

Living side by side with difference

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Thank you to the planning committee for inviting me to be part of this important gathering here in Central Plains Conference. And thank you to Kent and Mathew for the tremendous time and thought they put into their presentations. It is an honor to be among such company here.

Though Central Plains congregations can be found in nine states, my own state of Maryland is not one of them. As somewhat of an outsider, I feel a bit of trepidation coming into this group to present what is seen as controversial in most parts of the church, Mennonite and beyond. While the conversations we are having together these two days are feared by many in the church, they are envied by others. And though it may be labeled controversial, conflictual, or contentious, let us remember that this is holy work. Listening to each other, listening for the voice of God in our midst – is holy work.

I begin my own comments this morning by stating the context out of which I do hermeneutics. We like to think that we approach theology and living out of our faith objectively. But I believe we each bring our own experiences to our reading of scripture, our reading of the confession of faith and other church documents. And our experiences affect our participation in the local body of Christ of which we are a part.

Personally, I cannot help but read the bible through the eyes of a middle-aged white woman who is married to a white man. I am a mother, a sister, daughter of a Mennonite minister father, daughter of a Mennonite minister mother and now step-daughter to a Mennonite minister. I am even daughter-in-law to a Mennonite minister.

I have lived “inside the beltway” of Washington DC for over 20 years. The DC area is home to a large gay community as well as home to a large immigrant population and I am involved with both. I am pastor of a congregation that has been disciplined by its local conference for welcoming lesbian, gay and bisexual people into membership. Some of my context I have chosen and some was chosen for me.

While my own context is complicated (and lengthy) enough, it says nothing about the context of the bible: when, how, by whom it was written or how the canon was chosen and assembled.

It is important to keep context in mind as we continue talking with each other today. It is essential to recognize that some of what you take for granted, your context, may be unfamiliar to me and vice versa. In my context, having lesbian, gay and bisexual people integrated into the body of Christ has been part of our congregation's ongoing ministry of hospitality. It is part of our unified witness to the local community.

For over fifty years the congregation has had a monthly fellowship meal after worship. Forty years ago the congregation started the International Guest House, where visitors to Washington, DC stay in a home-like atmosphere for a night or a week. Thirty years ago the congregation began a ministry to adults with developmental disabilities; today Jubilee Association of Maryland provides residential services to over 100 people with developmental disabilities. In 1986, after much study and prayer, we welcomed a gay man into church membership. Twenty years ago the congregation began hosting homeless families in the church basement for a week each winter. In 2008, the congregation helped a refugee family of nine from Afghanistan relocate to the Washington area.

For some of you, this may sound like a disjointed list of activities that have more to do with mission and outreach than hospitality. But in our congregational context, hospitality is the mission and is part of how we relate to those who may find themselves on the margins of society. It is part of how we read the biblical mandate to protect the orphan and widow, and to welcome the stranger. We act in faith that as we offer refuge and a cup of water we will see the face of God. (Deut 24:19-21, Ex. 23:9, Lev.19:34, Eph 2:11-22)

As we continue our conversation this morning and this afternoon, I invite you to consider your own context. What about your life shapes the way you read the bible, the way you encounter the confession of faith, and engage with the body of Christ?

Just as essential is to acknowledge how our reading of scripture, encounter with the confession of faith and engagement with the body of

Christ shapes our context. For it is our reading of scripture, our adherence to the confession of faith and our experience of Christ at work in the local congregation that shapes the living out of our faith. This is a dynamic process: our context shapes our hermeneutical approach and in turn we strive to have our hermeneutics shape the context in which we live out our faith.

I wonder - How does your reading of scripture, your understanding of the confession of faith and your engagement with the body of Christ shape the context of your life and faith? Conversely, how does your personal context shape your understanding of scripture, the church's teachings, your experience of the body of Christ?

[I invite you to take just a minute to write down some of your first thoughts to these two questions found on your outline.]

What draws us together this weekend is discerning what the church has to say in terms of sexuality and how we express that in our life together as congregations and the conference. We do this work in the context of a society that is obsessed with sexual performance and prescribed images of beauty. We do our work in the context of a denomination that has been hesitant to talk openly about sexuality, even the good gift of sexuality. These two contexts converge and curiously lead us to talk not about sexuality of the majority – heterosexuals – issues of infidelity, pornography or teen sexuality. We instead focus on gays and lesbians in committed relationships.

(Sometimes it seems as if we begin with the erroneous assumption that gays and lesbians are all about having sex. Just for the record, this doesn't line up with the folks I know. The LGBT people I know who are in committed relationships are working, taking care of kids, on committees in their places of worship, living their lives the best they know how, following the example of Jesus. Just like for most heterosexuals, having sex is only small fraction of how LGBT people spend their time and energy.)

In any context, as Anabaptists when we have a concern, our first reaction is to turn to the bible for guidance. I appreciate the framework that Kent has presented, in exploring and explaining at binding and loosing. This moves us away from the few passages that we tend to highlight when talking about "homosexuality" and widens our vision to see more of the biblical text. Similarly, I would like to expand our scope and shift our focus.

Instead of looking at human behavior, let's look at God, at Jesus, at the Holy Spirit. What can we read in the bible about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit?

GOD

We start "in the beginning," with selected passages.

Genesis 1

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness was called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

6 And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' And it was so. ⁸God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

9 And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

(and skipping forward 3 days)

26 Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

*²⁷So God created humankind in God's image,
in the divine image God created them;
male and female God created them.*

³¹God looked at all this creation and indeed it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

We hear the familiar refrain of the creation story – God begins by creating light on the first day and concludes on the sixth day with the creation of people. And all of it is good, very good. This is a liturgical description of God and creation; there is rhythm, repetition, and at the end,

rest. Perhaps you can see this great and grand God, speaking the world into being. This is the whole world in God's hands.

Let's listen to another creation story from Genesis, chapter 2.

Genesis 2

At the time when YHWH made the heavens and the earth, there was still no wild bush on the earth nor had any plant sprung up, for YHWH had not yet sent rain to the earth and there was no human being to till the soil. Instead, a flow of water would well up from the ground and irrigate the soil.

So YHWH fashioned an earth creature out of the clay of the earth and blew into its nostrils the breath of life. And the earth creature became a living being.

YHWH planted a garden to the east, in Eden – “Land of pleasure” – and placed in it the earth creature that had been made. Then YHWH caused every kind of tree, enticing to look at and good to eat, to spring from the soil. In the center of the garden was the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Then YHWH took the earth creature and settled it in the Garden of Eden so that it might cultivate and care for the land.

Here God is depicted more as a farmer or landowner, in need of someone to cultivate and irrigate the soil. God plants a beautiful garden for the earth creature with everything it could possibly want. We know how the story continues: Despite the beauty of the garden, God recognizes that the creature is lonely. God creates wild beasts and birds and still the earth creature is lonely. So from the one earth creature, God makes a second so that they have each other, male and female. And they delight in one another.

These are our beloved creation stories.

In Genesis 1, God is the creator, taking hold of chaos and turning it into a methodical and efficient, day by day creation. And at the end of the process there are people. Then God steps back and takes a day off, a Sabbath.

In Genesis 2, the description of God is more intimate, perhaps more intuitive. God begins the whole creative process by forming a human creature out of the soil and breathing the very breath of life into its nostrils. And that same God relates to the earth creatures over time, in the beautiful garden - and in their shame.

God as omnipotent and God as intimate. We are given two creation stories in Genesis, for surely we recognize that God is too big, too complex to capture in just one story. What a gift, that creation is so multi-faceted it takes two stories to explain its meaning. Likewise, God is so complex that two stories are hardly adequate. For millennia, since before Christianity, we have lived with these two creation stories and they both point us toward what God is like.

JESUS

What about Jesus? No doubt we have heard the birth narratives recently in our churches. We know the stories well. (see Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1-2)

In Luke, the angel speaks to Mary, as well as Elizabeth and Zechariah. Jesus' parents travel to Bethlehem. With no place to stay they end up putting their baby, Jesus, in a feed trough. The local shepherds are visited by angels, the new family is visited by shepherds. After describing Jesus' baptism, the writer of Luke includes a genealogy of Jesus that traces his lineage all the way back to Adam.

Matthew **begins** the whole story with a genealogy of Jesus that starts with Abraham. In Matthew, it is Joseph who receives messages from angels, Jesus seems to be born at home and the family receives foreign astrologers as guests. Then Joseph takes Mary and the baby and flees to Egypt to escape King Herod's death threats.

For Matthew, Jesus was the new Moses, who will come out of Egypt. (Kent reminded us of this - there are 5 sermon sections in Matthew just as there are five books of the Torah.) For Luke, Jesus was the new creation, the new Adam. (see **The First Christmas** – Borg and Crossan) And we are the fortunate recipients of both of these stories. One creation story cannot contain the wonder of God. Neither can one birth story contain the glory of

who Jesus is. In fact, it takes four gospels to give us the full picture of Jesus' life and redeeming work in the world.

HOLY SPIRIT

What about the Holy Spirit? Each of the four gospels record Jesus' baptism and then we see the Holy Spirit at work.

Mark 1 - *And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

What is this Spirit that drives the beloved son into the wilderness to be tempted?

Acts 2 - *When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

Here we have a Spirit moving among many people in many languages, using wind and flame as tools. We understand this as the same Spirit; it drives Jesus into the wilderness and it helps to build up community. The writers of Mark and Acts give us these two mysterious pictures of the Spirit. The power of the Spirit is more than can be contained in one image. In fact, the Holy Spirit is not to be contained at all; it blows like wind and sets lives on fire.

We who look to the word for guidance count these biblical accounts as building blocks of our faith. And yet we recognize differences in how we tell the story of who God is and how God interacts with us as humans. Most of the time, we live comfortably with these various understandings of God - with these pictures that are wider than our narrow vision.

But sometimes, depending on our context, we forget that God is intimate and omnipotent. We gloss over what it might mean that God came to the shepherds in Israel and the gentile astrologers in Persia. There are times when we put more emphasis on having a personal relationship with Jesus than seeing the Spirit at work in the community of believers. Our

context helps determine the scriptures to which we are drawn and contributes to how we understand God and how God works in our lives.

MC USA Membership Guidelines and Teaching Positions

If we suppose that this is true, that we are drawn to some scriptures more than others, even that we understand some scriptures better than others, depending on our particular needs or situation, then what might this mean for us when we read church documents? How does our context and experience affect the way we read the confession of faith and other teaching positions? How does our context impact which portions of the teaching positions we are drawn to?

The membership guidelines from 2001 say that membership in MC USA is based on a mutual commitment to “build on the true foundation, Jesus Christ, to become a dwelling place of God in the Spirit; to be salt of the earth and light of the world.” The membership guidelines also call us to accountability, to be a “binding and loosing fellowship.” And we are called to unity in Spirit, to practice the fruits of the Spirit and celebrate rich diversity.

As if this isn't enough to live out, the membership guidelines get more specific. They say that the new denomination affirms the Confession of Faith, (article 19) the Saskatoon 1986 and Purdue 1987 statements that describe “homosexual, extramarital and premarital sexual activity as sin.” The guidelines **also** say we hold the Saskatoon and Purdue statements calling “the church to be in dialogue with those who hold differing views, to be the teaching position of the MC USA.”

(These statements were named after the locations where the delegates passed the resolutions. Saskatoon was passed in 1986 by the General Conference Mennonite Church and Purdue in 1987 by the Mennonite Church, before the merger of the two denominations in 2001. I wonder if their authors imagined the church would still refer to these “teaching positions” 25 years later. Saskatoon and Purdue say essentially the same thing though Loren Johns has a helpful line-by-line comparison on his website if you are interested.

<http://www.ambs.edu/LJohns/Resolutions.htm>)

As we have experienced over the years, there is no small amount of tension in holding all of this together - Calling certain sexual activity sin and

Continuing to dialogue with those who hold differing views. Depending on our context and experience, some of us prefer to emphasize “homosexual sexual activity” as sin while others prefer to emphasize “dialogue with those holding differing views.” We have paid very little attention to the part of the membership guidelines that says “we hold the abuse of power in its many forms, to be against the teaching position of the Mennonite Church USA.”

Herein lies our trouble. While our intention may be to adhere to the whole of these statements, our practice, at least in many congregational and conference contexts, has been to focus on “homosexual activity as sin.” We have been less consistent in our attention to “extramarital and premarital sexual activity as sin.” And I would venture a guess that we have completely forgotten or ignored the beginning sections of these teaching positions. “Sexuality is a good and beautiful gift from God, a gift of identity and a way of being in the world as male and female.” (opening statement from Saskatoon and Purdue.) In terms of the call for “dialogue with those who hold differing views” we have seen until recently a moratorium in the official church publication, *The Mennonite* magazine. Our commitment to dialogue is, at best, inconsistent across the denomination.

A closer look at Purdue and Saskatoon show that they each start with a section of affirmations that unite us (we hope) and then a series of confessions. Without these affirmations and confessions, the covenant statements that follow ring hollow. Even so, the first statement in the covenant is too often overlooked - “We covenant with each other to study the bible together and expand our insight into the biblical teachings relating to sexuality.”

The covenant section is admittedly longer than the affirmations and confessions but over the years we have chosen two sentences to highlight: the two that deal with “sin.” We have ignored the other sentences that speak of mutually bearing the burden of dialogue, prayer, compassion, ongoing discernment and openness. In short, we have focused on sin and ignored the grace and love that are contained in these teaching positions.

We can do better than this. We can open our eyes, ears and hearts wider to those around us. We have the ability to learn from the experiences and theology of others, to hear the hermeneutical approaches of others, to respectfully listen and talk with each other. The format this weekend is a great start and a good example for the rest of the denomination.

And we *have* to do better than this. The lives of our children depend upon it. Our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children are in danger of drug and alcohol abuse, risky sexual behavior and at twice the risk for suicide as straight teens. When the church turns them away, telling them they are sinners, when we speak of love but turn a cold shoulder, when we speak of being created in the image of God - except when you are not, we offer not grace but a law bound so tight it chokes.

Lest we think that this is an insignificant number of people at risk, let us remember our straight youth and young adults as well. They see their friends rejected by this church that teaches love and justice. In compassion and solidarity they also walk out the door. Perhaps not to commit suicide or to self medicate but they leave the church behind just the same.

Of course the church's rejection of LGBT people affects more than just youth. These are our children and grandchildren, nieces, nephews and cousins. They are also our best friends, doctors, accountants, teachers, musicians, coaches, scientists, even pastors and theologians. When we turn away a whole category of Jesus' followers because of who they love, we damage the body and the possibilities for healing and wholeness.

I respectfully suggest that just as we have learned to live with the complexity of the biblical text, just as we have learned to live with the multi-faceted nature of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, we must learn to live with the complexity of our teaching positions on sexuality. We must learn to live with the complexity of those created in the image of God.

We cannot assume that just because we have statements that call for dialogue and "agreeing and disagreeing in love" that we know how to do this, as individuals or congregations. It is not easy. We have to practice and teach how to engage respectfully with each other when we disagree. Respectful dialogue around LGBT concerns is so unusual and challenging that I can think of only two times, perhaps three, in my life when I have been able to participate in respectful conversations with those whom I disagree.

A WAY FORWARD

While we are learning how to listen to and speak with each other, I draw our attention to one other scripture passage from Acts 5. This is the scene where Peter and the others who have been teaching and healing in Jesus' name are brought before the religious authorities.

Acts 5: 27 *When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸saying, 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.'*

²⁹*But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. ³⁰The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you put to death by hanging him on a tree. ³¹God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³²We are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit who has been given to those who obey God."*

³³*When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. ³⁴But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, an authority on the law and respected by all the people, stood up and ordered that the apostles be put outside for a short time.*

³⁵*Then he said to them, 'Fellow-Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do with these people. ³⁶For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. ³⁷After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. ³⁸So in the present case, I tell you, leave these people alone and let them be; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will destroy itself; ³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!'*

We are gathered to discover what discernment looks like. Binding and loosing are part of our community life and are called for in our denominational guidelines. Studying the biblical text and denominational statements and acknowledging our hermeneutical perspectives is essential. What about looking for the work of the Spirit as another aspect of discernment? Might this be another way forward for us?

As we talk with each other, as we listen to each other, let us observe the lesbian and gay people who claim to be followers of Jesus, to be Anabaptist, who claim to be called by Christ. How do we see the Spirit at work among these people who are following Jesus together? How is the fruit of the Spirit evident in their lives and in the lives of their congregations?

It is a wonderful gift we have been given, the four gospels, the two creation stories, multiple examples of the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of God's people. So too, it is a gift that we have these teaching positions that allow room for the Holy Spirit to work among us in our particular contexts. By affirming, confessing and covenanting together we can move forward as a church, living with the diversity that God has created and blessed.

Let us reason together, let us listen to each other. Let us give room for the Creator to create anew. Let us make space for Jesus in our midst. Let us open ourselves to the Holy Spirit's guidance, comfort and disturbing power.