“How do we keep going?” - Stephanie Sorge, 5/5/24

Last Wednesday, two things happened nearly simultaneously. I received a text from a United Methodist clergy friend inviting particular prayer for the work of their General Conference that day. They would be voting on the “incompatibility clause,” which included this statement:“The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The language is similar to G-6.0106b in our old Book of Order. Those being ordained were expected to live according to the Scriptures, “including fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.” That language was added in 1996, and finally repealed on May 10, 2011, when the Presbytery of Twin Cities became the 87th presbytery to vote in favor of the change, which had finally cleared the hurdle on the floor of General Assembly the year before.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I celebrate the good news coming out of Charlotte last week, but the last few years have not been easy. A quarter of UMC congregations have voted to disaffiliate from the global denomination, anticipating the changes that have just been made. In the years leading up to the change in our denomination, we also saw many congregations choose to separate, including some of the biggest churches across the country. In both the UMC and PC(USA), those separations helped pave the way for change.

Just as I received the text, a PC(USA) minister posted a question in a Facebook group referring to the “Olympia Overture,” named for the Presbytery from which it originated. The Olympia Overture proposes two changes to the Book of Order. One would add sexual orientation and gender identity to our anti-discrimination statements. The second would mandate adding a reference to the non-discrimination policy in the process of examining candidates for ordination. The pastor wondered if the intent was to move towards single-mindedness in the denomination on the “LGBTQ issue,” encouraging those who disagree with it to either hide their faith or leave the denomination.

The Advisory Committee on the Constitution’s response is that candidates are already asked to affirm that they will be subject to the church’s polity and discipline. In other words, the second proposed change wouldn’t change anything in practice. However, what some hear as a necessary corrective others see as a final straw for any who interpret Christian teachings to be, using the now-stricken words from the UMC, “incompatible” with certain sexual orientations and gender identities.

It was striking to see the similar conversations in two different denominations happening at the same time. In both denominations, the road to inclusion has caused or accelerated denominational splits. As did the road to ordaining women, and racial integration in the church, and other important changes to our practice and polity. If Paul were writing today to the UMC or PC (USA), what would he say?

The early Christians in Corinth were arguing over practices, doctrines, and spirituality issues, and while he addresses some of those conflicts directly, his primary concern was the unity of the body. All the different parts are needed, and the “more excellent way” for this body to function is by treating each other with the love that they are called to live into and model as Christians.

How can the church keep going when there is so much disagreement? Only through love. How do we love people with whom we disagree? Those who have hurt you or others? Those who you think are doing harm? That’s the challenge.

Facebook hasn’t helped. Our filters tend to be more permeable on social media. We say things or phrase them in ways we wouldn’t in conversation, especially when we’re engaging with people we don’t know very well in person, if at all. We also see the less filtered, more emotionally charged comments of others. It’s easy to develop strong impressions, and even create complete character profiles, based on those limited and less representative interactions. When contentious issues arise, we dig trenches and lob grenades, bonding over our shared cause. That makes it really confusing when we see former comrades on the opposite side in a different battle.

That’s what was happening in the Olympia Overture conversation. I looked to see who was “liking” and “loving” different comments. I observed some battle lines with sadness, seeing people I know and care about on different sides. I felt righteous indignation toward others, especially those I don’t know well, but who I have too easily judged based on years of interacting in shared online spaces. My fingers itched towards the like button, and the love button, and then I was like, “Stephanie, you just wrote a whole sermon on loving each other! That love reaction is not it!” I figured I ought to re-visit what I was about to preach.

How can we continue to be the church when the divides are so deep? When the outrage is so quick? Love each other? Ugh.

I struggle to love some people. Not just the nameless ones who represent so much of what is wrong in our world today (as if it’s that simple). Not just the names and faces that are widely known, for the harm they are doing or have the potential to do. Often it is the people we know well who are the hardest to love. Those who have hurt us, or who make our lives harder, or who have hurt the people we love, can be hard to love.

What does love look like, anyway? Paul’s admonition to “bear with” and endure all things has been used against those who are already experiencing abuse and oppression. It has been used to silence protest and delay the work of justice. Cornell West said, “Justice is what love looks like in public.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The work of justice is the work of love. But there are different interpretations of what justice is, what love looks like, and what each requires of us. Those disagreements quickly become hate-filled and bitter, even in the quest to seek the loving and just path.

Peace and justice sound great, but when it comes to taking a stand, it gets harder. What happens when relationships are strained because of those stances? When there is deep hurt all around, taking any single position will likely cause hurt, but not taking a stand can be just as painful. Love each other! But how?

David LaMotte talks a little bit about love in his book, *You Are Changing the World Whether You Like it Or Not*. Insert shameless plug for the Pentecost team and our June plans. LaMotte compares love to hope as choices we can make, not feelings we experience. “Love is the active and ongoing decision to hold up another’s well-being and dignity, regardless of how you feel about that person. It is about how we treat people, sometimes not because of our feelings but rather in spite of them.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The choice to love can lead to cultivating feelings or emotions closer to it. LaMotte quotes the late John Lewis, who wrote, “For those of us who accepted [nonviolence] not simply as a tactic but as a way of authentically living our lives - our sole purpose was, in fact, love. We would settle for the proceeds of justice and equal rights.” What began as the disciplined practice of love and nonviolence morphed into compassion. By choosing to recognize the humanity and dignity of those who refused to do the same for him, Lewis felt genuine sorrow and compassion for them. They, too, were harmed by the evil systems of oppression from which they seemed to benefit.

When we think about the people who are hard to love, for whatever reasons, can we find a path to compassion? Bad behavior isn’t excused or ignored when we understand the reasons behind it, but seeking understanding can help us develop compassion for the person behind the behavior.

The church is called to love. We are called to share the love of God with others, just as Jesus did, and to do so with the goal of meaningful change in the world. What happens when we can’t even get along with each other? How does an imperfect collection of imperfect people stay together when things get hard? Only through love. Anger or frustration or despair can motivate change, but love is what endures. Love wins.

How do we love people with whom we deeply disagree, or those who have hurt us and others, or who are advocating for hurtful policies? We act in ways that respect each person’s dignity and support their well-being. We can disagree, and stake out opposing sides on different issues, while still honoring each other as children of God. We can act in loving ways towards others even as we set appropriate boundaries to protect ourselves or the community.

Sometimes, setting necessary boundaries leads to separation. How do we stay together? Maybe we don’t. Sometimes that is the most faithful response. Unity should not come at the expense of members of the body who have already been wounded, who are already more vulnerable. Unity is not a greater good than love for each other.

As a “big tent” denomination, we value the diversity of voices and perspectives. “Theological conviction” is a protected status in our current Book of Order. We have tried to pursue a both/and path. A position paper written a decade ago summarizes the challenge: “We have decided not to declare as a denomination whether same-gender sexual relationships are … to be regarded as faithful and holy. We have set ourselves on this way twice: regarding ordination and regarding marriage. This means our denomination grants the legitimacy and Christian faithfulness of directly opposing views of what Jesus Christ calls us to in one of the basic elements of human life.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Maybe it’s time to decide, or beyond time to decide. We call this an issue, but people are not issues. It is beyond time for us to state, clearly, that as a denomination, we believe that God has created the diversity of humanity and called it very good, beyond the gender binary and cisheteronormativity of our society. The inherent worth of each person is not up for debate. How can we act with love for and with each other if we continue to objectify those of us who fall outside of the cisheteronormative comfort zone, wringing our hands over this “issue?”

One of my clergy colleagues shared that his trans daughter will not be confirmed in the PC(USA) because “we are not safe for her.” He says, “I’d much rather work toward making the church safe for her than keep it safe one second longer for people who believe her very identity is a sin.”

Love itself will sometimes lead to separations within the covenants and institutions whose unity we’ve tried to preserve. Unity and conformity should not be idolized. Love is the greatest, most excellent way. But even and especially when our paths diverge, we are not excused from the command to love each other - to hold up each other’s well-being and dignity. It’s not easy. It takes practice. We practice seeing the image of Christ in each person we meet, and recognizing their dignity and worth. We strive for compassion. That’s how we love.

Love is our charge and challenge. Thankfully (?) we have plenty of opportunities to practice. As we follow Jesus on this journey, let us pursue what endures. Let us follow the most excellent way. May we each be filled to overflowing with the love of God in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to pour that love into the world. Amen.

1. https://www.umc.org/en/content/homosexuality-full-book-of-discipline-statements [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.pcusa.org/news/2011/5/10/presbyterian-church-us-approves-change-ordination/#:~:text=At%20its%20meeting%20on%20Tuesday,or%20chastity%20in%20singleness%E2%80%9D%20(G [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://pridefoundation.org/2017/02/justice-is-what-love-looks-like-in-public/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. LaMotte, David, *You Are Changing the World Whether You Like it Or Not,* p. 18-19 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/Our-Challenging-Way.pdf?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAAR2DI2hvo1HcfCue7RIlxtlJJ09iBrDwIrMOrkynGImzI1dPsuwzd138muY\_aem\_ARsEVcIzBKS8XgAuYRzKGhSWS-6Zrk\_bnUXU-Ts0V4YtNm8H7q6mGKWCzs1msLkKykv8BBQAofXnA1l9XDrJNXac [↑](#footnote-ref-5)