

Rock Stars and Prophets: Generations of Justice and Love Interview Series
A Ministry of That All May Freely Serve

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Marvin: I'm Marvin Ellison; I live in Portland, Maine. I have taught at a UCC seminary in Maine for over thirty years, teaching Christian Social Ethics. I'm now the Director of Alumni Relations at Union Seminary in New York.

And, with Dan Smith, served on the [Presbyterian Special Committee on Human Sexuality](#) that did its study between 1988 and 1991 and reported to the Baltimore General Assembly.

Dan: And, I'm Dan Smith and I am the pastor at West Hollywood United Church of Christ, formerly West Hollywood Presbyterian Church. While I was a Presbyterian, I, too, was on the task force with Marvin and about, I believe, almost twenty other folks. The General Assembly kept wrestling with the issue of gay and lesbian ordination from the 1978 report onward. And, each year as the conversation got more complex the church kept saying, "We can't begin to deal with homosexuality until we first deal with a healthy model of human sexuality." And, so in 1988 our task force was formed. It was extremely diverse and remained pretty diverse, in terms of theological and profession spectrum on the task force.

And, Marvin's going to say a little bit about what we wrestled with as we began to consider our work and then where it went.

Marvin: Ok, but also I should mention and present to the camera, this is a rainbow boa, which our friend and colleague Sylvia Thorson Smith – who is very much a part of the leadership on that '91 Presbyterian Task Force – Sylvia's not unable to be here at this conference, but she is very much here in spirit and is very much, I think, a part of our learning and the ongoing work that we try to do.

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So, one of the early decisions that we made as group on this task force was to make a choice. We said we could try to gently nudge the church to take another modest step forward on issues of sexuality, gender and difference. Or, we could be more bold and actually tell the truth about our own lives, our own struggles, the pain that was so apparent in so many people's lives around human sexuality – the deep alienation – not just for LGBTQ people but for people regardless of their sexualities.

And, the choice we made to go that second route and try to speak not “the truth” but “our truth” as best as we could discern, and then try to invite the church into a conversation around thinking about these issues in a fresh perspective that recognized that the Christian tradition for a long time has struggled with issues around human sexuality, in part because of the long-standing body/spirit dualism, but even more fundamentally because of the patriarchal dualism. And so part of the challenge that the task force began to clarify as we did our work together as a group is that we, in whatever way we could, wanted to both give a strong critique of patriarchal Christianity's craziness around sexuality and difference and gender but also offer what we hoped would be a hopeful liberating word about how we could live as persons who were both sexual persons and spirited persons who were also committed to a comprehensive social justice.

So, it wasn't a modest agenda.

Dan: Right, and one of the things that that highlighted for us was that historically for centuries the Christian church had defined sexuality in terms of the institution of marriage. If you were married, whatever you did within your marriage was acceptable. If you were not married, sex outside of marriage was not acceptable. And, we have seen from the 1960's on, how that paradigm fell apart both in terms of heterosexual marriage, in terms of young adults and changing sexual mores, in terms of the gay and lesbian community that at the time was not legally allowed to enter into marriage – and we wanted to come up with a different paradigm that would help the church, not look at form, that is whether someone was married or not, but on the substance of a relationship.

Now, where that got skewed in the buzz around this was that said, “anything goes!” It wasn't “anything goes,” at all. The ethic that we proposed that needed to be looked at for every sexual relationship was one of justice/love. That is, is what is happening within the relationship just and is it loving. And, that was the framework that we worked on to try and present something new to the church that would open the conversation and it totally exploded with negative spin.

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Marvin: So, I think part of it speaks to it both the deep craziness in the culture and in Christianized culture around issues of sex, body, women, gay persons – but it also I think, exposed how woefully inadequate the conventional Christian frame around sexuality has been - that has given very minimal guidance saying, “If you’re single remain celibate;” “If you wish to be sexually active, you must be married;” but then it gave no further guidance about what it means to live with integrity in covenanted relationships.

So, when we suggested that the framework for all relationships should be a standard of justice and love, what we believed we were doing was not lowering the standard but *raising the bar*. Because, if each and all of us expected in our relationships that we would be treated only in ways that were respectful, were just and loving, we would ask more not only for ourselves but we would also as more of ourselves in our relating.

So, the justice/love ethic got lots of attention, but I think in many ways the backlash came because we clearly said that the normative expectation is no longer heterosexuality nor was it marriage, *per se*. That it wasn’t problematic to be heterosexual it’s just that it would no longer have a privileged, favored status that’s “better than.”

Dan: Right. And one of the pieces that we experienced from the very beginning, everywhere the Task Force went for three and a half years we had open hearings at the beginning of our meetings, and then on a Sunday morning the general presbyter of the visiting presbytery that we were in, would select up to five congregations for us to be divided and go speak to, and so we engaged in conversation with the church. And in every single presentation that we had we would get tremendous resistance from people around the concept of justice/love and as soon – these were usually classes or forums – as soon as that formal forum was over and we were outside of the constraints of the church, people came up to us in droves and said:

“Please help us! My son, or my daughter is living together with their partner, boyfriend, girlfriend, heterosexual, gay, outside a marriage – we know that they are good people – we don’t know how to process this.

I’m divorced,” you know. “I’m this; I’m that; I’m gay; I’m lesbian; I have gay kids; I have lesbian kids.”

But, in the formal setting of the church, that conversation couldn’t even happen honestly in an adult forum.

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Marvin. Yes. So, I think one of the challenges – and we talk about it in the report – but I think we could have done even more, because what we said early on was that if we were going to have honest, constructive conversation there was a leadership challenge to create the conditions of safety and mutual respect, so that we could actually begin to have conversations that mattered. But, I think one of the things we learned and was very sobering was that so many in the church were too frightened to respond to that invitation but rather responded to kind of shut things down. So there was enormous pressure put on the task force. The chair of the task force and our colleague, Sylvia Thorson Smith were summoned to Louisville by national staff who then berated them about how they were risking the unity of the church. How they were putting at risk everything that the Presbyterian Church stood for. And, so there were these enormous stakes.

So, I am both very grateful that as a group we held our ground and continued to try to offer a hopeful and liberating word, but I am also persuaded that the Spirit was moving because there's no other explanation about how that report saw the light of day and began to be widely circulated – not only among Presbyterians but outside Presbyterian circles to many denominations, the World Council of Churches – it's had a strong and important influence much more broadly than our one particular denomination.

Dan: Yes, and every denomination that studied sexuality since has looked at that report and some - they tried to tweak it in one way or another – but it still is out there.

One of the, I think one of the sad things that we all learned was the request for a human sexuality study was not really meant to be a way to deal with the problems at hand around human sexuality in general, or homosexuality in particular.

And, when we got to the General Assembly, it became very clear that the spin about the report was going to take over, regardless of what the report said. In fact, I remember sitting through that entire assembly, after we had worked three and a half years – just unbelievably hard on this report – and we sat there and the report was never opened once.

No one studied the report, no one looked at the report, there were three and a half days of hearings and fighting over what people said the report said – and no one looked at the report.

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So the spin just took so far over, and it was very depressing for me and for other people who thought when we entered into this process that the church was really serious about coming up with a new framework that would help us deal with human sexuality and with gay and lesbian experience, and it was quite clear that was not the intent at all. It was just to simply to put another study out and to delay the process.

Marvin: I think for me, two sobering things just to mention quickly. One was when we were in Texas, I think it was Texas, and we were meeting with church people and I had given a brief presentation and was talking about the justice/love framework and how that grounded us in biblical values and was a way then to infuse an understanding of human sexuality that would reflect gospel commitments.

A woman stood up and looked right at me, and shaking her finger said, "Why are you talking about justice? There is nothing in the bible about justice." And that sort of put me back on my heels, needless to say, but it gave me a sense that there's much work that we have to do - including learning out of our own tradition how central the call to justice as right relationship is for all that we should be about.

But the other thing that was sobering is, as soon as the General Assembly rejected the report a pastoral letter was sent out by the Stated Clerk to reassure congregations about three things:

One: about how the General Assembly was fully committed to the authority of scripture, that I would add/implicitly read through a patriarchal lens;

Second: that the General Assembly had done nothing to tarnish the sanctity of marriage, and I would say implicitly to do anything to dislodge the favored status of marriage as the exclusive zone in which Christians and other responsible persons can be sexual beings; and

Thirdly: that the church had held the line against gay ordination.

So, those three battle lines: how you read the bible, whether you want to preserve above all the sanctity of marriage above the sanctity of persons, and the denial of the full humanity and the full membership and leadership of LBGQTQ persons were the three battle points.

Dan: Correct. And one of the ironic things is our work never deemphasized the sanctity of marriage, it simply said *being married is not sufficient*; it's the love and the justice within a marital relationship that is more important... that's what we're talking about "raising the bar."

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One of the issues that we had is: we didn't simply use heterosexual privilege, where marriage was a possibility as the ethical form for a sexual relationship or for a loving relationship. We used a wider wider lens that included people who were intentionally discriminated against. So, gay and lesbian people that could not get married at the time had an option to be included in the justice/love ethic along with heterosexual marriage and other forms of meaningful relationships for people who were sharing them.

I mean we, what we did was we listened to what the church brought to us in the hearings. And we took seriously the equality of everyone's story, not just the few that had heterosexual power and privilege in marriage and tried to incorporate everyone equally into a new ethical paradigm. And it was that threat of widening the circle and raising the bar that so rocked the boat and that just set people off on these horrible horrible tangents. And that was named as patriarchal power and privilege and just using that language just ignited a firestorm of resistance and criticism against the report among people who, you know, you wonder if they even read the report, because the he report was, across the board, lovingly inclusive of folks. And it dealt with lots of biblical principles of justice and love. The bible was never absent from that report. It's throughout that report. But it was a wider hermeneutic or a wider lens that we used.

Marvin: Right. I think what distinguished much about the report is that it uses a liberation method, by which we meant that if you are going to tell the truth, if you're going to convey a meaningful word to persons, you must pay attention to the voices of persons who have been harmed by status quo arrangements; who have been displaced and pushed to the margins. So that meant to develop a credible Christian ethic of human sexuality you would have to listen to and learn from victims and survivors of domestic abuse and sexual assault. You would have to listen to people with disabilities who have been "desexualized." You would have to listen to people of color who often are "oversexualized." You would have to listen to single persons who are trying to navigate their way to be persons both sexual and spiritual. You would have to listen and learn from LGBTQ persons and their families and their allies.

And, so that work of listening especially to the voices that had been neglected or worse – silenced, gave our report a different flavor and whenever you change the conversation partners at the table, you change the conversation. And, so I think it speaks to both the quality of the work that it was so richly informed by diverse voices, but the threat of the report is that it no longer privileged the voice and the status of only the few.

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Dan: Correct. And, what we since have learned in twenty-five years in the sociological paradigm is while the church kept saying the issue of homosexuality is destroying the church in the twenty and thirty year old generation, the issue of homosexuality was seen as the issue of human sexuality, because their lives matched identically what was going on in the gay and lesbian community. And we had so many young adults asking for a new ethical paradigm, one that would work for them, one that would include them and what they continued to see was as the church responded against gay and lesbian people, they read that also as against them. So, there is a whole generation now of twenty, thirty, forty year-olds, and even boomers, who left the church because the sexual paradigms of the church just made no sense whatsoever to their lives.

Marvin: It's not a surprise that people often disconnect from church as they are coming of age both spiritually and sexually. And when the church cannot offer a framework of understanding and support to engage people where they are, I think many self-respecting young adults leave the church because the church has left them; has wanted them to stay only if they could be infantilized.

One of the things I found really sobering is that we had a meeting once with a group of college students who were furious with the task force because they had heard enough about this justice/love framework that they came and said to us:

“We’re active in the church and we plan to stay in the church, but what we need are rules. We need to know black and white; this you can do this you cannot do; we need the list of the shoulds and the should nots and you have failed us because you have not given us just a list of rules to follow. You have given us this framework of guidance saying, ‘Decide for yourself and in consultation with those you trust what is genuinely loving, what is genuinely compassionate, what is genuinely just.’ and they said, ‘That’s too hard. We need rules.’”

And, then, I remember listening and sort of trying to figure out how I was going to begin a response, they then went on to say:

“We need rules, but,” they said, “we’re not going to keep the rules. We’re going to break the rules, and therefore we need the church to offer us forgiveness.”

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So, basically what they were saying is we need the church to be our “negative parent” and we need God to be the fearful judge in the sky who is observing our behavior and ready to catch us doing anything wrong, and because we are going to do things wrong because we are going to mess up then you need to offer us forgiveness. But, what an amazing trap to keep people disempowered and infantilized rather than support them in becoming – coming of age and claiming who they are and their power to live out of their own sense of faithfulness and integrity.

Dan: Right. And, ironically, twenty-five years ahead now, as we look at the marriage equality movement, which is important on a justice basis, it becomes clear to a lot of us that that is still trying to make the old paradigm work just by expanding it. And, we need to be extremely careful that we don’t fall back into that trap so that we have – the only acceptable sex within a gay relationship is if you are married, just as the only acceptable sex within a heterosexual [relationship] is if you are married, because that paradigm does not work for where many, many people are in their lives. For those who are married it’s wonderful, but for those who are not married there has to be a larger framework.

Marvin: So, I think part of this is, I think at its best, the Protestant Reformed tradition, the Calvinist tradition understood marriage was a vocation. Some people have the calling, but not everyone has the calling to be married. It takes particular gifts and a willingness to enter into that commitment. But, it’s also the case that there are many ways that faithful, responsible people can be sexually active outside the institution of marriage.

Dan: Correct, and we had a number of widows and widowers come to us to talk about how because of pensions, especially women, if they got remarried they lost their husband’s pension, which was their sole source of income and so when their husbands died they economically couldn’t risk financially getting married, and yet developed significant loving relationships that they wanted to honor. And, so it wasn’t just a “young thing” it did the whole age spectrum of people who came to us with sincere personal and pastoral desires and needs.

Marvin: I want to go back and see if I heard you right, because this is something that I’ve observed and want to make sure I got your point clearly, earlier. You were talking... the thing that is sometimes claimed is that, especially around the extension of marriage to same sex couples, that what you see is the movement of gay and lesbian persons who are acting as if they’re straight, trying to assimilate and mainstream. You know, and I think that’s going on in some places, but the far more interesting dynamic culturally is how many in the heterosexual majority are living and acting as if they’re queer.

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I mean in part because the normative sexual practice now – for the majority of heterosexual persons is contracepted sex, not procreative sex. So people are engaging in sex for pleasure and bonding, not to make babies.

Dan: Absolutely.

Marvin: So, that's very queer. And, I think many many heterosexual couples of every age are trying to figure out what does it mean to live fairly and to share power and resources as partners in marriage relationships or all intimate relationships and break away from the traditional stereotypic gender roles for men and women and that's very queer.

And, I think third, many in the heterosexual majority have come to greatly appreciate and depend upon families of choice and not only their biological families, because so many people in a mobile society are not living in the same communities that they grew up in so – and depending on an extended tribe – that's very queer.

So, I think what's driving the religious right crazy is, not so much those of us who are LGBTQ are exerting our rights and our claims for full human dignity, and so forth, but that so many heterosexual persons have left the patriarchal box and have no interest in going back.

Dan: And another group that needs to be added to that, is those who - heterosexuals who have been divorced, people because of the economic and the human pain issues in divorce - there's now a whole community of folks who came and spoke to us who said, "I will not get married again until I first live with someone and be sure this is a relationship that's going to last."

And, I know even in my congregation we have heterosexual couples who refuse to get married and have children. They just do not want to enter into "the institution of marriage." And, we have gay and lesbian couples that can't wait to get married, you now? So, it's a very mixed bag, but I think you're right there's a lot of cross-breeding going on in terms of what is formally queer and what it formally heterosexual.

Marvin: So, I think one of the things is – I don't that our report will have an exceedingly long shelf life, but I think it does offer people some language and framework to talk about those core values and commitment that they're trying to embody in their intimate relationships as well as in their communities. So when you can say to divorced persons who are not ready to reenter a marriage without living with someone and testing that out that's not about being irresponsible or hedonistic or selfish that's about saying, "We take marriage seriously and we want to know whether our relationship will take on the substance of what is just and loving."

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And, if you give people that language, instead of feeling shamed or guilty that they're not complying with the conventional norm of celibacy in singleness, sex only in marriage – if you give them a different language it deeply resonates with what they deeply value and what they want to find in their faith community, in terms of those core commitments and respect for persons finding a diversity of ways to live with integrity with those value commitments.

Dan: Absolutely.