

Some of you may have been surprised to read in the Rock Hill Herald or the Charlotte Observer or through online news on Friday that the Presbyterian Church (USA), our denomination, has sent to the presbyteries a new policy concerning sexual orientation and ordination standards for clergy and elders. This morning I want to make sure everyone understands our polity or our form of church government and what exactly was done and the discussions that will follow. I will then lead us into our morning's second Scripture and how I think it can guide our conversations.

Yesterday concluded the 219th meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Our General Assembly meets every two years now in places around the country. This past week they met in Minneapolis, MN. The General Assembly is made up of representatives from all 173 presbyteries within the Presbyterian Church (USA). I say Presbyterian Church (USA) because we are a separate denomination from our brothers and sisters in the Presbyterian Church in America, Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. We share a common heritage but our church decisions do not affect one another.

The representatives that gather at General Assembly are both ordained elders and ordained clergy. Providence Presbytery sent two elders, two pastors, and one youth advisory delegate who could speak on the floor but not vote. I know that here today our congregation has one person who has served as a previous commissioner and another who served as a youth advisory delegate.

Over 6 days the GA commissioners debate different overtures that have been presented by different presbyteries. This year there were 124 overtures sent to the General Assembly to discuss and debate. They range from the innocuous to the controversial. Of course, what makes the national media are the controversial.

In the news on Friday were reports about two of the controversial overtures. Overtures which dealt with removing language which bars someone from serving as an elder or pastor who is openly gay and another overture redefining marriage from being between a man and a woman to being between two people. After much discussion, the GA approved an overture to remove the language which bars someone who is gay from serving as a pastor or elder. They rejected changes to the definition of marriage.

Now what happens is that this overture which was approved as well as other approved overtures are now sent to each of the presbyteries to vote on. A majority of the 173 presbyteries have to vote in favor of the overture for it to pass. Approved overtures are then added to the Book of Order or Book of Confessions. Providence Presbytery, our presbytery in this corner of South Carolina, will vote on these amendments in the spring meeting of 2011.

Read Luke 10:38-42

I need to let you know that I had already written a sermon prior to Friday's news. I used this text in what I wrote. This is the lectionary text for next Sunday but I misread my calendar and thought it was the text for today. That is what happens when you are gone for two weeks of study leave. But with Friday's news concerning potential ordination changes, I felt that it was my responsibility to allow the text to provide some framework for our discussions from here.

This congregation has a painful past concerning discussion about homosexuality and the church. And I am also aware that some of our families have some painful and difficult pasts and present concerning issues related to homosexuality within your own families. I am not going into where some of us are within our families. But for most of us, family discussions about homosexuality within the family are not mythical conversations but actual and continuing conversations. This congregation represents the diversity of opinion that covers our country.

But if this morning's passage is not accidental but indeed is breathed by God's Holy Spirit, then this text has something very important to say to us about how we talk about this and any issue. When Martha receives word that the Messiah is in her midst, she invites him into her home and works hard around the house getting everything all ready.

She becomes perturbed at her sister who is merely sitting at the feet of Jesus and not doing anything. Martha begs Jesus to tell her sister Mary to get off of her duff. But Jesus doesn't tell Mary to get off of her duff and do housework. He honors her for doing the better thing and sitting at his feet and listening.

So if this text is believable to us, then Jesus says that listening is more important than doing. The best response to any action that may impact you is to not do anything right away. Don't threaten to leave this church or denomination if you disagree with this conversation or decision. Don't press others to come to your way of thinking if you support this decision. Instead, it is more honorable to Jesus if we take time to listen to one another, listen to God, and listen to Scripture.

But most of us deceive ourselves if we say we are good listeners. Me included. Historically I have been one who did not listen very well but instead sought ways to manipulate others to my way of thinking. Others of us hear what others say only so that we can debate our point against them. Big problem in many marriages and families.

Others of us pay attention only to information which reinforces what we already believe anyway and disregard anything that goes against our pre-determined narrative. This last point is a big problem in our society. Whether its scientists who self select data, law enforcement who disregard evidence, parents who ignore ideas from their children, or church people who ignore the opinions of others who disagree with them on an issue before them.

Most of us form opinions on subjects and then find the data and the Scriptures to support our claim. And this is true for the most liberal of us and the most conservative of us.

So maybe this issue which is constantly before us as a church and in our families is an issue which can give us an opportunity to practice what Mary does and what Jesus preaches.

Conversations about sexuality and the church and our families scare the bajebies out of most of us. But engaging in serious conversations where we really listen to one another can lead us into the deep type of trusting community that many of us crave but that few of us ever realize.

Most church and most families miss opportunities to grow into deeper relationships because they avoid serious conversations. They don't listen to one another. Most churches and most families would rather pretend to be close rather than really grow close to one another and to God.

Jesus says the better thing is not to do.

Jesus says the better thing is to listen.

Really listen to one another and to the Scriptures.

Ultimately who we really need to listen to is God. And listening to God is not an easy thing to do. AMEN.

-Text: Luke 10:38-42

-Given: June 11, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)