

You Asked For It: Presbyterian Peace, Unity and Purity?

A Sermon by Louise Westfall

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

Cleveland Heights, Ohio

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Text: Hebrews 12 (selected verses)

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church adjourned Wednesday after its week-long, biannual gathering. The commissioners, evenly divided between elders and clergy, representing presbyteries across the nation, came together for worship and deliberation, decision-making and celebration. The headlines will never capture the awesome experience one has of being part of a connectional church with a mission broader and more encompassing than any one of its member congregations. Reports you have seen on television or read about in the newspaper focus on the controversial aspect of these decisions, often with little understanding of Presbyterian polity and process. For example, some of you saw on a local television news show a report from the assembly about a paper the Assembly approved on language for the Trinity. The news station used old footage of Fairmount as the backdrop for a snickering commentary on theological wordplay. In reality, the assembly affirmed that “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” is the primary way the Church expresses the mystery of God. At the same time, it encouraged the use of other *Biblical* images for study and in worship, such as “Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost” we print in our bulletin as an alternative wording for the Doxology.

The Assembly also overwhelmingly approved a recommendation about Israel/Palestine clarifying that “financial investments of the Presbyterian Church, as they pertain to Israel, Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank, be invested in only peaceful pursuits.” While not rescinding the action of the 2004 Assembly which called for exploration of phased, selective divestment in multinational corporations doing business that supports violence in Israel and Palestine, it does identify such action as a method of last resort. And the Assembly acknowledged the “hurt and misunderstanding among members of the Jewish community” that resulted from this earlier action. “We are grieved by the pain that this has caused, accept responsibility for the flaws in our process, and ask for a new season of mutual understanding and dialogue,” the approved recommendation says. An overture sent by our presbytery was incorporated into the recommendation, that the Church actively seek affirmative investment opportunity as a peacemaking strategy in the troubled region.

The morning text is the one chosen as the theme for the Assembly, from the letter to the Hebrews, a potent reminder that our faith sets us—not on a solitary pilgrimage, but on a journey taken with others, with encouragement by the ones who have gone before. Listen for God’s Word to the Church in the reading from the letter to the Hebrews, in the 12th chapter, at the first verse. [HEBREWS 12:1-3, 12-15]

The text gives us insight for the particular topic requested for today’s sermon. The church member, reflecting on the Presbyterian Church’s long-standing disagreement on homosexuality with respect to ordination standards for elders, deacons, and ministers of

Word and Sacrament, wondered a bit wistfully if the denomination could stay together. “Isn’t division a real possibility?” she asked. The approval of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church is the action of the Assembly most likely to put that question to the test. And it is to that action that we now turn.

A young minister is called to serve a large congregation in an affluent, highly educated suburban community. At his very first Session meeting, a debate erupts as to whether communion should be served to the seated members by the elders, or by the people coming forward to receive the elements. Arguments from both sides are persuasive, and the meeting ends without resolution. The next day, the pastor decides to visit the church’s oldest member, now residing in a nursing home, to seek her advice and counsel. “Mrs. Johnson, I’m asking you: what is our congregation’s custom about serving communion?” And Mrs. Johnson replied, “Why do you ask?” “Well,” the minister continued, “At the session meeting last night, the elders wanting to serve yelled at the ones wanting people to come forward; then they started yelling at the ones who wanted to serve....” Responded Mrs. Johnson, “That is our custom.”

We recognize this custom as belonging to the Presbyterian Church, too. The debates over ordination standards particularly regarding sexual orientation have raged for almost 30 years. More than five years ago, the Assembly—in good Presbyterian style---formed a committee to seek a way through the controversy...together. The committee make-up itself encompassed broadly diverse viewpoints, as well as racial, gender, and geographic balance, and had both clergy and elders. The task force held hearings throughout the church, spent a good deal of time in prayer and Bible study, and in the end, developed a report that they unanimously recommended to the Church.

The report offers an “authoritative interpretation” of our church’s constitution that relies upon historic principles to find middle ground in the ordination controversy. It calls for the maintenance of current standards, developed by the whole church and set forth in the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order (including the one regarding “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness”), while at the same time putting more responsibility on ordaining bodies (presbyteries and sessions) for the application of those standards to individual candidates.

Supporters of the report hoped it would end the cycle of conflict over these issues. As one elder expressed it, “We’ve been fighting in this ditch for 28 years, and the ditch is getting deeper. It’s affecting our mission work, our youth ministry and evangelism efforts, and I’m ready to try something else. Please, let’s get on with being the church, taking the gospel into the world and offering them something besides argument.” *[quoted from PC(USA) website accounts of Assembly actions]* But not everyone agreed. The report was adopted by a vote of 298-221—the numbers alone revealing the lack of consensus. I’ve read very carefully the statements issued by a number of constituency groups in the denomination to understand their objections to the report. A colleague in this presbytery e-mailed a copy of a letter he wrote to members of his congregation outlining his concerns. He believes the report abandons historic ordination standards by giving sessions and presbyteries some latitude to ordain those who depart from those

standards. He has appointed a task force to review the Assembly's actions and what implications they might hold for that congregation's response. The possibility of pulling out of the denomination was only thinly veiled. No doubt you have heard—or will hear—of individuals and congregations who see this action as the straw that will break their already-tenuous connection with the Presbyterian Church.

No report, however faithful or creative, could be expected to resolve a matter so deeply felt and potentially divisive. I found it ironic and disheartening that no news story contained interviews with gay and lesbian persons about their perspective on the Church's action. In the interest of church unity do we perhaps inadvertently but oh-so-effectively silence the voices of most likely to be affected? The Task Force Report leaves intact the "fidelity and chastity" standard adopted in the 1990s many view as exclusionary. The Report asks for patience and understanding from both sides.

It's clear that the differences will not go away. But I also believe that the "peace, unity, and purity" of the Presbyterian or any Church does not depend upon unanimity of viewpoint. What is essential is the heart of our faith: the truth of God's love demonstrated in Jesus Christ, received by grace for the salvation of the whole world. This is —dare I say it? —the fundamental principle that ought to govern everything else we say or do. Friends, in spite of disagreement, across every difference, it is Christ who unites us, who purifies our motives and decisions when they go awry, and most of all, it is Christ who gives us the gift of peace.

How does the task force's report affect Fairmount? First and foremost, it reminds us that we are part of a connectional church; we are not our own sovereign entity, but are part of a church that covenants together to seek God's will and way. It asks us not to turn away from controversial issues, but to engage in "intensive discernment" through prayer and study in response to them. I will ask the Christian Education Council to offer opportunities to study the theological section of the task force's report. Fairmount's Nominating Committee has already been doing its work according to the recommendations of the report—mindful of ordination standards, while applying them thoughtfully to individual elder and deacon candidates. Future Associate Pastor nominating committees will be instructed by that same guidance.

In a pastoral letter to the 11,000 Presbyterian congregations, newly elected moderator, the Rev. Joan Gray, and Cliff Kirkpatrick, stated Clerk described this unity as not just about coming to an agreement. *It is about being with each other in the healthy struggle to discern God's will. It was that healthy struggle we witnessed at the assembly, and in that struggle we were blessed. God's Spirit was with us. . . . We invite you to join us as we move with renewed enthusiasm to doing God's work in the world.*

The letter to the Hebrews likewise acknowledges the difficulty and length of the race we are running that leads to life. The thing is, we didn't choose this race. God called us, and keeps on calling us to follow. Great perseverance is required. But here's the good news: God does not ask us to go anywhere that God has not already gone in Jesus Christ.

The road ahead for the Presbyterian Church may seem uncertain. But it really isn't. God's already there. May we go with courage, with patience, and most of all, with love.

TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO
ACCOMPLISH FAR MORE ABUNDANTLY THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE,
TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND
EVER. AMEN.