

The Road Less Traveled – May 5, 2017

The other day during my devotional time I read a quote by Norman Shawchuck that said, “Fear kills a mind and soul by slowly obliterating the visions we hold for our lives.” Those words spoke to me deeply on several levels, not the least of which is the latest news coming out of our Church. Not our family of faith here in Aledo, but rather the larger denomination of The United Methodist Church.

We were back in the news late last week. You may have seen stories online or seen Facebook posts referencing it. The UMC’s Judicial Council – basically the Supreme Court of our denomination – ruled on a challenge that was filed last year after a woman named Karen Oliveto was elected Bishop and assigned to oversee churches in Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, and Montana, as well as one church in Idaho. Her election made her the first openly gay or lesbian Bishop to serve in the United Methodist Church. Her election was immediately challenged as violating church doctrine, which since 1972 deemed the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching and made self-avowed, practicing homosexuals ineligible for ordination as United Methodist pastors. One week ago, the Judicial Council issued its ruling in the case. Voting 6-3, the Judicial Council ruled Bishop Oliveto’s election out of order, saying, “It is not lawful for the college of bishops of any jurisdictional or central conference to consecrate a self-avowed practicing homosexual bishop.” However, because her status as a pastor had not been previously challenged on the basis of her sexuality, the Judicial Council also ruled that she was technically in good standing at the time of her election. What that means is that, at least for now, Bishop Oliveto will continue in her position overseeing the Mountain Sky Area of the church, pending further judicial proceedings.

The case is important because it comes at a time when the longstanding debate over issues of sexuality and the church’s faithful response to them has reached a crisis point. You may remember last summer when the church’s quadrennial General Conference met, we seemed to come precariously close to an actual denominational split over the issue. Both sides seemed to be resigned to walking away and effectively starting over. Instead, a special commission was appointed to delve deeply into the issues and come back with a recommendation on how we might move forward as a unified church. That commission’s report will be presented at a special called General Conference in February 2019.

In the meantime we wait. Unfortunately while we wait those on the extreme sides of this debate continue to position, posture and in many cases, force the issue. And when I use the word “extreme,” I don’t mean unreasonable or frothing at the mouth. By “extreme” I mean those on either side of the theological spectrum for whom this single issue is THE issue that determines how we will move forward as a denomination, or whether we will move forward together at all.

I confess the whole thing leaves me unsettled at times and fearful of what the future holds for The United Methodist Church. It makes me fearful sometimes about the church that we will pass on to my son and daughter-in-law, both of whom hope to become United Methodist pastors. But then I remember words like the ones I read the other day. “Fear kills a mind and soul by slowly obliterating the visions we hold for our lives.” And words like that remind me that fear is the real enemy. Regardless of where you find yourself in this debate, the real enemy is fear. I think that’s probably why the words “fear not” or “do not be afraid” appear more than 150 times in the Bible. Because fear is the enemy.

In these rocky times, that’s what I choose to remember, and I hope you will as well. God is still God. Jesus is still Lord. We are still the church. And we are still called to our holy task. Obviously the story will continue to develop. The Commission will continue its work and eventually make its report. And when that happens, we will have something real to talk about. And talk about it we will. In the meantime, I am going to keep working. I’m going to keep striving to faithfully walk the path of a disciple of Jesus Christ. I am going to keep reaching to make real the vision for Aledo United Methodist Church. And I’m going to keep praying for God’s dream to be made manifest right here in Aledo, TX.

See you Sunday.