

“You Asked for It – The Issues that Divide the Conservative Church from the  
Progressive Church” – Part I

A Sermon by Martha (Missy) Shiverick

Cleveland Heights, Ohio

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Text: Psalm 8, John 17:20-21

“I ask not on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Sometimes in a large congregation such as ours, we forget that we are a part of a larger denomination, a family to whom we belong. We are not just Fairmount Church; we are in fact Fairmount Presbyterian Church. We are Presbyterians. We enjoy a rich heritage; we are kept in balance by our Book of Order its rules and its historical confessions, we receive opportunities for local and world wide mission through our Presbytery and General Assembly offices, and we Presbyterians share a common theology with Presbyterians throughout time and location. We are not ships without rudders but are grounded in a theology, a history, and a form of government. Although we don't think of it often or discuss it, we must admit that being in membership and communion with the Presbyterian Church (USA) is a blessing for us here at Fairmount. We gain much from being a part of something bigger than ourselves that holds us accountable to a theology, a heritage, and a set of doctrines.

But, being in a family like this national denomination has its down side too. While being connectional keeps us faithful to doctrine and theology, we also fight over what that doctrine and theology is. Divisions break out and fights begin over what the true mission of the church is and what true doctrine should be. Threats of congregations leaving the church are common place and congregations even take their mission dollars which should go to the Presbytery and General Assembly offices and put them in other programs where the individual church can control them. Behaviors like that sound much like a family fights. And, well, they have been and are today.

Today there is a growing divide between factions of the Presbyterian Church, and I really do not know what the final outcome will be.

Will we find a common ground to live together with a mutual respect for our differences or will we once again split as we have several times in the history of our church? And what are exactly these fights over? Why are these lines

being drawn in the sand and congregations threatening to leave the denomination? Why have some already left? Not just the Presbyterian Church, but the Episcopal Church and the other mainline denominations are having these same struggles. The “You Asked for It” sermons for this week and next are on the issues dividing our churches denomination. Today we will address the issue of homosexuality in the church and how this topic is dividing the conservative churches from the progressive ones within our denomination.

This is not a new issue. In the Presbyterian Church we have been talking about the issue of ordination of homosexuals since I began seminary 30 years ago. Studies have been done, General Assembly Overtures have been passed, our Book of Order has been modified, and still the issue will not go away. Groups and organizations have formed on both sides of the issue and plans are being made by some churches to either leave the denomination or start a new Presbytery where they can mandate ordination standards to fit their strict interpretation. The Confessing Church Movement, started by a group called the Layman is leading the conservative church movement. They have formed to proclaim their commitment to three doctrines they call essential. These foundations for the group are as follows: The first is that Jesus Christ is Lord. The second is that Holy Scripture is the Triune God’s revealed word, the Church’s only infallible rule of faith and life. The third foundation is that God’s people are called to holiness in all aspects of life. This includes honoring the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman, and that this is the only relationship within which sexual activity is appropriate. Several Churches in our Presbytery are members of this group and a few have stopped giving their mission dollars to the Presbytery and National Church.

On the other side of the argument are the Covenant Network of Presbyterians and the More Light Presbyterians who are seeking to allow homosexuals into full membership and life of the church including ordination. The More Light Presbyterian Church Movement is a little more radical than the mission of the Covenant Network, of which our Fairmount Church is a member.

The Covenant Network states its mission as to support the mission and unity of the Presbyterian Church, to articulate and act on the church’s historic, progressive vision, to work for a fully inclusive church, and to find ways to live out the graciously hospitable Gospel by living together with our fellow members in the PC(USA). It is in working to be a fully inclusive church that it advocates for the full participation of Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals and transgendered people. Not just Fairmount Church, but Forest Hill Presbyterian Church, Noble Road Presbyterian Church, Avon Lake Presbyterian Church,

Church of the Covenant, and Kingsville Presbyterian Church are all part of this Covenant Network and have signed statements to work toward total inclusivity with in our churches.

In support of the Covenant Network's stand, Pastor Joanna Adams from Morningside Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, states that there are far more important issues than homosexuality when choosing church leaders. Jesus never mentioned the topic of homosexuality, but he did have a lot to say about justice and excluding people and including everyone – particularly those who are excluded elsewhere in society. She says that she finds it unfathomable that the church, which has a compelling mission to fulfill in a world of suffering and hurt, a world in which people are languishing for want of hope and healing, has devoted so much energy to this issue. But she goes on to say that the issue of homosexuality is important for our discernment and attention because real people are involved and real justice is at stake. How can we talk about the family of God without including the approximately 10% of the population who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered? Not a single word about homosexuality is to be found in the teachings of Jesus in any of the Gospels. Jesus was the one whose eyes and ears and heart were always open to those on the margins, those who were excluded – The Samaritans, the women of his day, the tax collectors, people who had been beaten up and left in a ditch. Churches like ours who are part of the Covenant Network say how can we be any less loving than the Jesus we follow?

Many of the arguments on the side of those condemning homosexuality base their reasons on Bible Verses taken out of context or by accepting the word without placing theological, historical, and scientific criticism into account. I do not want to refute all those passages in this sermon, but have a copy of a sermon delivered by Joanna Adams on that subject for anyone who would like to read it. They are available after the worship service today.

Members of the More Light Presbyterians and the Covenant Network see the Christian moral imperative to be inclusive of all people regardless of race gender or sexual orientation. We read Scripture passages like the words of Jesus in this mornings Gospel text and know that it is truly Christ's message that all shall be one. Jesus did not preach a message of "the us and the them" but that "we all are as one". Jesus also commanded that we go out and make disciples of all nations in the great commission. Jesus did not qualify who we should let into our group and he didn't ask us to only make disciples of just a few select people who fit our standards of conduct and lifestyle. He said that we should go out to all. I have jokingly said that my ministry is to set the table

for God's great banquet, to make sure that all are invited and to make sure that all are know how much their presence is wanted. Perhaps that is the call of us all.

In fact, Jesus never condemned people for their lifestyles. He was a friend of many to whom the righteous would not speak. We who follow Jesus know that all are loved by God and all are equally unworthy of that love. How then can we allow one group to say that they are not welcome or they are only welcome if they live a life according to our rules? It seems to me that the only people Jesus ever condemned or said would have a hard time getting to God's realm, were those who did not help others, those who did not see God in another human being, those who felt that they were superior to another.

Verse 5 of Psalm 8 which was read this morning affirms that we all are made in the image of God. We are all made a little lower than God and crowned with glory and honor. How can we then state that some people are not as Godly as us if all are in God's image. This is a justice issue but also a pastoral one as well. I do not know how white heterosexual males relate to prejudice and being seen as not as worthy because as you have been born into a powerful fraternity. You lucky gents have had the benefit of centuries of domination. This also puts an added burden on you when you wrestle with issues of justice and inclusivity. However, we who have not had that luxury have an ability to feel others pain is this area. I need only to think about the humiliation and anger I feel when I am within a group of men and they make a pejorative comment about a woman to imagine on a small scale how it must feel to live within our gay bashing society if you are not a heterosexual. Even though all are made in the image of God, some, it seems feel they are a little higher up the scale than others.

I imagine what it must feel like to always worry if you are being judged, if you will be accepted, and if you will be loved, and it makes my heart sad to think that we Christians have marginalized a part of God's creation into thinking that God might be that punitive and judgmental when we know God to be loving to all. Imagine the burden of being a Christian in a church that might not accept you if they knew your true sexual orientation or might strip you of your ordination even though you have been called by God into ministry in the church.

When I was in Social Work School at Columbia University, I used to go and listen to the late William Sloan Coffin preach at Riverside Church on Sundays. He wasn't exactly a warm fuzzy from the pulpit but his sermons were inspirational and extremely thought provoking. One Sunday, I heard him

preach sermon which was quoted in his book “Credo”. He was preaching on the journey of faith and that you continue this journey through your whole life as you try to live as Christ modeled. He said that his first faith hurdle to overcome was his racist attitudes being brought up as a white man. Ten years later, the feminist movement came along and he learned to battle his male chauvinism, then his classism as he worked of justice issues. Just when he thought he was finally at a resting point, he learned that he needed to open his heart and mind to GLBT people. That is the continuing call of Christ, to work toward inclusivity and sharing God’s love and grace with all. He ended his sermon saying, “As a man I consider myself at best a recovering chauvinist. As a white person I am a recovering racist, and as a straight person a recovering heterosexist. To women, African Americans, gays and lesbians, I am deeply grateful for stretching my mind, deepening my heart, and convincing me that no human being should ever be patient with prejudice at the expense of its victims.”

The session at Fairmount developed a Diversity Council this year to address how Fairmount could be a more open and inviting congregation to minorities within our community. They are still in a preliminary phase where their mission and focus is being discussed. These first few meetings brought to bear the fact that diversity is not just a race issue. To not include the GLBT people as a minority would be to leave out a vital population as we strive to be an inclusive church. The goal and work of this commission, the session, and the whole Fairmount Church congregation will be to find the way to show the community that here at Fairmount Presbyterian Church all people.... And that means ALL people are welcome and are loved children of God.

Jesus said in the Gospel of John, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word. That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” Truly we are all one in Christ. Amen.

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