

My Journey Continues...

For as long as I was in ministry, it seemed that the 'buzz' at every Annual Conference was around whatever petition was going to be brought forward that year addressing some aspect of human sexuality. I would, like many other delegates, be inundated with letters, statements, lunch conversations, hallway caucuses, (and later) emails designed to persuade me to vote a certain way to keep the tide of apostasy from reaching our personal beaches.

My seminary training encouraged a very conservative and rather literal interpretation of Scripture, which made my chosen 'side' easy... at first. But as time went on, as I continued my reading, study, conversations with godly men and women, and much prayer, it began to dawn on me that there was a huge unexamined gap in my training: i.e., we never looked at *why* we assumed that our method of 'reading' Scripture was correct. We used the Bible to support our theology, and in moral issues, we often pulled statements out of context and 'proof-texted'. End of argument. ("The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it!")

But, I've never been content to live, and teach, based on unexamined foundations. Further consideration led me to realize how inconsistent my 'camp' and I were on our so called literalism! "Well, divorce... we have a better understanding today of how marriages can be broken. So we interpret Jesus' clear statements differently." (By the way, I'm ok with that, just making a point!)

In the same way, what right minded person would think that slavery in any form, one human being owning and controlling another, was OK? Well, uh, Paul did, as did implicitly pretty much every other Biblical writer. But Paul said a number of things that needed time to be worked out in the real world, and it's no co-incidence that the Abolitionists - centuries later - were mostly Christians. Yet we won't find a single specific anti-slavery statement in Scripture!

The place of women in society and the church is another huge example of our inconsistency. Thank God we don't take many of those statements literally - I think of the wonderful ministry of FUMC's Pastor HeyYoung that we would have missed out on if we did. Not to mention all the other strong, godly women who have served well in our church and others over the years.

On a related note, take a look at the number of women who come to church with their heads covered - whoops, I call a foul! Not literal! Need I go on? I haven't even touched on the Old Testament statements which we have determined to either interpret spiritually, or metaphorically, or simply ignore. Capital punishment, war, dietary guidelines, polygamy, even which day of the week to worship (hint, it's not Sunday!) People have written books on this which are worth reading.

But I'm simply trying to give you an understanding of my personal journey here... Those of you who sat in the pews during my 20 years at FUMC heard MANY sermons either about or including statements that referred to the examination of our foundation - how many times did I preach about "progressive revelation", saying that God's word is a Living 'thing', that God still speaks to us today, *through scripture*, but also through prayer, meditation, history, reason, and experience? How many people did I annoy, sharing my newfound understandings of postmodernism, saying it wasn't the enemy like people were saying, but was a much needed course adjustment to help us 'modernists' realize that our own world view

is a huge factor in how we understand our faith today - and the same was true for the Biblical writers! Friends, like most of what I preached, I was sharing my journey, letting you 'look over my shoulder' at things I was struggling with.

So, back to where I started at the top of this page...

As the years went by, I found myself hearing those Annual Conference 'petitions' in a different way. I'm especially grateful to my 20+ year prayer and accountability partner, Tom Kulp in making this journey with me. We walked many miles, and drank a lot of Cubbyhole coffee while sharing our inner struggles with reconciling what I now consider to be a misinformed method of utilizing Scripture with our hearts, which were being shaped by the Holy Spirit. I hope that was true for me, I know it was true for Tom. Little did either of us know what we were being prepared for!

I remember that frequently, among those discussions, how I would say to Tom, something like this, "I'm so conflicted... my heart tells me one thing, and my mind tells me another! I just wish that I could find a way to reconcile the two without undermining Scripture as the foundation of my life and ministry."

How slow I was to hear the very things that I was already preaching! One resource that I read that pulled everything together for me (in other words, helped me to see where I already was) is the book by Adam Hamilton, "[Making Sense of the Bible](#)". His examination of what 'inspiration of the Scripture' really means should be required reading for anyone who wants to have an informed conversation regarding sexuality.

It was after working through this book, that my head finally caught up with my heart. I'm very sorry that it took so long, and for the people that were hurt by my silence. But I appreciate the opportunity that Pastor Tom extended to me to finish what I had started and make this statement.

So, finally, let me be clear: I fully support and applaud the work of the reconciling committee at FUMC Moorestown, and I pray regularly for your success. This church has always been a pioneer in new things and a leader within the GNJAC. I'm proud that you are continuing that legacy in following this leading of the Spirit. Let me remind you: all significant change comes with a price! I'm sad that some people have felt that this is such a stumbling block that ministry, friends, and history had to be left behind; but I understand that examining the foundations of *why* we believe is a much more difficult task than simply stating *what* we believe. I pray for those who have left, that, like mine, their journeys will continue with open hearts.

One more thing... having lived there for so long, and having so much invested in the Church as it 'always has been' (at least during my lifetime!), I certainly understand the anxiety over where this current road might lead us. I heard all the 'slippery slope' arguments over the years, and to my embarrassment, probably uttered a few of them myself. My vision of the church of the future is another thing that has changed.

Dianna and I have the privilege of regularly visiting the Asbury First UMC in Rochester, NY, the church where our son and his wife attend. This one church opened my eyes to what the UMC of the future can be. It is a very large and beautiful church, an intentionally inclusive congregation (read their statements <http://www.asburyfirst.org>) that has, so to speak, put these

sexuality issues behind them, and moved on to an incredible variety of ministries. They truly are a presence for Christ in their community, including their vibrant worship. I tried to tell one of the Pastors after my first service there that this one church has renewed my hope for our denomination, but through my blubbering I'm not sure that he understood me. I'll try again later.

May all our journeys continue....

Pastor Steve

happily retired in the Adirondacks