

What Should We Do In The Valley?
Luke 9:28-43a

For many months now we have kept you apprised of developments leading up to our denominational General Conference on human sexuality. For the past few weeks, I have asked you to pray for that Conference and our Conference delegates. Well that Conference met last week and I want to bring you a report on its findings. So may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts, together, be acceptable to God who is our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today's gospel lesson begins on the Mount of Transfiguration. According to our text, roughly eight days – remember that number – roughly eight days after Peter confessed Jesus as Messiah, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain to pray. And as they prayed, Jesus was transformed. The appearance of his face changed and his clothes became a dazzling white as the light of his divine nature began to shine though the veil of his mortal flesh.

Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep as all of this began to take place; but arising from their slumber, they suddenly beheld Jesus in his transfigured glory, and they also observed two other men – Moses and Elijah – speaking with Jesus about Jesus' impending death. Perhaps still suffering from drowsiness, Peter blurted out, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah' – (he said this) not knowing what he said." (Lk. 9:33) That's when a cloud overshadowed them all, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" (Lk. 9:35) It must have been quite the moment!

Well about eight days ago – there's that number again – about eight days ago, delegates to our denominational General Conference went up to Saint Louis to discuss our denomination's position on homosexuality. Like Jesus and the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, they spent their first evening together in prayer. And then on Sunday morning of last week, they began their legislative work. Late on Tuesday evening, they announced their final decision.

By a very narrow margin of about 6%, our General Conference delegates maintained our denomination's prohibition against all homosexual conduct, regardless of context – even when practiced within a lifelong covenanted relationship of marriage. While affirming that all persons are of sacred worth, they supported the denomination's previous statement that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching" and preserved the prohibitions against ordaining self-avowed practicing homosexuals or allowing our clergy or churches to celebrate same sex unions. In addition to this, they strengthened measures to hold clergy accountable to these rules and to penalize those clergy who actively dissent.

Now it's important to note two things about this outcome. First, a majority of American delegates voted against this plan – 2/3rds by the report of the delegates from our Conference who were there and voting. It seems to have passed with about 1/3rd of the American vote supported by most of the delegates from Africa, Eastern Europe, and the

Philippines. Second, as I understand it, much of the initial legislative language was ruled to be unconstitutional on two separate occasions by our denominational judicial council, and the final language, as amended and adopted, will have to undergo another judicial review in April to determine its constitutionality. As one delegate said, some or all of it may very well be thrown out. So, stand by – there's more to come on this matter.

So, the question arises, "Did they get it right?" Well Jesus was present in Saint Louis just as he was on the Mount of Transfiguration – of that I am quite certain. After all, Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them...I will never leave you nor forsake you...(and) I will be with you always." (Mt. 18:0, Heb. 13:5, Mt. 28:20) But did our delegates get a clear vision of him and hear a clear word from him after all their varied prayers, that's the real question. And I suppose it all depends on where you stand on the issue at hand.

Traditionalists will doubtless conclude that God heard their prayers and saved our Church from a grave and serious error. Progressives are more likely to conclude that our delegates were half-asleep, as Simon Peter was, and that they uttered something foolish in all of their legislative language, just as Peter did when he called for the construction of three tabernacles on the Mount of Transfiguration! Given the very narrow margin on the vote and the probable constitutional problems with the outcome, it doesn't seem like a clear word was heard or a clear vision was had in Saint Louis.

I must admit, I preferred a different outcome – the One Church Plan – which recognized that devout Christians of deep conviction come to different conclusions on this matter and should be free to follow their consciences without coercion. I must also confess that I fear the outcome arrived at in Saint Louis holds the greatest possible potential to disrupt our denomination's good work and undermine our church's overall witness to the grace of God and the loving favor of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Perhaps things will become clearer as the dust settles in the days ahead. We'll see.

Be that as it may, there's work to do now in the valley all around us. You see, following his transfiguration, Jesus led his disciples down the mountain and into the valley below. There, Jesus met a man whose son was possessed by some evil spirit. That spirit often convulsed the boy and caused him all manner of suffering and harm. The man begged Jesus to heal his son because Jesus' other disciples, those not with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, were unable to work a cure. "I begged your disciples to cast it out," the man said to Jesus, "but they could not." (Lk. 9:40)

You and I may live in the mountains between eight and nine thousand feet, but all around us our world is very much like the valley that Jesus entered on that day so many years ago. For all around us there is whole host of suffering people who look to us, as that man looked to the disciples and to Jesus, for some comfort and relief. And in the vast majority of cases we are united in our common concern for them and in our commitment to be in ministry with them. We disagree very little on our approach to serving the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the sick, the suffering, the afflicted and the oppressed. And where we do differ, we generally allow freedom among us for different approaches to ministry

so long as those approaches seek to alleviate the hardship of the suffering while simultaneously declaring the loving favor of God, revealed in Jesus Christ.

It would be a shame if that good work were to be hampered in any way by any internal differences regarding our denomination's most recent action. Indeed, it would be a true tragedy if people had to look elsewhere for help, as the poor man in our text was forced to do, because, like those disciples of old, we were no longer able to help them due to some withdrawal of funds or slackening participation on your part.

That said, I think it's important for us to remember that there are gays, lesbians, transgenders, and others in the valley all about us; and not only in the valley about us, but also in the room around us. Did you know that two families in or related to this congregation have transgender family members? One family I know has a homosexual son. Another woman here has a gay brother. Another man has a gay sister. Another family has a lesbian granddaughter. The granddaughter is visiting Woodland Park this Sunday but her grandmother didn't bring her to church this morning because she was afraid the experience might be too painful given this week's proceedings. My own nephew is gay and hopes to marry his partner this summer. We have had gay couples worship here from time to time. And those are just the families I know about. I'm sure you know of many others. And for all we know, we may have gay members who are even now worshipping with us in these pews – quietly, because they may not know whether or not they will be welcomed and accepted if their true identity were known.

Yes, there are gay and lesbian family members, friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors all around us in this valley – and all around us in this room. And somewhere along the line we, as a congregation, are going to have to decide if we can have a common approach to ministry with them, or, barring agreement on a common approach to such ministry, whether or not we can allow some variety of approaches so long as in those various approaches we are all following John Wesley's First General Rule – Do no harm – and we are endeavoring always to embrace our gay neighbors in ways that clearly convey the loving favor of God. However we choose to minister, may it not be in such a way as to frustrate Jesus who, when confronted by the fact that his disciples failed to help the father's suffering son, said, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" (Lk. 9:41) I'm sure none of us wants to frustrate our Savior!

I, for one, want to be part of a church with Christ at the center, arms open wide, welcoming all into his loving and life-changing embrace. Yes, I want a church with Christ at the center because, as the Transfiguration story reminds us, it is in and through Christ that we get a glimpse of God and hear a voice from heaven. And the God we see in Christ and hear through Christ is a God of grace who stands with arms outstretched, welcoming all and saying, "Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Mt. 11:28 KJV)

"But what about change?" some may ask. "Shouldn't people change when they come to Christ?" Well, yes they should – if not when they come, at least as a consequence of

their coming. For you see, when people fall into the arms of Jesus, they are changed – but they are changed by Jesus – not by us – into their best selves for their own good and God’s glory. And this change is the work of a lifetime and beyond. And it doesn’t always take the form I expect. And I’m willing to trust Jesus with this life-changing work – because it is his work, after all – and not mine! And, finally, I need to remember that there are things in me that still need to be changed, too. And maybe that work of change should be more the focus of my attention than the change I think others need to make.

Now I fully realize that many may not be satisfied with what I’ve said today. Some of our traditional members may think I have gone too far, implying we accept things the bible doesn’t seem to accept – at least at first blush in a simple and straightforward reading. On the other hand, some of our progressive members may think I haven’t gone nearly far enough in proclaiming the all-inclusive love of God or in defending the rights of our gay brothers and sisters. All I can say is this: I’m no better than Peter, James, or John. I’m just another drowsy disciple trying my best to discern the vision and hear the voice.

And I invite you all to join me in doing the same. Will you? If so, then let’s worship God together, for God is still God and wonderfully worthy of our worship and adoration. And let’s stay together in community, for no part of God’s family should be excluded and no part of Christ’s body should be cut off. Finally, let’s go down into the valley – together – to be the healing presence of Jesus Christ to all our world, remembering our mission to make disciples who love like Jesus, creating a world where God’s love reigns! Amen!