

Where We Stand
Carlisle UMC
March 24, 2019
Rev. Mira Hewlett

I grew up in rural central Pennsylvania in a conservative area and family. It was at a Presbyterian seminary when I first encountered conversations and denominational stances on LGBTQ weddings and clergy. It was there in the land of John Calvin and high steeple academia where I remember a professor writing on my paper “You are truly a Methodist at heart.” Even before I was consciously aware of my theological lenses, the ways in which I think about ministry and life, my theology and practice was clearly rooted in Wesleyan ways.

Methodist Thinking – Quadrilateral

**(Quadrilateral) Some days I marvel at how different Pastor Jim and I are in ministry and approach, and other days it eerie how similar we are to one another. I too think about this question using the Quadrilateral pillars of scripture, tradition, reason and experience.

I begin where Wesley did with the foundation of scripture. Growing up I only learned about reading the Bible through the eyes of my pastor and family, but in seminary I learned about various methods of biblical interpretation and different ways scripture is viewed, understood and translated into teachings for readers today. Tony Campolo, a leading evangelical pastor and professor at Eastern College in Philadelphia and his wife, Peggy, came to our campus one evening to share their views on gay marriage. They spoke about how they read scriptures very differently on this issue, and it blew my mind. They both pointed to scripture that supported their position, but did so with a posture of love toward the other who felt very differently.

I then spent time looking at all the scriptures related to this topic. One example was 1 Corinthians where Paul’s words, seen only in this book and letter, were referring to sex between an older man and child, which was really what he spoke against – which even today as a church and society we strongly condemn. None of the passages I could find spoke directly to sexual orientation of committed, loving same gendered relationships when considering context and translation uncertainties. The more I looked, I became less sure scripture was as “clear” as I was taught to believe on this topic.

**(Romans) As I dug into the context of each, I felt I was missing something. I was looking at specific trees and not seeing the forest. The apostle Paul tells Timothy, “all scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching...” 2 Timothy 3:16. To new Christians in Rome Paul writes: *“The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and the other commandments, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)*

This didn’t start with Paul, but he was modeling the ministry of Jesus. Jesus said all the Law and Prophets hung on the two greatest commandments: love God and love one another (Matthew 22:34-40). The more scripture I read the more central to the Gospel was the message of Jesus, love one another without borders.

**(Quadrilateral) Seminary challenged me to think about my hermeneutic, or lens, through which I read scripture. A family member who reads scripture literally challenged how I could be a female clergy person because Paul called for women to be silent and not in leadership over men in a local church. My call to ministry was questioned because of my gender. Yet I knew in my heart I was called to ministry and Paul’s words could not stop the Holy Spirit moving within me. I learned about reading the Bible focused on the larger metanarrative of God’s work in the Old Testament and how Jesus in the New Testament lives that out.

Our former Bishop, Jane Allen Middleton, in her reflection of General Conference wrote on Facebook: *I am a self-avowed practicing woman. I am fortunate that when I received my call to ordination, my church permitted me to fulfill it. I did not endure years of hearing others debate my right to do so.*

I am thankful that my call to ministry happened in an era when women in ministry are accepted, loved and supported unlike 70 years ago. I have a lens of reading the Bible to see the larger picture of scripture not limited by Paul’s one sentence about women in leadership but the larger narrative of the importance of women in scripture and ministry modeled throughout the Bible in times when women culturally were not as respected as today.

The final part of the quadrilateral, experience, was my “tipping point” as I studied scripture, understood church tradition and history, and learned how to think and reason systematically. But more on my experience in a bit.

**** (Simple Rules) The 3 Simple/General Rules**

The other foundational part to my theology and how I make decisions is through using John Wesley’s Three Simple Rules. The rules are: Do Good. Do No Harm. Stay in Love with God. Wesley wrote these rules to guide early Methodists as they organized into small groups and held one another accountable for relationships with one another and God. As I think about large decisions these three rules are an important filter for me.

Like many, I was shocked when General Conference gave the One Church Plan very little time for consideration. This plan supported a large umbrella of administration and missions, but with tentacles of diverse theological understandings of how scripture is read and contextualized.

Unlike our Presbyterian and Lutheran brothers and sisters, the United Methodist Church is globally organized with members in Carlisle living under the same church law and rules as members in the Congo. While being gay is seen by many in our culture as accepted, this is not the case in every community around the world. There are areas of the world, particularly Eastern European and African areas, where being gay or supporting same gendered weddings could lead to death. I understand how it’s impossible for people in this situation to vote strongly any plan that prohibits same gendered marriages and clergy who identify as LGBTQ.

For the clergy and laity of these regions to Do No Harm requires that restrictions apply – potentially even to keep their lives. However here in our culture and context, Do No Harm is questioned when persons created by God to love someone of the same gender are excluded or limited in how they live out their spiritual giftedness. The same would be said 75 years ago as clergy women were trying to be ordained in the Methodist Church – Do No Harm required an end to exclusion.

We all are trying to Stay in Love with God – by loving God and loving our neighbors. But it looks radically different. Our human devised organization of the church with all her laws and policies are making it increasingly hard for everyone to stay in love with God. Hearts of LGBTQ persons, their family and friends are broken because of the decision of General Conference and making it hard for them to continue to see the church, with all her imperfections, as a place where they want to learn and grow closer to God. In our brokenness, harsh words, and global enforced decisions it many are failing at loving God and loving one another.

**** (gay marriage) Gay Marriage**

In seminary I never really understood why my family and others I knew stood firmly against gay marriage beyond citing scriptures. Recently I read the book “Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gay vs Christian Debate” and a light bulb went off.

Justin Lee, the author of Torn, writes about how marriage is more than just acts of sexual pleasure and creation of children. Marriage is about a covenant relationship – to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad times. As I thought about marriage from what I saw as a young person, I saw marriage rooted in a covenant between a couple that loved each other and loved God. I never saw or heard much about marriage primarily for sexual acts or procreation.

I believe God gives us partners to support each other in covenant relationships and I’m still waiting on God for my partner to appear. Bearing children and making a family can come in so many different ways in our modern society from IVF, to surrogacy, to adoption. Marriage, for me, is about so much more than sexual actions and children.

Friends who are LGBTQ desire and long for a loving relationship and family just as friends who are heterosexual, and I believe God blesses unions of two God-loving partners who are committed to honoring God and loving each other.

I hope some day as UMC clergy I will have the privilege to lead wedding services for you, your children and your grandchildren if you/they are committed to putting God in the center of your lives and families – no matter what a family looks like in regards to racial backgrounds, cultural practices, or genders.

**** (MLK quote)** Martin Luther King Jr quoted 19th century clergymen Theodore Parker saying: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." I believe justice is when every person can honor who and how God created them to be and can be in a devoted, committed marriage to live and grow with a partner if that is where God is leading.

**** (gay clergy) Gay Clergy**

The other big issue at General Conference was if LGBTQ+ persons could be clergy. I believe that each of us is made in God's image and sexuality is a piece of who and how God creates us.

Like Pastor Jim, I believe if a person is called into ministry, willing and ready to accept the call to follow Jesus and lead within the church today – I do not think anyone or anything should be able to stand in his or her way. At seminary I was in the Dual Degree program receiving a Masters of Divinity and Masters in Youth Ministry in four years. I was blessed to learn from a teaching assistant named Dan and felt any young person in his youth ministry would be blessed. When I learned he was openly gay it made me pause, but only long enough to affirm that his call and effectiveness in ministry was so much more important than his sexual orientation. My experience mattered.

**** (Anna) Anna Layman Knox**, a close friend, clergyperson at Camp Hill UMC wrote these words she intended to share at the General Conference: *You all made me a vow - 36 years ago, as a baby, before you knew if I was straight or gay, bisexual or queer, you held me up before the altar of god not as an idol - but naming my life as a gift from the God who created me, and you made me a vow that is sacred to me. At my baptism you vowed to surround me with a community of love and forgiveness. You vowed to uphold our shared baptismal covenant with God through not just your prayers - but your presence, gifts, and service. And if you're thinking - I wasn't there - I didn't say those words over you. But you were - communion of saints - oh you were there.*

In our sanctuary services at baptisms we have started singing "Welcome to the family of God, little one; tiny seed of Abraham that you are. Hear to God's kingdom, surrounded by God's grace, welcome to the family of God." I pray that those words we sing about coming into our family are words we live out fully for every person in God's family, at their baptism and well beyond. Welcome into our church, I pray some day soon is also welcome into full pastoral leadership for all within our United Methodist Church just as God created you.

**** (why not) Why not leave now?**

Knowing my heart on these matters, some friends in and beyond our denomination have asked – why are you staying in the UMC? After much prayer these past three weeks, I can share three reasons.

**** (God's grace)** First, God's grace is larger than how I or you or we believe on any particular topic – be it this topic or anything else. Grace sees us for what makes us each unique and beautiful in God's eyes. While I may not agree with all my colleagues, denominational leaders or even everyone within our church – I believe that where I get things wrong or am incorrect – or where others may – that God has grace for all of us who are striving to live and love like Jesus.

**** (Facebook)** Days following General Conference I wrote on my Facebook page: *In seminary our beloved Old Testament theologian Dr. Miller said you could sum up the Old Testament with "Do not be afraid" and the New Testament with "Love Wins." Throughout seminary as I struggled personally with this issue and others, including some family believing women should not be in ordained ministry, I clearly understood God's call upon my life to ordination and that the message of Jesus was "love wins." Whenever I am in a situation that is challenging, I remember those words, love wins for Jesus, and it needs to be how I live out my discipleship. I leave judgment to God and seek to love as Christ did – love the children, love the widow, love the outcast, love our neighbors. My understanding of how to be a disciple of Christ's and how to live out my ordination is to do this to all of God's children. This is not always easy, simple or comfortable but with God's grace what I try to do each day.*

**** (Family)** Second, I am part of the UMC and CUMC family – and being family doesn't mean we all agree on everything or break ties when things become difficult. Like many of you, I have family members that challenge my definitions of normal, helpful and sane – but I still love that uncle and see him as created and loved by God. I may not like a person or decisions he or she makes, but I try my best to love them as Jesus loved the woman at

the well, as he loved the person filled with demons, and as he loved Judas. You are my family – wrinkles, crinkles and all – and I think God uses each of us to help one another grow.

**(CUMC posture of love) And maybe most importantly, I am proud to be pastor in a church with a posture of love. Two weeks ago I was at a gathering with Bishop Park where clergy friends shared they had church members tell them if they believed in welcoming LGBTQ persons they would go to hell for being a pastor and leading others astray. One parishioner even refuses to receive communion from a pastor who doesn't agree with "his" way of thinking. My heart breaks for friends who serve in those congregations filled with anger.

What I have seen from you in the past three weeks, and in our Leadership Council in our conversations where different positions on this topic are held, the posture was always one of love for each other and for those who feel hurt and judged by the church. It's God grace, when lived through us that enables us to build bridges of love over differences instead of camps isolated with only those who believe and think alike. I have seen you welcome persons into worship and our congregation who identify as LGBTQ and want to worship and serve God with us. Your posture of love and welcome to all is an example of Jesus' love. Thank you for your posture of love, no matter your position on this topic or other political issues that threatens to divide us. You know it's more important that we do ministry together in Carlisle with different positions on this and many topics. I am proud to be one of your pastors and love you. All of you. Thanks be to God.