

Thoughts on “A Way Forward” in Eastern Pennsylvania

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To begin my reflection, I'd like to share a personal story that concerns my relationship with my father. For much of my life, my father and I had a very rocky relationship. We are very different people – with vastly different personalities, interests and aptitudes; he's a science guy, trained in physics and engineering; I considered a career in fine arts when in high school. Even more, we have had very different beliefs about life, God, morality and politics. For many years, both of us were determined to convince and convert the other to our way of thinking, believing and behaving – sometimes in subtle, but more often, in not-so-subtle ways, replete with arguments, accusations, and hurtful words. There was even a period, when my children were still at home, that we actually had no contact whatsoever with each other for a year.

I came to a point where I realized I faced a basic decision: either cut myself off completely from him, or, choose to accept and love him as he was; find a way to be in relationship with him, even if he never changed one whit.

Thankfully, I – both of us – chose the latter course, and I can tell you that today, some years later, our relationship is the best it has ever been. We have learned to appreciate things about each other that before we could not. We can sit outside on the porch with a cigar and glass of **brandy** and talk for hours. (Yes, I have confessed that amongst a group of Methodists.) Three years ago, we took a road trip together to Montreal to visit some relatives. I was nervous about all that time in the car together, but it turned out great: we got along famously, and talked about family stories, memories of his parents, and more.

I lead with that story because I think it speaks to where we are today in the Eastern PA Conference and the larger UMC. Liberals and conservatives – or progressives and traditionalists, if we must resort to such labels (though I think they obfuscate more than they reveal) – have for years been battling with each other, attempting to coerce and compel one another to embrace the other's way of thinking, believing, and acting; and it hasn't worked. We have now reached that point of decision my father and I came to years ago: Will we find a way to continue in relationship? Or will we part company?

I believe that is the challenge that is before the Bishops' Commission, and which is also before us here in Eastern Pennsylvania. Today I want to address two questions: first, what are the critical things, from the orthodox or traditionalist perspective, that really divide us? And second, what might be some basic requirements which would have to be in place, if we are to find a

way forward *together*, rather than apart.

PRESENTING SYMPTOMS, UNDERLYING ISSUES

When it comes to what divides us, I believe matters go deeper than we normally think. My middle daughter, a newly minted doctor finishing up her first year of residency, tells me that when patients come complaining of things like headaches, odd pains or aches, doctors call these “presenting symptoms.” The presenting symptoms are outward manifestations of a deeper problem or set of problems, which the doctor needs to diagnose and treat. For many of us on the traditional side, our current clash over homosexuality and marriage is a “presenting symptom” of deeper issues.

A. CLASH OF WORLDVIEWS

One deeper issue I would characterize is a clash of fundamentally different worldviews. I believe we are in a cultural moment that has shaped the way many of us, certainly in the larger society, see the world around us – and it is very different from how more traditionally-minded people see things.

A new way of thinking has become widespread today, especially among millennials, often labelled *post-modernism*. Defining that is not easy, since for many it is not a conscious philosophy but more like the “soup” in which people are immersed culturally.

But the critical point is this: for most of history, thinkers and cultures have generally believed there is a reality beyond our subjective perceptions which gives order and meaning to existence. Whether it is ancient Platonic philosophy, Jewish or Christian theology about the plan or the will of God, or ideas about natural law, there was a “Reality” with a capital “R” – and the task of humanity was to discover and understand that reality (whether by reason, revelation, or scientific inquiry), and then *conform ourselves to it*.

In the new thinking, however, *there is no reality with a capital “R.”* All claims of truth or reality are simply social constructions. *We humans create our own reality*, and do so in the context of social structures and relationships.

The idea that there is any divine order or will for who we are or how we should live – even a natural moral order – just doesn’t compute to an increasing share of society.

This idea that *we create our own reality*, even our own identities, of course, feeds into contemporary ideas about sexual or gender identities; at last count, there were more than 70 gender options on Facebook. In addition, any attempt to impose norms or standards (like the so-called “binary” options

of male and female) is simply an exercise of power by people with a different construction of reality, and is to be resisted.

By contrast, many of us who are more traditionally oriented don't accept this cluster of ideas.

We see the world as something created by God and governed by purposes and designs – sometimes called “orders of creation” – which are givens, woven into the very fabric of creation itself. *We believe there is a reality with a capital R*; there is God's truth, which transcends cultural and personal perceptions.

We believe that after all due consideration is given to the limits of language, cultural context and the mystery of revelation, what Israel received at Mount Sinai were the 10 commandments *from God*, not the 10 pretty good ideas of Moses. When the prophets said, “Thus says the Lord,” it really was a message *from God*, not just the enlightened insights of a few people ahead of their time.

In addition, we view human nature as fundamentally broken and twisted by sin and therefore in need of God's saving grace and healing to get us aligned back again with God's “capital R” reality.

This means that simply studying human behavior patterns, sexual or otherwise, may be able to tell us what is *normal* in the sense of occurring with some regularity – but cannot tell us what should be *normative* – that which is good, right or within the will of God.

This also means that attempts to define our own identities, our own realities, and our own moral codes, apart from God's designs, are often expressions of our sinful attempts to “be like God,” as the serpent says to Eve in the Fall story in Genesis 3.

So, to use an image: you folks on the left who have bought into all this stuff about sexuality and identity, have eagerly run across the gangplank onto an ocean liner that that I and others like me haven't boarded at all, because we've looked over the keel and all the navigation systems, and *we don't think the ship is seaworthy*. You have unpacked your bags, and launched out into the ice-laden north Atlantic, enjoying the buffet, and listening to the band, while we're on the dock saying, “that ship just isn't sound.”

We see life as something God has designed and revealed to us by his Word; folks on the left appear to see life as much more up to us to define – and

redefine – as we see fit. As a result, we wind up talking past each other much of the time.

B. ATTITUDES TOWARD SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

Another area where there is a deeper divide than that which appears on the surface, is how we approach authority. Now, this is not about *definitions* of Scriptural authority, but more about attitude – an instinct, if you will, about how to address moral and social issues.

For those of us on the traditional side, our instinct is to go to the Word of God, believing that it does speak authoritatively, in a way that transcends every culture, to every basic issue of how we should live as disciples of Christ. As the Evangelical United Brethren Confession of Faith puts it, the Bible is “the true rule and guide for faith and practice.” We really believe this, and also believe that it refers to the *whole canon* of Scripture which we have been bequeathed, not just favored parts, or reconstructions of particular passages by form-critical scholars.

Now, on complex issues like environmental stewardship, racial justice, or prison reform, there is no simple or singular “Biblical answer” – though we would insist that the basic principles which must inform proposed answers are in the Bible. But on other things basic to our creation and daily lives – like sex and marriage – we don’t believe God has left us in the dark until the advent of university departments of gender studies.

So we would go *first* to Scripture, expecting that there will be consistent themes that tell us about how God intended us to live – *then* we would consult with social science, contemporary scholarship and cultural trends.

Our perception of those of you on the progressive side is that your instinct is to go *first* to social science, scholarship and popular culture, and *then* to the Scriptures, often with the assumption that the Scripture is probably to be discounted for its ancient cultural biases, and that our enlightened age is where God is speaking most clearly.

Actually, I left something important out – we would also look to the great traditions of the Christian Church, even before contemporary sources, because we believe God has guided his people over the years. This is very Wesleyan. Wesley called himself a “*man of one book*” – yet he knew no one interprets Scripture in a vacuum. He knew that to grasp the meaning of that book, he needed to use all the critical reasoning faculties given to him by God.

But he also believed that a crucial source of authority is found in the great traditions of the church, especially from the earliest centuries. It is

worth noting that, in his 50-volume series of small books he wanted to get in the hands of every Methodist called *The Christian Library*, the very first volume in the set was the *Apostolic Fathers* – which I think says something about how highly he valued tradition.

Though it has come under fire in recent years, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral lists *tradition* second behind Scripture as an authority for us as United Methodists, and *before* experience and reason. Yet I often find that tradition almost never comes into play in these debates *at all*.

Our perception is that those on the left just don't value tradition as a guide to understanding Scripture, and look to either individual personal experience (which is not quite what the quadrilateral means by experience), or social science (an application of reason) as the final arbiter of truth.

CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN ANY "WAY FORWARD"

Given those deep and profound differences – to which you may well add others – is there any way we can stay in relationship? Is there a way forward *together*? And if so, what, again, from my or our perspective would be needed to make that possible?

A. STOP THE DISRESPECTFUL RHETORIC

I think the first thing that needs to happen is this: we need to put an end to the angry, nasty rhetoric. I fear that one way we have let the larger culture subvert the kind of Christian culture we should embody in our church is in how we talk to each other.

The demonizing rhetoric that we see in American political culture and on social media, the shouting down of people whose perspectives we don't want to hear, and the reflexive accusations of bad faith, have now all increasingly become standard fare at annual, jurisdictional and general conference sessions, and beyond.

This has happened on both sides, and both must repent of it. I have always sought to speak with people who differ with me with respect; yet I have been called a purveyor of hate; I have been accused of having hidden motives to exclude and condemn people, even to want them dead, no matter what I say is my real intent. Indeed, I have been told, in effect, that I am no better than an antebellum slaveholder or a hooded Klansman – simply because I believe something different about marriage and sexuality than you do.

What I believe and what you believe about marriage and the proper use of God's gift of sex, however, is just that – *what we believe*. Though I'm

convinced of the truth of historic Christian affirmations about marriage and sex, neither what I believe nor what progressives believe can be proven in a test tube by someone in a white lab coat.

So perhaps some more humility should be on display, based on the conviction I hope we both share, as expressed in 1 Pet. 3:15, which says we should be prepared to defend our convictions, but always “*with gentleness and respect,*” and at least be willing to accept the good faith and sincerity of folks who see things in opposite ways.

That alone I think would go a long way to *finding a way forward*. If we can't or won't show basic respect, and be willing to accept as a starting point the essential goodwill of the other, then there is no hope in my mind for us to stay in the same household. In a family, the ways we've been talking to one another would be called *verbal abuse*.

B. RESPECT THE CONSCIENCE AND CONVICTIONS OF EACH OTHER

A second requirement I believe will be necessary for us to move forward *together* involves structural change. The United Methodist system will have to be modified such that both sides are confident that their consciences and convictions will be respected.

A few years ago, at an Annual Conference session in Oaks, I was approached by a member of FUMCOG, a lovely woman, who wanted to dialogue with me about sexuality after one of our debates.

We had a good, substantive and respectful conversation, and at the end she said, “This was a wonderful conversation; why can't all our conversations in the conference be like this?” I said, “I wish they would!” She added, “And why can't we just agree to disagree, and let pastors and churches just practice the way they believe?” To that I said, “I'd love to find a way for that to work, but it can't work as we are currently structured. Because, at least in theory, *I could be appointed to FUMCOG next month!* How would that go over?” And she said, “Oh, my. We'd have to talk about that...”

Right now, the trust levels are so low that I don't believe either side will accept a “local option” approach – and it really doesn't work with our itinerant system. Several proposals have been floated in recent years, and the Bishops' Commission will have to deal with that, so I won't take time to detail them.

But any such change will have to involve some setting of boundaries that allows both sides to function according to the dictates of conscience.

In March, I heard one of our bishops say that he thought some sort of separation was “inevitable.” Another bishop tried to put a happier spin on it and said, “We’re looking at new forms of unity for the 21st century, *in separate structures.*” That guy should be White House press secretary.

But maybe there is something to it, at least as a starting point.

When my dad and I set out to rebuild our relationship, we knew there were some things we just couldn’t talk about, and some things we couldn’t do together, at least not at first. Some degree of separation, *some setting of boundaries*, was needed.

Then, we looked for those areas where we could find common ground, and began there. That inaugurated a process which, in time, allowed us to start addressing more sensitive issues. But it took time to rebuild trust.

And I think that is a big part of our problem today in the Church: trust has broken down, and it will take time to rebuild. It may indeed mean “new forms of unity that involve separate structures” – at least for a time.

C. REAFFIRM OUR COVENANTAL PROMISES

There is one last item that will be absolutely necessary for us to remain a *united* church. Contrary to the usual way our current crisis is characterized, I don’t believe that sexuality and gay marriage is the cause of the current threat of schism, at least not the immediate cause. After all, we have been arguing about that for four decades. No, the immediate cause is *covenant breaking*.

For 230 years, our polity has allowed for profound disagreement within the context of our system of holy conferencing, imperfect as it is. We have wrestled, wrangled and argued, but at the end of the day, all sides have been bound to abide by the results of that holy conferencing process, as embodied in our *Book of Discipline*. And that is what we as clergy *promised we would do*, when we were ordained.

But in the last few years, some clergy and laity have decided those promises no longer apply. They have called their acts “civil disobedience;” but that doesn’t wash. The church isn’t the government. No one is compelled to join our churches, live under our teachings, or be ordained. And we have no police or army to enforce our Discipline. *All that holds us together are the covenant promises we have made to each other.*

Many of us feel like we are in the position of a married person whose spouse has unilaterally decided that ours should be an open marriage and

then starts seeing other people. We say, *wait a minute!* That's not what you promised; that's breaking the covenant! So we plead and pray, and seek counseling, hoping against hope the marriage can be saved. But if the spouse never comes back to reaffirming the covenantal vows, we will have to conclude that the marriage is over.

I fear that we are nearing that point in the UMC. Whatever comes from the Bishops' Commission, whatever structural changes may be proposed, there must be a renewed commitment *by all* to the promises we made to abide by the *Discipline*, and to live under the same set of rules.

CONCLUSION

To conclude: I suspect I am not alone in saying that I am weary unto death of the ongoing conflict within the UMC. Nonetheless, I am an optimist.

That is, I am an optimist *in grace*, in what God can do through willing human partners. When we act apart from God, in defiance or disbelief, I am an utter pessimist. But I know, both from Scripture and experience, that nothing – not the flowing Red Sea or the sealed tomb, nor a strained relationship between a son and his father – nothing is too big a problem for the living God to overcome. And that includes the current crisis and impasse confronting United Methodism.

Whatever happens in the next few years, I know this: the Wesleyan movement will continue; and I know that the Church of Jesus Christ will endure. I always valued part of the older Methodist ritual, which introduced the reception of new members this way:

[T]he Church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, for the conduct of worship, and the due administration of the sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers, and the conversion of the world. All, of every age and station, stand in need of the means of grace which it alone supplies.

I really believe that. So I am an optimist. God's will, in the long run, will prevail. And God is faithful. The only real issue is whether we will be faithful to God or not. God's faithfulness and God's truth are never in question.

I really believe that once we get through these next few difficult years, and finally settle this question one way or the other, that on the other side, a beautiful and renewed church will emerge. It will be one that is orthodox in its Wesleyan expression of the faith, mission-focused in all its activity, leaner and

more efficient administratively, committed to covenant faithfulness, and, under the gracious providence of God, growing and spreading Scriptural holiness *all around the globe*.