us,” as well?

I don't know. When I came here two years ago there was an inherent closeness in the congregation that had been tested by events that preceded my arrival. Every church goes such things when a minister leaves; some congregants will wish the minister had stayed; some would be pleased they were gone, and a few would never notice one way of the other! Lol

At such times, some make the decision to stay and some to go; and in my first several months here, it was made clear to me by the leadership and others in this church that we needed to reach out to those who had left; at least to let them know they were missed and would be welcomed back. And, if they stayed away – we wished them well, and if they ever wanted to return – they would be welcomed, unconditionally – even though that might not be so easy to do. We were and remain willing to bridge our own gaps, to extend out hearts and hands across the divide and work it out. Why? Because it is what Jesus (and many other faith traditions) teach the “trying to be faithful” to do.

The difference though, if there were “sides” to the gap is that we did not tell anyone they had to leave; in fact, it was the opposite. If we erred, it would be on the side of welcoming. And here we are –together as best we can be, doors as wide open as we can fling them.

“Come in. We'll go from there together...”

And that is what I think Luke is telling us in this morning's gospel.

In the case of the lost sheep this morning, there is one sheep in a hundred that is lost. In the case of the silver coins, there is one of the ten that has gone missing.

Whether many or few, Jesus challenges us to be whole and together. There was no difference made between the shiny or dull coins or the sheep themselves that might have separated or grouped them. Simple, if one is lost – find them, bring them in, welcome them. Do not divide what God has created.

I think that is the difference. The Scriptural arguments, as we have studied together over the last many months – can be looked at in many ways; have been changed in many ways; call us in many ways. There is no certain solution except entering into our faith together, undivided, staying together whenever we can, and never discarding or marginalizing another – no matter what our differences may be. We do it here and it happens in other places – and it works. The church does not fall apart. I have always said that I believe that God is so vast and unknown that in God is room for what we might see as mutually exclusive. In other words there is no such thing as marginalization in God's love; just we who sometimes perceive it that way to allay our own fears of salvation and the avoidance of punishment.

Really, for many, that's what it is about. A stairway to heaven.

The gap is really a gap based on the practice of Christian love. It always comes down to love – known in ways Christian, as well as many other traditions. And it is a love that errs on the side of love.

You may remember that even Jeremiah felt compassion and loved the Israelites so much that he admits to disobeying God and praying for them when once he was told not to.

Err on the side of love: such is strong enough to bridge any gap; even if we never cross over to the other side.

Speaking of “other side,” in The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton, he talks about his visit with Chogyal Thichchen Rinpoche, a lama, mystic, and poet of the Sakyapa school. He says the following:

“We talked first about *Samadhi* [a state of intense meditation believed to lead to spiritual enlightenment], beginning with concentration on an object, then going beyond that to meditation without object and without concept. I asked a lot of questions about *bodhicitta*, [the intense ontological aspiration to save all beings by following the path to enlightenment.]

Bodhicitta, Thichen said, is the most fundamental of ... concepts, which [centers] on love and compassion. He spoke of three kinds [of bodhicitta]:

1. “kingly” – in which one seeks spiritual power to save oneself and then save others;
2. “that of boatman” – in which one ferries oneself together with others to salvation;
3. “that of shepherd” – in which one goes behind all others and enters salvation last – and this is the most perfect.”

It is this last of the bodhicitta that I think will finally close the gap. When our work has been done, we will be the last to leave, happily following, our love, faithfulness, and leadership having opened the way for others, who now lead us.

It's a marvelous image. Can you see it?

It make one think that the only way to ever really close a gap – is to just leave it behind and seek God together, differences and all.