

WHEN ALL THE RULES BLEW OUT THE WINDOW

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 98, Acts 10:44-48

When you are a visitor in Jerusalem these days and a Protestant from the U.S. you have a sense of being a distinct minority. When our group of twenty traveled to Israel a couple of months ago, half of the group Presbyterian, and the other half Jewish, you could not help but have a sense of being a religious minority in that land. According to the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz,¹ Christians compose only 2% of Israel's population today.

Maybe there we got a taste of what it's like to be a Jew in Alabama or North Dakota. We Presbyterians were outsiders in Israel, a religious minority by a long shot, hardly worth noticing save for our prevalence in so many other places on earth.

I worshipped one Shabbat evening in an Orthodox congregation and it was a fascinating experience. The men wore kepot, (most of us goys call them yarmulkes, which I learned is the Yiddish word for kepot).

Prayer is different in the synagogue than it is in the church. I watched the men in the temple bowing whenever the name of the Almighty, the Holy One, was named in the prayers.

We stood; we sat, we prayed, and sang. And being an outsider I fumbled through the prayer book and the body language, not knowing when to do what, stand or sit, as if were playing a game of "Simon says." There were prayer shawls and prayer books and everything was sung and read in Hebrew.

The women kept on the other side of the room, separated from the men by a curtain. But this being a progressive Orthodox synagogue, the curtain was sheer and you could see the forms on the other side. There was also a woman cantor who took part at one point in the service from her side, leading both the men and the women in prayer.

Some men stood at the window to pray, and others simply mumbled their prayers from the congregation. And I was struck by the fervor and enjoyment all of them seemed to take in their being together for Shabbat evening. Afterward the men joined the women outside and reunited with their families so that they could walk home and light the candles and say the prayers that begin the Sabbath dinner.

Somehow the roof stayed on the synagogue that night, in spite of my being the only Christian in the temple! And my host at the service, another member of our group, could not have made me feel more welcome. But still I was a Gentile, and an outsider, and a huge gap of history, and ritual, and tradition stood between me and my Presbyterian upbringing in a small neighborhood church in Missouri, a vastly different experience from this service of ancient words amid people who two thousand years later maintain a ritual and a form that Jesus knew. My connection to God in the synagogue was not that I was a Jew, but that I was and am a human being; that God loves me, too, a connection that the Spirit makes, one that supersedes ritual and form. Sometimes that happens with religious divisions, the Spirit intercedes and breaks down our forms and rituals, even our sense of what is required and mandatory.

The passage today from Acts tells a story about another worship experience when the lines that divide people from one another got blown right out the window. It is the story of the baptism of the Gentiles of Cornelius' household in Caesarea.

The story takes place after the resurrection, and if the truth be known, after Pentecost as well, so it comes in this Eastertide a little out of place, a part of the story that slips out early.

The Apostle Peter had been visiting in Joppa, and in the preceding passage, had fallen into a trance in which he saw a strange vision of a four-cornered sheet being lowered from heaven loaded down with birds and reptiles and four legged beasts. (Hang in there, I know this is hard to follow for those not trained in Jungian psychology or dream therapy.) A voice said to Peter, "Get up, Peter, kill, and eat." Peter protested that he had never eaten anything unclean. But the voice said, "What God has made clean you must not call profane."

What is happening in this strange sounding vision is that the kosher laws so scrupulously described, and carefully observed through centuries of Jewish tradition from the giving of the Torah onward are being overwritten, laid aside. It is no longer necessary to keep a kosher house in order to be an observant believer. And off stage we hear glass breaking, walls falling down, and foundations cracking - because up to this point, only observant Jews were considered to be eligible to be followers of Christ.

This may seem inconsequential to you, a matter of meals and dishes and dietary laws, but for us to understand what this meant for the Jews of Jesus' day you have to think of the most controversial and unthinkable thing you can imagine (from a religious perspective) being overturned. It would be like telling Jerry Falwell that God has made it known to you that gay and lesbian and bisexual and transgendered persons may be ordained to the ministry. I know in this congregation in New York City this would not have the same shock value as it might in Lynchburg, Virginia, but you get the picture.

Basic religious understandings are being blown apart in what is happening here. Something that is bedrock to the faith is turned upside down. Something that for centuries before has been preserved is being declared to be no longer valid, and a new understanding is breaking in.

Prepared by the vision that he has had, Peter goes to Caesarea and enters the house of Cornelius, a Gentile and a Centurion, who has summoned Peter from Joppa to hear Peter preach. Cornelius had a reputation as an upright and God-fearing man, respected within the Jewish community over whom he had charge, even though he was a Gentile.

Peter takes a risk and goes to Cornelius' house, right there breaking the law of Judaism, which forbade Jews and Gentiles to enter one another's homes. By entering Cornelius' home, Peter himself becomes *unclean* in the ritual meaning of the word.

Peter preaches to Cornelius' household, telling them about Jesus, his life, his death, and his resurrection. In the midst of Peter's sermon the Holy Spirit descended upon the Gentiles in the house and Peter was blown away by what he saw, because what he saw was something he thought he would never see, in fact it might be fair to say that at an earlier time Peter might have never *wanted* to see this.

The knowledge of God that up to that time had been the sole province of Jews, was now being given to the Gentiles as well, and the carefully preserved, fastidiously kept, dutifully observed laws of circumcision, kosher observance, temple worship, the separation of the clean from the unclean, the barrier that divided the women from the men in worship, the whole cult of the priesthood, was starting to be dismantled. This was an ecclesiastical breakthrough that would lead to an earthquake of monumental proportions.

Swept up in the excitement and in awe of what was happening, Peter asked a really good question, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” In other words, who are we to withhold from these non-Jews the recognition that they too have received God’s blessing through the Holy Spirit?

Everybody there could think of a thousand years of history and a preponderance of laws, kosher and otherwise, in fact the whole instruction of the Torah itself which were sufficient reason not to baptize these Gentiles. Gentiles were, after all, not Jews, because from a Jewish perspective they were ungodly. But all of those good reasons were trumped by the fact that God had already made moot the distinctions that had previously kept these Gentiles from being baptized. What’s a little water on the forehead after God has already done by the power of the Holy Spirit what happens in baptism anyway?

After the gift of the Spirit, the rites of the church were only a faint echo, only a confirmation of what was already a *fait accompli*.

Similar dynamics are unfolding before us in the Presbyterian Church right now. For more than thirty years, our denomination has been fussing and fighting and dividing over the issue of the ordination of gay and lesbian persons to the ministries of the church, and because we believe there is one ordination to differing roles this has included a prohibition against ordaining gay and lesbian members as elders, deacons, and ministers of word and sacrament.

Over the years that prohibition has taken the form of definitive guidance offered by the General Assembly, authoritative interpretations rendered by the Stated Clerk and subsequent Assemblies, and by an amendment to the Book of Order dating back ten years.

We have made attempts to remove that clause from the Book of Order twice before, gaining the approval of the General Assembly, but failing when referred to the presbyteries for ratification. In a few weeks the General Assembly will meet again, and this time it will consider two recommendations, two bills which address the ordination question once again.

One is known as the Heartland Overture, named for the presbytery that introduced it, but also endorsed by New York City Presbytery, which would call for a vote at the Assembly level to remove the prohibitive clause from the Book of Order, a clause which, incidentally, bars from office not only gay persons but also those who are single and who are not celibate. It might pass the Assembly, but it will most likely fail if referred to the presbyteries again. There are just not enough votes to approve it nationally.

The other action the Assembly will consider is the report of a Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church established six years ago, which will

recommend six actions to the Assembly. But it's really only recommendations five and six that are controversial.

Recommendation five, in essence, invokes an interpretation of the constitution which says that while standards for ordination are set by the national church, they must be applied locally, by the Sessions and presbyteries that know their candidates' abilities and promise for ministry best. Sessions would examine candidates for elder and deacon based on the qualifications of the individual as a person, and not as a category of person, ruled out simply because they are gay or lesbian. Presbyteries would do the same for ministerial candidates.

If a candidate for the ministry believes that he or she cannot uphold the Book of Order's prohibition on the ordination of gay and lesbian persons, they would declare that belief at the time they are examined, and if the presbytery determined that the exception is not an essential tenet of the Reformed faith, that's the technical phrasing, "essentials of the Reformed faith," then the presbytery may proceed to the ordination of the candidate regardless of the Book of Order's standard.

It's a very Presbyterian way of doing things; complicated, nearly unfathomable, technical, but in this case, ultimately fair and just, because it looks at the *person* and not the *category or type* that the candidate is.

Needless to say, this recommendation five is controversial. And the sixth is like unto it. If five is controversial to those on the right in the church, six is troubling to those on the left. It advises that the best thing to do for the next two years, until the next Assembly meets, is not to take action on overtures (or bills) to remove any ordination standards including changing anything regarding ordaining gay and lesbian persons to the offices of the church.

This is to allow us as a church to *live into* this new approach to ordination, to find out what its promise and its problems are, and, from my perspective, to demonstrate to the whole church that we always have had and hopefully always will have able, gifted, and qualified gay and lesbian leaders in the church who can and should serve as Elders, Deacons, and Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

In essence, the report of the Theological Task Force to the Assembly takes seriously the essential message of Acts 10 and the baptism of the Gentiles in Cornelius' household in Caesarea. It takes notice of the fact that the Holy Spirit has already blessed and fallen upon gay and lesbian persons in the church who are today leading congregations. These able ministers, elders and deacons provide leadership in the church in ways that the larger denomination may not want to recognize but that it nonetheless depends upon.

I could cite countless gifted pastors and elders and deacons who have served the Presbyterian Church in the past and even today whom the whole denomination respects.

Elder Willard Heckel, former Dean of the Law School at Rutgers University and Moderator of the General Assembly (1972).

Rev. Mieke Vandersall, director of Presbyterian Welcome here in New York City, and former candidate under care of First Church.

David Cockcroft, Pastor Emeritus of the Riverdale Presbyterian Church, and member of this Presbytery.

Rev. Janie Spahr, Director of the organization *That All May Freely Serve*. And Rev. David Sindt, founder of what would become More Light Presbyterians.

Beyond the Presbyterian Church I could cite a pantheon of gay and lesbian saints who have served God in the church: Peter Gomes, chaplain at Harvard, a consummate preacher and witness to the faith; Fr. Henri Nouwen, Yale theologian and inspiration to a generation of seminarians; Fr. Mychal Judge, chaplain in the New York City Fire Department who died on 9/11; artist and sculptor Michelangelo; French religious composer Camille Saint-Saëns, and on and on and on. Surely God has used all these people in ways beyond our limited imaging to fulfill God's purposes in the church that defy our narrow categories.

The Presbyterian church stands at an important hour, once again, but it is not an hour we have not faced before. It happened in Caesarea, when the church discovered that the Spirit had fallen on those who were deemed unimaginable, unthinkable, least likely.

And as Peter asked about baptizing the household of Cornelius, so we ask today about other outsiders, "Can anyone withhold the laying on of hands for these people who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, just as we have?"

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¹ National Catholic Reporter Online, January 10, 2003