

Accessible and Inclusive

Earlier this week, McKenna and I were discussing the ordination process in the PC(USA). It's a long, complicated, and often expensive journey that tends to be easier for certain specific kinds of people – like those who do not have to work fulltime in order to support themselves, for example. But we've both noticed that, quite apart from the steps that are set out in the PC(USA) constitution, the people who make up the Committee on Preparation for Ministry (or CPM – the group that oversees everyone in the ordination process) often make the process even *more* difficult for those who live with physical disabilities. One of McKenna's friends, who walks with the support of a crutch, has had to pass additional requirements in her presbytery just to 'prove' that she had the physical capacity to be ordained. One of my friends in seminary, whose calf muscle was paralyzed such that she needed a brace to be able to walk, was interrogated by her CPM on the subject of whether or not she could be an effective youth minister.

"This is why you see so few Presbyterian pastors with physical disabilities," McKenna remarked, "because too often we don't see those with disabilities as being fully capable human beings. And we don't make this process accessible to them."

Very true. And the process is not only inaccessible, it's also uncomfortable. Can you imagine walking into a room full of people who can decide whether or not you're fit to do the job that you feel called to do knowing that they see you as being somehow less than your peers because of a physical characteristic that is out of your control? I remember my friend in seminary talking about the fear that existed for her in that space. She went in knowing that she had to guard herself, to protect herself, and that she could be badly wounded by the people sitting around the table. That space was not *for* her.

Fear-filled spaces seemed to be the theme for this week. It was in this same conversation that I learned of the planned ICE raids that are supposed to be happening in Baltimore – now put off for a couple of weeks. Joining in the work that several others within the Presbytery, McKenna included, had been leading, I helped reach out to those who might be affected by this governmental action – which included many of our churches and the entire Bay Area Disciples ministry group. What I heard from pastors was a deep fear – they were fearful for their members, for those in ministries they ran, for kids in their preschools, and for congregations that rented their space. And they relayed just how afraid entire neighborhoods in their area were – some even becoming like ghost towns as residents either left or shut themselves inside. And the fear wasn't just among immigrants who were undocumented – it extended to many people of color and for good reason. One of the soloists at a sister congregation, who is here with a green card, was picked up in a raid while he was traveling over the weekend. It was quite some time before anyone bothered to work on his situation and let him go free. Right now, America is a fearful place to be if you're a person of color – no matter what your immigration status.

And all of this came on the heels of a weekend where Lauren and I found ourselves in a space that was decidedly not for *us*. We traveled out to California last weekend to attend the wedding of one of my good friends from college. They had made the trek out to Baltimore when we got married, so it was a joy to be able to return that gift. I'm not sure what made me do it, but a couple of days before the ceremony, I decided to look into the church where the ceremony was going to take place. I knew it was Lutheran, but I wondered what *kind* of Lutheran – though I couldn't imagine my friends being in a church that wasn't LGBT inclusive. So imagine my surprise when I found out that the congregation was Missouri Synod Lutheran – meaning uber conservative, refusing to ordain even women, never mind welcoming the LGBT population. The

knowledge made Lauren and me nervous. Would we be safe there? Would we be safe around the people who were attending the wedding? And most importantly, would Jonathan be safe? As we walked into the building, we were on edge. And then Lauren found the flyers just outside the sanctuary that read ‘What about homosexuality?’ My friends, it was not good. We knew that this space was not for us, and we were afraid.

It has been a week of fear-filled spaces.

And in the midst of this week, you know what really struck me? What really struck me was how much I’ve been taking for granted the blessings of being in a church and a presbytery where I generally feel pretty comfortable – where I generally feel like I’m existing in spaces that *are* for me. I’m guessing I’m not alone in that. I would guess that many of us who fall into a ‘majority’ or ‘privileged’ category – because we’re male or white or cis-gendered or straight or a citizen or able-bodied or able to make ends meet – take for granted the comfort that we enjoy because the spaces in which we exist are generally designed for us, for people who are male or white or cis-gendered or straight or a citizen or able bodied or able to make ends meet.

Reading the lectionary with this in mind, Paul’s words are particularly convicting.

This passage from Galatians can be particularly problematic. It’s one of those texts that seems to pit the body against the Spirit. It’s one of those texts that often leads people to view their body as the enemy, which is so very unhealthy. But that really was not Paul’s intent. Paul’s intent was to draw a distinction between those impulses or desires that tend to pull communities apart (like strife or jealousy or enmity or engaging in behavior that fails to honor the humanity of others and yourself) and those that tend to make communities stronger. Here, in particular, Paul is urging the Jewish-Christian community to welcome Gentile-Christians without forcing them to become circumcised. Specifically, he’s telling them to stop judging the Gentile-Christians as less-than simply because they still have their foreskins. Love your neighbor as you love yourself, Paul says, and do not bite and devour one another. It seems to me that, when read in the context of the rest of this letter, Paul is commanding the Galatians to create community that is *for* everyone – to create a community that allows the Gentile-Christians to be themselves, even if that makes the Jewish-Christians a little bit uncomfortable.

Paul’s words then issue a clear call to the Church as we witness the creation and propagation of increasingly fear-filled spaces. Love your neighbor as you love yourself, Paul says. Do not bite and devour one another. Do not give into those desires, impulses, prejudices, and biases that tear communities apart, but seek to build communities that are for *all* even if that means being a little bit uncomfortable in the process.

That means creating spaces that are accessible and inclusive – and embracing the definitions of those words.

I’ve been asked on several occasions why the Tuesday night Bible study is called ‘inclusive.’ It’s LGBTQ+, some people have said, so how is that inclusive? I’m fascinated by this question because it implies that somehow *only* LGBTQ+ people are welcome on these Tuesday night gatherings. It raises the question: what does ‘inclusive’ mean? When it comes to minorities, to those who typically have less privilege in society, it means creating a community that is as much for them as everyone else – it means creating a community where there are no barriers to access, no barriers to positions of leadership and power, where issues that are important to that demographic can be freely discussed in the same way that issues important to the majority can be, and where that demographic can exist free from fear. And it’s true, when you create a community like this, sometimes those who *had* been in the minority (like folks who are queer) become a majority of the group members because they now have a safe place to freely

be themselves. And I wonder if it feels uncomfortable for some of us to be in a space that is majority LGBT because that's not what we're used to – and so we *perceive* that it is LGBT only, when it really isn't. I wonder if we perceive it as being un-inclusive because it was designed to make queer folks feel comfortable and welcome – so while it isn't an unsafe space for those who are straight, it's also *unlike* most spaces, which are designed by and for straight folks. That difference can certainly be jarring.

Yet Paul invites us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Paul invites us to turn from that which breaks down community and to embrace that which builds it up. Paul invites us to serve one another in love. And that means creating and supporting spaces that are safe and comfortable for demographics that have typically been excluded, oppressed, and rejected – creating and supporting spaces like those that we who live in the majority are privileged to enjoy most of the time. And it means having the courage to venture into those spaces, even if it's uncomfortable, with a spirit of humility and love, trusting that by participating in those communities we not only deepen Christ-like relationships but also open ourselves to growth in the Spirit.

Friends, we live in a time when fear drives more and more people to hatred, violence, and exclusion. We live in a time when it seems like the national hobby is creating spaces that engender fear in minorities. We live in a time when this call from Paul seems urgent. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Do not bite or devour. Build communities; do not tear them down. Embrace inclusion and accessibility even if it makes you uncomfortable because in so doing we follow in the footsteps of Christ and join in God's work of creating a world that is truly for all.