

Full Sermon – If we Live by the (Queer) Spirit, Let Us Be Guided by the (Queer) Spirit

A Sermon for Pride Sunday

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Luke 9:51-62

“I’ve come to the conclusion that process is how Mennonites justify and inflict violence. As long as we have a process, we have been fair, good, and kind people.” - Carol Wise, Executive Director, Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests.

Is the Holy Spirit by which Paul exhorts us to live and be guided heterosexual? If you attended the recent gathering of Central Plains Mennonite Conference you might be left wondering if this is, in fact, the case. At the very least, it apparently remains a question open for “discernment.” In stark contrast, if you attended the worship service that took place last Sunday in our fellowship hall, you would have heard different soundings of the Spirit, the fruits of the (queer) Spirit borne not out of impurity or idolatry, enmity or strife, but out of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This morning I want to reflect on what it might mean for us as a congregation to live and be guided by the queer Spirit of Christ, especially what that might mean for how we move in relation to one another as a congregation, in relation to our conference, and the wider Mennonite church.

Before I begin, I want to let you know that we will have some time following the service and our fellowship time today to report back on our experiences at Central Plains Mennonite Conference. And I hope that you will stick around to join us in this conversation. My remarks this morning should not be misinterpreted as glibly rejecting the delegates that came together representing our various congregations nor do I mean to repudiate the efforts of our conference leadership to provide guidance. Overall, I very much enjoyed my time at the annual meeting. But I think a few words are in order about what it might mean for us as a congregation to live and be guided by the (queer) Holy Spirit within the context of a conference that is still patiently, and many of us might say much too patiently, discerning the question of the place and space—the inclusion or exclusion—of non-heterosexual persons into the life of our church communities.

I begin with quote from Stephanie Krehbiel’s recent dissertation:

“In [MCUSA] structured conversations, denominational conventions, committee meetings, Sunday school circles, and many other less formal settings, queer people have been discussed; they are a concern; they have been the subjects of dialogue and discernment. They have, on

numerous occasions, been asked to share their stories....the terms of these processes constitute queer Mennonites as an unsolvable problem. Thus, I echo W.E.B. Dubois in posing this question: how does it feel to be an unsolvable problem? For queer Mennonites, what material and affective experiences result from being constituted in this way?"¹

Born out of what scholars have called, the Radical Reformation, from its beginnings the Mennonite Church has been strongly opposed to hierarchical structures of power in the Church. What makes us different from our Protestant and Catholic brothers and sisters is that we emphasize the authority of scripture over all other authorities and traditions, rulers and powers, whether secular or churchly. We have long emphasized what has been called "the priesthood of the laity," which means that we are all ministers, each and every one of us, called by God to mutual love and service to one another. Unlike other churches, in our deliberations together over what we believe and how we are to live into our calling, we have tended to eschew "creeds" and "dogmas." Instead, we have chosen the unstable path of communal discernment of the Spirit. And, so, the question that guides our living together is: "what is the Spirit saying?"

So much of this is modeled after Paul's instructions; and in Galatians we see how he addresses some of the problems that come along with community living. Aware of the difficulties of rightly discerning the Spirit, Paul implores his readers to recognize the Spirit by the fruit that it bears.

Take a second to look at the list of what is "opposed" to the Spirit and then take a look at what the Spirit looks like. On the surface, that's a pretty good list, right? What Paul doesn't say here is that the power of "the flesh" can so easily disguise itself as the fruits of the Spirit. And this is where things get dangerous. Of course, Paul knows this to be true and he takes it up elsewhere, even if he doesn't say all that needs to be said about it. If you think about it for a second you will realize that it is not uncommon for expressions of love, kindness, and patience to be rooted in deep hatred and anger and resentment against others. It is also not uncommon for something like anger and dissent to be rooted in deep love and commitment. We can all recognize this in ourselves and others. We see it in the passive-aggressiveness characteristic of "Minnesota Nice" and we see it among Republicans and Democrats in politics; we probably see it in our relationships and even in our families too. And, hey, if we're honest, we probably see it at church! I don't mean to say that everything that looks like a sheep is really a wolf — we all know that can lead to horrible cynicism. But we also know that the Donald Trumps of the world are not the only wolves among us. Now that is a strange way to begin a reflection on Mennonites! But I think it's very important. You see, I am talking less about particular persons and more about particular operations of power. What I am talking about here

1 Stephanie Krehbiel, *"Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community, and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the Mennonite Church USA,"* Ph.D. dissertation 2015, 27.

is how sin has a way of insinuating itself into our lives and relationships and into the structures in which we live and breathe. Even when organizational structures are based on a rejection of hierarchy, dynamics of power that privilege some voices at the exclusion of others can still remain in tact. The Pink Mennos among us have been trying to name this stuff for quite sometime. What they and others have been trying to name is how the operation of power and violence can enter into well-intentioned communities committed to nonviolence and peace and justice, communities that are genuinely seeking after the faithfulness of God in patient and loving discernment. You see, often times the violence of exclusion happens despite the best of intentions! That's the power of sin! And because sin is about the operation of power in relationships it doesn't affect us all in the same way, even while it threatens to destroy our communities. There are real victims and there are those who are complicit in real violence against others—even if they are at the same time kind, patient, joyful, and loving people.

Many of the spiritual practices outlined in the approved covenant can be affirmed (e.g., worship of God, prayer, fasting, generous giving, hospitality, Bible study), but we must remember that spiritual practices in and of themselves are not signs of the Gospel at work in our communities, nor do they guarantee the emergence of the truth of the Gospel, for as our history has shown us spiritual practices and discernment processes can just as easily be borne of oppressive dynamics of power, operating according to another spirit that is not of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Virtues and spiritual practices mean nothing when they are predicated on violence, when they justify the status quo, when they operate as mechanisms to manage difference at the expense of human lives and bodies, and when they regulate belief and preserve a semblance of unity at the cost of truth and justice. Cornel West says, "Justice is what love looks like in public." Well, this is true in the "public" that goes by the name of the Mennonite Church USA.

When the fruits of the Spirit are torn from the tree on which the crucified body of the queer Christ hangs, they can all too easily be put into the service of an oppressive ideological system. If kindness and gentleness, love and joy, lose their basis and roots in the queer Christ, they can quickly become their polar opposite. That is, they become signs of the power not of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, but of domination and oppression. With Paul I am convinced that Jesus means freedom and that the power of the queer Holy Spirit is always a power of liberation from bondage, freedom from enslavement. This must be the central criterion for the discernment of the Holy Spirit in our communities. Simply put: if it oppresses, it is not Gospel. If it enslaves, it is not of Jesus Christ, it is against Christ. It is anti-Christ. Perhaps what we are called to in this time is a kind of holy impatience that lives and is guided by the (queer) Spirit. According to queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Queer Christians seem to be condemned to be outside the gates of the church and away from the presence of God, while in reality they know by their own lives of suffering and commitment to integral justice that they can claim not victimhood but agency in their praxis. Queer dissidents in search of paths of

holiness through social practices of justice in sexual, religious and political areas of their lives might well be reducing the hetero-God and church to impotency.” “It is not the church which has forgotten us,” Althaus-Reid goes on to say, “the truth is that we do not know that church. We do not give authority or recognition to sinful structures that call from that very sinfulness.” In this sense, the queer Spirit guides us in the way of the affirmation of queer agency and queer life. As such it refuses to acknowledge the authority of other spirits that “justify their position on false claims which cannot be found in a path of justice.” As such, as Althaus-Reid puts it, “Queer saints are a menace and a subversive force by the sheer act of living in integrity and defiance.”²

There is another tradition in the Bible that runs alongside covenant — it’s not called contract, but prophecy. There are times when the Spirit guides us to respond to covenant and talks of discernment and patience with prophetic judgment and holy impatience, for the Spirit always calls us to live and be guided by that queer combination of love, freedom, and justice. The question for us is how might we bear witness to a Gospel that disrupts covenants predicated on the silencing and displacement of other voices? Don’t look back, Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke, for the Spirit pushes us forward into an unprecedented future of grace, a future that comes to us as a gift not to be possessed, but to be shared, a gift that opens out onto mutual love and justice. Yet it is a gift that operates according to the kind of love and forgiveness and vulnerability that is always attentive to the way the dynamics of oppressive power are at work in our relationships with one another, including our discernment processes. Anger and rage and cries for justice can indeed be signs of the peace of the Gospel alongside love and joy and kindness. They can even be the signs of the breaking of enslaving chains and signs of re-birth.

I’d like to close with the words from one of FMC’s queer saints and prophets— from a delegate session during the 2013 national meeting in Phoenix:

“My name is Katie Hochstetler and I’m a delegate from Faith Mennonite Church in Minneapolis, MN,” she said. The camera focused on her, so that everyone could see her from the projection screens, and she read her statement, her voice clear and level. “We come to you as Mennonites who are burdened by our church’s practices of exclusion, silence, and violence towards gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer people. We carry with us not only the faces of lgbt sisters and brothers, but also their hopes and dreams of a church whose language of welcome and justice matches its actual practices. It is right that as a church we carefully and prayerfully examine the meaning and disparities of race and citizenship as it is practiced in our country and in our church. We seek to understand the ways that our prejudices and privilege have hardened our hearts to the suffering of immigrant people. We repent of the ways that we have contributed to the diminishment of others by our votes, indifference or

2 Marcella Althaus-Reed, *The Queer God*, 166.

blatant support of injustice. Lives matter to God, and the cries of the marginalized do not go unnoticed. We call upon the Mennonite Church to repent for its harsh and unwelcoming treatment of the sisters and brothers, parents, teachers, leaders, friends and family among us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer. As Pink Mennos, we refuse to allow our leaders to pit marginalized groups and people against one another in the name of unity or convenience. We reject the premise that our church is incapable of understanding the insidious connections of oppression and privilege as they are played out on the bodies of immigrants, women, children, people of color, lgbt people and the many who are excluded from full participation in our church and society. We bear witness to the pain and loss that accompanies the violence of rejection, exclusion, silencing, condemnation and complacency. We affirm MLK, Jr.'s jailhouse words that 'injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' Today we bring before you our faces, our yearnings, our bodies, our dreams, our faith, and declare that we refuse to be strangers to one another. As followers of Jesus, we cannot, and will not rest until the Mennonite Church abandons its exclusionary impulses and embraces the width and breadth of God's welcome, so that all may participate fully and God's kin-dom is made whole."³

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3 Quoted in Krehbiel, "*Pacifist Battlegrounds*," 182.