

More than “it is what it is” - Post GA Reflection

I've been giving a lot of thought to acceptance this week. Much of what I have learned about acceptance comes from being a member of a twelve step program for over thirty years.

Here's a part that I often read from our literature to help me out when things aren't going my way. It's a prayer, or at least a form of prayer - for me. It goes like this:

"Acceptance is the answer to all my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing, or situation – some facts of my life – unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I except that person, place, thing, or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing happens in God's world by mistake. Unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I can not be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes.”

What needs to be changed in me and my attitudes - an “inside job, so to speak. I have a lot of work to do there.

As I drove 3700 miles home via San Francisco from our General Assembly held in Portland, Oregon, I kept thinking about what might have been — had the overture for the admission of harms done and apology to the LGBTQ members and family by the church been approved closer to its original format. It is an overture, by the way, that this congregation's session approved and sent on Presbytery, helping it to get the overture to the General Assembly. Thank you.

When I arrived in Portland, I had been reeling from news of the mass shooting in Orlando that took place just days before our assembly began. It was two weeks ago today, while on the drive to Portland that I woke up to the news of the worst mass shooting in America's history, targeting the LGBTQ community.

I drove in silence for long hours, grateful for the miles and the sound of the road and the changing landscape from state to state. I didn't know how to let it sink in. The road, the travel and the silence became a prayer that extended over several states.

At the same time, the work ahead at GA began to mingle with the horror we had just witnessed. I began to think about the chance we had as an assembly and to make a strong and powerful statement as a mainline Protestant denomination, to acknowledge the harms done to the LGBTQ through years of alienation and division and the resultant suffering, an apology and a promise to do better after forty years of struggle - a very public struggle that made many feel unwelcome in church, unloved by God, and gave others rationales for marginalizing our community and those who loved and stood with us. A possibility for healing that took on even greater proportions in the aftermath of Orlando.

As the assembly continued and conversations and presentations were made, the hope I and others had - the vision - of the PCUSA standing tall and filled with Christian love entering powerfully into a national discussion with its voice of healing and love - made many of us hopeful that maybe this was finally the time when we could truly address our LGBTQ family in an unquestionably welcome way; that we could reignite the personal relationships that had too long ago become debates and issues, rather than about the people whose lives were affected by our actions or inactions on a daily basis

It was not to be. One of the Progressive Groups, Covenant Network opposed the overture from the start and with its formidable power, reach and influence weighed mightily in quieting the voices that were calling for the overture. It was an all-out effort to snuff the overture with a horizontal exercise of power that ultimately reduced it to a whimper, one that basically said, "We regret if you feel that you have been harmed."

All the while, only one of the progressive groups actively worked in support of the overture. All the others remained relatively silent or disengaged.

As I prepared these remarks, I read that we had lost a true hero and example of the power of forgiveness and courage in Elie Wiesel. I was reminded of one of his quotes:

"We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

It is how I felt as our relatively few voices were aggressively overridden by those who had a different agenda combined with those who were silent; among them those we often had considered allies.

I remember feeling as I did following the beating and death of Matthew Shepherd almost 18 years ago, thinking then that this was so horrible and such an enormous crime that finally people would see what the violence was really like toward the gay community.

That didn't happen then for the church and it didn't happen after Orlando. It seems we have not yet had enough crucifixions.

And, honestly, whatever the arguments were against the original overture, I saw none of them as anything other than a cautious milquetoast approach to justice and love.

As you can tell, I am still working my way through this...the passage on acceptance still weighs on me. What does it mean, really. Does it mean “it is what it is”; that we get all nice and friendly again after being opposed; just saying that's ok - or, well, we did the best we could, and stuff like that?

That's not acceptance for me - that more like resignation.

Where would we have been if the call for Independence in the late 1700's been lost to resignation?

On this Independence Day weekend, we know the struggles of our nation over its past and current history. We are actively engaged in trying to change the imbalance of power and resources that often gives the powerful an unfair advantage in silencing the minority to assure their status. We know the efforts of those who desire to quiet the poor and their needs - attempting to sow resignation, powerlessness - so folks just give up. Go they go away. Get a job. Leave us alone. Go back home where you belong...

We know what it is to rise up against oppression and unfairness and injustice rather than accept that - “it is what it is” -

Instead, we **accept** God-given call to find in ourselves an attitude of faithful commitment to others to make sure that every voice is heard, that every individual is provided for and cared for and policies or practices that dehumanize and marginalize others are simply not accepted. Not because it's *nice* to do so - but because it is our called *mission* to do so.

So, we accept and embrace a rejection of domination with an attitude that refuses to yield, stays the course, stays steady without needing to destroy or hurt anyone in the process but never shying from speaking truth to power, even it is our friends with the power.

- While I can never accept the idea that time of itself is *the* healer, that the harms and violence that exist in the world will simply go away with *time*, absolving us from the work or the risk...

- while I can never accept that the *acceptable price* of progress is a continuation of injustice while others “get comfortable” over a course of slow and anemic change -

- what I can embrace is that the acceptance is to perseverance, an acceptance of the work, the messy and hard work and the risks - that Christianity has always called us to accept, joyfully!

We have long known, haven't we, that the greatest of all risks — the expression of unconditional love for one another is our mission and our call. And such love elicits a strong reaction - not always one of welcoming....

In this morning's reading, Luke tells of the disciples being sent out, you are like lambs going into the world of wolves.

Still, Go, take nothing with you,

Where people welcome you stay

where they reject you - go.

But never doubt that the kingdom of God is with you and is near you and at hand — whether they reject or accept you - for you see, it is not their rejection or acceptance that affirms the Kingdom of God. Just whether they are ready to hear...

In a few moments, we will to the communion table, we will listen to the words of institution, to Jesus saying - remember — “my body has been broken for you, yours will be broken for others.” That’s how how it works...

We can see Jesus lifting the cup and tilting it toward the others... this is a cup to the covenant we share... not of self-love but of love and service to others in the name of God.

Overtime you eat or drink - think of me and these moments.

And he might as well have said, “And don’t think it will be easy...”

But what *joy* there is in bringing the Good News of God's love to the disenfranchised, lonely, poor...joy, even in the suffering that is ahead on the cross, and act that will free all those I love from death, once and for all. It’s a lot to grasp and of course its hard.

It’s not just a change in attitudes, my friends, but a spiritual and psychic change that we remember when we come together. We remember that we are not here to win, but to carry the message and from there, the Spirit will do the rest.

So, today, with whatever it is that may be that is heavy on our hearts, whatever we may feel in this time of transition for All Souls Parish and the retirement of your pastor and my friend - and pastor at times - Bruce Baker,

we remember to embrace the joy we have to serve one another with courage, humility and love, especially in the midst of disappointment, upheaval and uncertainty.

What enormous power we have in expressing God's love in our lives for others to see, whether in the smile offered in a glance, the door held for one who follows or precedes, the meal cooked, the listening ear, the simple gesture that lets those who may have forgotten that there is goodness and God in the world...to be able to see it in us.

And, as Jesus said to the disciples when they returned telling him how amazing it was that they were able to heal and cast out demons, even as Jesus remarked that he could see Satan falling from the heavens as they cast out suffering and illness...

He reminded them of what is perhaps most important - that we do not do these things of our own accord. It is God who does these things through us.

It is acceptance of God and trust in God - believing - not in comfort but service, with a humility and courage that brings church to those who have the least among us — have been harmed the most among us — who deserve to know the love God has for us all.

As Wiesel also said, “The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference.”

May that never be the case with us and where it is, may we accept our call to change it beginning with ourselves. Amen.