

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP; JOHN 3:1-17; JUNE 7, 2009—MORE LIGHT SUNDAY; THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBY CHURCH

Last year when we celebrated twenty five years as a More Light congregation we decided to use this day – the day of the Gay Pride Parade in Buffalo – to reaffirm our commitment to a more inclusive Presbyterian church.

The struggle for inclusivity has not been and never will be easy. The testimony of any racial/ethnic group in this nation, the testimony of women includes stories of overcoming steep social, political, economic and theological barriers to equality.

Just as the struggle for the inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people to join the mainstream of American life includes stories of bias and bigotry.

The good news in the midst of the bad news is that the day of full inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life of the church, in military life, in marriage and family life while it is not here, is drawing closer.

It is striking to consider, even though gay and lesbian persons are still barred from ordination as elder, deacon or minister in the Presbyterian Church and most Christian churches; and even though the military observes a policy of don't ask, don't tell; and even though marriage equality – and its literally thousands of legal rights – is withheld from gay and lesbian couples in forty six states; it is striking to consider that the resistance to full inclusion in these areas of day to day living is somewhere between a faint-hearted whisper and a last gasp.

It is also interesting that the most recent states to adopt marriage equality – Iowa and Vermont – explode the myths that this is a cause that is popular only on the liberal east and west coasts of the nation; note Iowa is just about dead center on the map. And that this change came in Vermont not from the courts but from the grassroots. When the governor vetoed gay marriage, the assembly voted again by a wide margin to overturn the veto.

News of these changes in Iowa and Vermont barely captured the headlines and nightly news. Some pundits say that many Americans are more worried about their mortgages than their neighbors' private lives.

Polls suggest that the majority that support civil unions is steadily growing and that younger voters are fine with gay marriage.

Many see same-sex marriage achieving majority support at some point in the 2010s.ⁱ

As far as the PCUSA is concerned our recent national vote failed to win a simple majority to ratify the constitutional amendment to allow ordination of gay and lesbian persons approved by the last General Assembly.

With forty seven percent of the vote the shift to an inclusive church was teetering on an historic moment but will have to wait at least two more years.

So while our church and nation continue to struggle with these issues and full inclusion in the mainstream of American life is delayed we continue to reaffirm our vision for a church and society that welcomes all people.

Shift with me to the Gospel. This is the familiar story of Nicodemus visiting Jesus in the dark of night so not to be detected. Because he was a well known teacher of the law being seen with the country preacher would have raised suspicions.

The conversation between the two is like ships passing in the night. What Nicodemus sees does not square with what he knows. He sees a popular rabbi performing miracles. He is convinced Jesus' power is from God but he is at a loss when it comes to knowing how to access that life-transforming power.

What can Jesus say? He is surprised that Nicodemus, who has his Ph.D. in Torah studies, is mystified about calling on the power of the Creator in daily living. So he offers a kind of Zen koan 'you have to be born again, anew, from above' that stumps Nicodemus' formidable learning.

Which is precisely what Jesus wanted to do. Jesus wants Nicodemus to get out of his head; he wants him to surrender his ecclesiastical authority to the authority of the Holy One of Israel and allow his life to be reshaped and reformed.

The problem for Nicodemus is that his faith had become more liturgical practice than divine presence; more interpretation of law than openness to the pulsing of God's Spirit through his heart and soul.

And this is the perennial problem for anyone two weeks beyond conversion: we do need theological formulas and rituals on the one hand but we also need to cultivate openness to God's presence in each moment.

That's where we are now as a church and society with regard to the issue of including our brothers and sisters, parents and children, aunts and uncles and friends who are gay.

We've been laboring so long with same-sex life styles sequestered in the dark as biblically forbidden, socially taboo and constitutionally wrong that we find it as difficult to embrace this change as a church and nation as Nicodemus found it difficult to embrace the transformation and rebirth Jesus offered him.

But something happens to Nicodemus in his encounter with Jesus. He actually meets the man he both admires but has apprehension for. Before the conversation there is no relationship, after the conversation there is a relationship. Nicodemus is too frightened to let go and let God in his nocturnal interview with Jesus but he decides later, recklessly to pay his last respects at the tomb in broad daylight with Joseph of Aramathea while a witch hunt for Jesus' followers was underway.ⁱⁱ

There are some who cannot contemplate what legally approved ordination would mean for the church or gay marriages for our society; others want those changes to occur now.

But many are like Nicodemus somewhere between the first meeting with Jesus and the second meeting showing up at the tomb.

More people know and have relationships with openly gay persons. As common place as that seems in this congregation, there are still places in our church and nation where fear reigns because no honest relationships exist. Events like More Light Sunday and the Gay Pride Parade help to bring this issue out of the social and theological darkness it has been relegated to into the light of day and defuse the fear of the unknown.

Earlier in the month I had the privilege of hearing Mayor Cory Booker of Newark, NJ speak to a small group of people in New York City.

Booker, an African-American is ten years younger than President Obama and much like the President a powerful voice for change and mediation of differences. Booker is a graduate of Stanford and Yale Law School, a Rhodes Scholar and trained as a community activist.

He tells about being elected as a councilman in Newark and being singled out by the then corrupt mayor. Everywhere he went his car was ticketed; the mayor tried to discourage his efforts to change the status quo.

But then a mother from the projects called him for more police protection for the neighborhood where gangs were openly gunning for each other and killed an innocent child.

Booker said he had no idea what to do. I can't even get the police to stop ticketing my car he said let alone battle the gangs.

Not unlike the well educated Nicodemus whose learning did not offer a path through the darkness, Booker, a deeply committed Christian, opened his bible to Moses encountering God in the tent of meeting after some uprising of God's people. That's when God's Spirit breathed on him he said. He would go to Dick's Sporting Goods, buy a tent and set up his tent right on the spot where that child was killed and he would fast until God's Spirit made something happened. That was his plan.

You see all of that high-powered education didn't provide a path to change but his surrendering to God, humbling himself and entering into a relationship did.

Within days people started showing up; first a delegation of clergy; then a team of college students from NYU and Columbia to run summer day camps – right there where Councilman Booker was fasting in his tent. Then the local hospital set up mobile screening and health clinics; restaurants in the area took turns providing food to the dozens and hundreds of people who came each day to support the councilman's call for safety in the projects.

Finally the corrupt mayor himself arrived and pledged not only to increase safety patrols but to build a park where the shooting had taken place.

Change happens when we humble, surrender and open ourselves to God's transforming power; change happens when people meet people and the darkness of stereotypes and labels recedes as the light of human beings discovering their commonality shines forth.

Even after ordination is approved throughout the church and marriage equality is a reality in all fifty states, which will happen, I believe in a cascade of legislation across the nation; the fear that lurks in darkness where stereotypes allow theological distortion and political injustice to exist will still be with us.

So we continue our witness today as a More Light congregation to be welcoming of all in a world that cries out for the new life Jesus offers but is perplexed about how to embrace. The need for this witness as we see in the fractured Middle East, in the workplace for women, in the path to opportunity for racial and ethnic minorities and in the ongoing bias against same-sex orientation is still vitally important. Amen.

ⁱ The above analysis was taken from an op-ed article by Frank Rich entitled, “The Bigots’ Last Hurrah”, *The New York Times*, Sunday, April 19, 2009

ⁱⁱ Nicodemus reappears in John 19:39 to join Joseph and take Jesus’ body to the tomb. The other Gospels make no mention of Nicodemus’ visit to Jesus in the night or at the burial though they do mention Joseph.