

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Proper 7-C; 23 June 2019
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201906221530)

One in Christ

In nomine...

I. Intro

O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your loving-kindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

This week I went to Boston for a joint Episcopal and Lutheran Churches Young Adult and Campus Ministry Conference. The days were full, early to late, with worship, workshops and discussion groups. Even lots of our meals were organized to facilitate conversation, interaction, and cooperation. It was great fun and also exhausting. After four days of extroverting, I was ready for a long, quiet train ride home!

The learning that takes place at a conference like this takes place on many levels. There were students, lay persons, and every order of clergy. There were volunteers and full-time staff members and people like me who weren't hired specifically for campus work, but find it to be a missional imperative in their whole scope of ministry.

Together we were learning details and techniques: tools for ministry and ideas about ways we can help one another. We were also gaining wisdom and perspective as we shared with one another about our contexts and experiences, exchanging contact information so we could follow up and continue to draw on another as resources. And we did theology: big overarching work about the nature of God, the meaning of the Gospel, and the ways these things inform the work we do with young adults and college students.

II. Thesis

Our keynote speaker was Mikah Meyer, a young man who had grown up the son of a Lutheran youth pastor. Mikah spoke of the rejection and disdain he had encountered as a young gay man – not from his parents, but certainly from his community in the town of Lincoln, Nebraska. He didn't let on that he was gay, because he saw the warnings on TV, in casual epithets, and in the coarse, denigrating jokes of his friends. Mikah knew he was not welcome to bring his whole self to those relationships.

Mikah talked about other influences, and especially role models, who helped him to understand that he might not be such a monster. People who eventually helped him to lay hold of the truth that God loves him – and that God leaves no part of him unloved. Eventually Mikah learned that the very fact that he was gay was not something to be hidden, not something unholy, but that his sexual orientation was simply another facet of the person God had created him to be, the person through whom God desired to express God's love for the world. Mikah's message for young people today is the message he wished he had heard earlier on: "There's nothing wrong with you. God did not mess up on you."

There are an awful lot of us who question God's handiwork. We look at our lives, our personalities, our bodies, and we find them less than perfect. We sit in judgement on ourselves and we try to hide or cover or minimize the parts of which we are ashamed. These can be outward things like our body image. Or sometimes we fret that we're not as smart or as well-read or as socially savvy as someone else. Maybe we're too emotional, or not emotional enough. Sometimes we're ashamed of the things we like or don't like, the things we struggle with or the things that challenge us. There's always some ideal to which we're not living up, some standard we're not meeting. and sometimes that failure can be crushing to us.

III. Good News

But what does Paul say?

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3.27-28 NRSV)

Can you imagine how the Christians in Galatia would have heard what Paul was saying? Paul was doing an incredibly audacious thing. Paul was taking the very core of people's identities, the markers by which they knew themselves, and saying that these things were irrelevant to the question of whether God loves you.

Race. Class. Gender. These were foundational distinctions in Paul's world. These were and often still are the most pronounced ways that we know ourselves, that we make sense of ourselves in the world. They are conditions we aspire to live up to or, occasionally, to escape from. They are the basis upon which the powerful maintain their power and excuse their refusal to practice justice. They are the bases for discrimination and denigration and abuse and "othering." And Paul says these distinctions simply don't have any play in the Kingdom of God. God's love is not in any way impeded or distinguished by them.

Those same questions of race, class and gender still have play in our culture today, don't they? Mass incarceration and the whole justice system surrounding it continue to be highly racialized. And there are other issues getting play. Our culture is all in a tizzy about sexual orientation. Reproductive rights are getting a lot of attention once again. There's a lot of noise and bigotry around national origin and immigration status. There seems to be no end to the creative ways that people have for discriminating against, disempowering, and despising one another.

But Paul tells us none of those things have standing in the Kingdom of God Nobody is illegal, illegitimate, unwanted, or despised. Further, *no part of you* is messed up, wrong, unholy or irredeemable. The Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, is that Jesus has already died for you, and not just for the parts you're proudest of. Jesus died for all of you – and he died before you were born. God loves you because that's who God is, and there's nothing you can do to stop it!

IV. Invitation

Late in the conference, somebody offered a bit of wisdom about churches and welcoming. He talked about how when a baby is born into a family, often we will put bumpers on the nice furniture, and attach gates to our previously unmarked walls, in order to provide a safe and nurturing space for this newest member of our family. We happily disrupt the beauty and harmony of our home in order to care for its newest resident. Likewise when our mothers or fathers get old and come to live with us, we will change the dining room into a first-floor bedroom, build a ramp, add a railing to the bathtub: whatever it takes to make it safe and comfortable for this person we love.

This is the message of the church for us: You are loved by God: all of you is. Even the bits you're not proud of: they, too, are God's good creation. You are worthy to stand before God, as God's beloved. Before you ever drew your first breath, Jesus bled and died to drive that point home.

This is the message of the church for us, and our message as the church for others. This is our message for Rowan students and for anyone else who walks through our doors. For someone we love, we'll spare no expense. We will build a ramp, or even an elevator. Because that's what it means to love. Maybe we would even change our schedule or stand out in our community by hanging a rainbow flag to make perfectly clear the surprising welcome of Christ. Jesus did a lot more than that in order to convey to and through us a simple message: "There's nothing wrong with you. God did not mess up on you." You are loved, and you are welcome.

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