

“The Work of Impartiality”

October 1, 2006

FCC Open and Affirming Statement

Acts 10:9-23, 34-35

Two summers ago, I was one of several would-be clergy in a hospital chaplaincy program. It was an intense summer of learning about illness and death, about ministry, and about ourselves. Only one person in the group was already ordained, and there were times when the group looked to her to pass along some knowledge and experience of what it’s like being an ordained minister in the world. Even though Marjorie wasn’t serving a church and so couldn’t tell us anything about that experience, she did consistently wear a clerical collar wherever she went. As a result, throughout her days and in all sorts of places, she was easily identifiable as an ordained minister, a clergywoman.

One afternoon that summer, the group was having some down time. We were sharing various stories with one another, and Marjorie told us about an encounter she had recently had with a homeless man in downtown Northampton, where Chey and I lived. I don’t remember how the two of them had started to talk, but, as they shared a bench on the sidewalk, he began to ask her about being a minister. He wanted to know what sort of training and education she had had to go through before she could be out in the world wearing a clerical collar. He wanted to know what she had had to do before she could become “the Reverend Smith.” So she told him about the training requirements and about her several years in seminary.

Hearing all this, the man nodded and looked at Marjorie intently. “What, then, Reverend” he asked, “is the meaning of life?” Marjorie told us that she felt as though her answer was vitally important, as if it might make a profound difference in this homeless man’s life. She said she was very nervous and, for a while, completely stumped. Then, something came to her that seemed like “the” right thing to say, a passage from the Book of Micah. So, with great relief and a good measure of confidence, she told him, “The meaning of life is that we are called to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.”

The man looked at her. There was no smile on his face to match the smile on hers. Shaking his head, he said, “All that studying, all that work, and that’s the *best* you can do!?” With that, he stood up, still shaking his head, and walked away.

Marjorie and those of us listening to her story found more than one lesson in this exchange. For one thing, we felt reminded that none of us, ordained or not, has “the” airtight answer for any question or any dilemma. We can offer compassion, hospitality of the heart, and some of what has made a difference in our own lives, but we *don’t* have the answers for other people (and, strictly speaking, we really don’t have them for *ourselves*, either). We all also thought that Marjorie’s story contained a warning against having a Messiah complex, a warning against self-centeredly thinking that the health and lives of everything and everyone are riding on *us* and on what *we* say and do.

But even though Marjorie’s tale seemed largely cautionary, identifying traps we as ministers should try to avoid, I’ve never lost my sense that her answer was a pretty darned good one. “And what does the Lord require of you,” says the prophet Micah, “but

to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” Justice, mercy, and humility. I think they form a sound, wise trinity of guidance. Of course, *how* we do these things is a different, difficult question, but trying to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly seems like a good place to start in our daily lives – and in our life together.

Marjorie’s story has been on my mind lately as I’ve been asking, in my prayers and here in this pulpit, “What is it you and I have been called together to do and to be?” Her story has been reminding me that we can all be in danger of dismissing a simple truth that’s right in front of us. We can all be in danger of expecting it to be some grand, complex mission or ministry that we are called to do. But instead of grandiosity and complexity, time and time again, in words both ancient and new, what we hear are simple, uncomplicated, but usually *challenging* calls to love and service. Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly. Be still and know that I am God. Love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might, and love your neighbor as yourself. Follow me.

Despite these and other reminders of the importance of being open to the simple, plainly visible call, I still believe that we are and will continue being called to not-yet-visible ministries in the months and years ahead. At the same time, I think we’ve already had our own version of Simon Peter’s vision on the roof, and we need to continue to try to *live* that vision. As the Book of Acts describes his experience, Peter came to see that divisions between clean and profane, between Jew and Gentile were the creations of human beings, not a reflection of a divine pecking order. Five years ago, this congregation had a similar vision. You came to see and proclaim that the divisions that continue to tear at the fabric of churches around the world, especially those based on sexual orientation, are destructive divisions created by human beings, not by the God who has created and loves us all.

This congregation has already discerned and responded to God’s call to be a community that says, “Yes,” to those to whom other religious communities say, “No.” We have pledged to say, “Welcome!” to those to whom far too many congregations offer only condemnation and a closed door. You – we – have heard and responded to that call, but our response, like all faithful responses, is a *living* commitment, something we embody over a lifetime, something a church embodies over *many* lifetimes. In our Open and Affirming Statement, we have embraced what our denomination sees as one of our greatest callings, to provide shelter – to provide *home* – to the spiritually homeless. Like all human responses to a sacred calling, ours is a work in progress. Just as Peter and the early Christian churches were unable to live perfectly into God’s vision of impartiality, we, too, will never be perfect in our welcome and embrace of all of God’s people who have been disenfranchised and rejected. But with and through God’s abundant grace, we will live and work more fully toward that sacred vision of impartiality and shalom.

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday. We honor and celebrate our connectedness with churches and peoples around the world, even as we acknowledge the divisions that remain between and among us. We also honor and celebrate our connectedness to the people who have gone before us and who for nearly 2000 years have gathered and shared this meal in remembrance of Jesus’ love and ministry. We join together across time and space, with people whose languages we don’t understand and whose theology may seem strange or even threatening. We gather and celebrate, knowing that we need the gifts of grace that flow through something as simple as bread and the fruit of the vine. We gather and celebrate, trusting that the Holy One – Creator,

Redeemer, Sustainer – is at work in us, through us, and all around us, seeking to heal the divisions that limit and damage us all.

Amen.

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