The Gospel and Gay People
A Few Excerpts From Sermons Over the Years (1995-2016)

Robert Allan Hill

New Creation

Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians is one of the great high peaks of the New Testament. It is about a whole new life, a new creation. In fact, it may be the highest peak in the whole range, the Mount Everest of the Bible. It is written to address this question: “Must a Gentile become a Jew before he can become a Christian?” Is there a religious condition to be met, prior to the reception of God’s apocalypse in Christ?

After Paul had been converted to Christ, he spent 17 years in unremarkable, quiet ministry. We know nothing of these two decades spent in Arabia. All the letters we have of Paul come from a later decade. Paul was converted to Christ, as he says earlier in this letter, “by apocalypse”. Christ revealed himself to Paul. Thus, for Paul, the authority in Christ, is not finally in the Scripture, nor in traditions, nor in reason, nor in experience. Christ captured Paul through none of these, but rather through revelation, the apocalypse of God. In short, Paul was not a Methodist.

There is a singular, awesome freedom in the way Paul understands Christ. We have yet, I believe, in the church that bears His name, to acknowledge in full that freedom.

After these 17 years, Paul went up to Jerusalem to meet with the pillars of the church. Can you picture the moment? All in one room: Paul, Peter, Andrew, James, John, Titus, Barnabas. And in that room there was argument, difference. Paul preached the cross of Christ to unreligious people, and they heard. What would the Jerusalem elders say? Jesus was a Jew, and had been circumcised. So also were all the first Christians, including Paul himself. But God had done something astounding. It was the Gentiles, not the Jews, who fervently believed the Good News. Should these unreligious children of God be brought back into the Covenant of Circumcision? No, they all agreed, no. God had done something new. So, Peter went to the circumcised, and Paul went to the uncircumcised. Peter
went to the Jews, and Paul to the Gentiles. They agreed to disagree, agreeably. And the meeting ended and it was settled.

But you know how sometimes it’s not the meeting but the meeting after the meeting that counts? What was settled in Jerusalem was unsettled later. Peter couldn’t be counted on to hold the line, and Paul told him so, to his face. Peter was inconsistent about freedom—sometimes he ate with the unclean Gentiles—that’s all of you by the way. Sometimes, when somebody was watching, he backed away. And Paul caught him at it and as he ways, “opposed him to his face”. I wish all opposition in church was so clean, direct, personal, and honest. “One of us is wrong and I think it’s you!” Paul doesn’t talk about Peter, he talks to Peter. There’s a life lesson.

The lines that are drawn in the name of religion are so marked, so indelible. Look at the Middle East, Ireland, Bosnia, Botswana, India, Quebec. We listened again the other night to the music of West Side Story, and heard the poignant plea in Maria’s song, “There’s a place for us.” For some, caught between various Montegues and Capulets, there is never a place.

Paul envisions the end of religion, Christ “the end of the law”. In its place he pictures the community of faith working through love. Whatever does not come from faith is sin.

Your primal identity does not come from your religion. Christ brings a whole new life, the end of religion and the beginning of the church, understood as the community of faith working through love.

As potent as is the power of religion to determine identity, money is stronger still. This is why in the Gospels Jesus speaks so repeatedly about money, about its dangers…where moth and rust consume. If you are used to solving your problems by writing a check, you are doubly endangered by the real problems, for which no check is large enough. I remember an old District Superintendent 25 years ago saying to me that Jesus spoke more about money than about anything else, and I was offended. “I thought it was love”, I smugly and arrogantly and full of my Union Seminary theological degree did respond.
But over time I have learned from experience, about how selfishness can hurt the spirit, and how mixed up our priorities can become. And I read the Bible weekly for 25 years, and I hear Jesus: with Zacchaeus in the Sycamore, and Matthew the tax collector, and the widow giving her mite, and the prodigal son squandering, and the man fearful of the talents, and the crafty steward, and rendering to Caesar, and—you see how the list grows?

Paul sees what we still hardly ever do see. Money can’t buy love. Finally, one’s place on the map of economic life is not one’s primal identity. It is interesting to remember at the end of his life that John Wesley worried about the growing wealth of his poor Methodists. They did what he told them. They earned all they could. They saved all they could. They gave all they could. They prospered. And in their prosperity, they were endangered. They forgot the poor, once they were not poor. Their diligence, frugality, and industry, all wondrously good things, also contained the potential to obscure their primal identity. We are not what spend, nor are we what we buy.

We are stewards, not owners. Finally we only truly own what we give away.

I remember an old friend of ours, who is now a City School Superintendent. I have watched him for 25 years, as he struggles to teach the poorest children in our region. I will not sentimentalize his work. The city schools in the northeast are in tough shape. Violence and disrespect are rampant in many places. He and I watched our own children hurt by these schools. No, we need not sentimentalize.

But I also remember another day. It was a bright June day like this one, and I had left the office for the hospital when I drove past the school which my friend led so well. There on the side lawn, moving in a circle, were 400 students, 50 teachers and administrators, and a dozen custodians and cooks. There they were—half black, half white; half rich half poor; half male half female; most straight and a few gay; Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Jew; some Republicans, and many others; some past puberty, and some a long way from it; some A students and some delinquents. But in that hour, they danced together, with a good leader. In that moment, they swayed back and forth to some new Polynesian beat and rhythm. I pulled to the curb to watch, and pray. It wasn’t quite heaven, but
you could see it from there. Neither slave nor free. No, your primal identity
does not come from your wallet, either.

What could mark more indelibly than religion and money? What could keep our attention better than religion and money? If you had to
devise a televised soap opera to mesmerize 270 million people and much
cattle for a whole year, what, other than religion and money, would you use? Any thoughts?

In the resurrection, there will be no gender. At least, according
to Paul in Galatians. In Christ, there is no ‘male and female’. Gender is
swallowed up in victory. The Oneidas and the Shakers could sense this, odd
and contrasted as were their ways of living it out.

We have yet, I doubt, to take seriously the Good News of
liberation found in these passages. Your identity does not come from your
sexuality, your gender, your orientation.

In this passage, in the Bible, Paul points to a clue, as well, to
one of our great arguments today. Here, your identity is not to be inferred
from creation….but from new creation! This apocalyptic baptismal formula
declares the erasure—who says there is nothing radical about Christ?—of
the distinction we so heighten, that between male and female.

God is calling into existence a new community of faith working
through love. There is your identity. Not what is natural but what is
heavenly about us forms our primary identity. That is, the Bible itself, from
the vantage point of this great mountain passage, opens the way for an
understanding of identity that is not just nature or creation, but new creation.
This is the community of faith working through love. Here, there is a place
where God may be doing something new, revealing something new. And,
most strangely, it may be those who are not so easily confined by the
creational categories of male and female, those who are both or neither, who
are on the edge of the new creation. I know what Paul writes in Romans, but
you still must ask yourself, at this point, which is Mount Everest: Galatians
3 or Romans 1? I think it is Galatians 3. I have come to believe that gender
and orientation do not provide our primal identity. No male and female
means no gay and straight, no homosexual and heterosexual. God is doing
something new, which includes all in the community of faith working
through love.
The trajectory of Paul’s preaching in Galatians, and thus in total, makes ample space in our churches for gay people. If you love Jesus, and especially if you love the Bible, then you may just find courage not only to defend a moral life in a post-moral culture, but also to preserve freedom for those who have found a whole new life, like Reynolds Price—a gay man, and so are harbingers of the new creation.

**Finding Our Way**

The little, daily death of service, the service of Christ, and the responsive service in Christ, is that which finally bears fruit. We shall wonder on our way home about the performatively adequate quality of our service.

For instance, the full humanity of gay people and current discrimination against them in the United Methodist church, of which from this pulpit we have spoken numerous times, continues to engage our service.

With some courage several church leaders this year published a book of divergent views regarding Christian faith and homosexuality in United Methodism, titled FINDING OUR WAY. With respect for these writers, several of whom I know personally, and a couple of whom I count as real friends, and one of whom you have heard from this pulpit not so many years ago, I present a book review, attached to the print form of this sermon, and available on my blog, and also in copy form in our office today, along with a few copies of the book reviewed, and copies of a resolution that I have submitted which has approved for consideration in my home conference, Upper New York.

With respect, and out of love, I differ with most of what is written in FINDING OUR WAY. The review will give the details. But the singular heart of that difference is the gospel itself. Our gospel reading today, taking its place within the full gospel of John, and thereby within the eternal day of grace in Jesus Christ, celebrates the liberality of the gospel, the good news of a Father’s house in which there are many rooms. A page over from our lectionary reading—they have to be read in context—we have the announcement, ‘in my Father’s house there are
many rooms’. This is the liberality of the gospel of grace, freedom, pardon, acceptance, forgiveness, mercy and love. Many rooms. One for the sisters, cousins and aunts of John Wesley, we hope. But others for Mahatma Ghandi, Anwar Sadat, Elie Wiesel, the Dalai Lama, Pope John 23, and, yes, John Calvin. There is no traction, no space in such a gospel for bigotry on the basis of status, class, race, gender, embodiment or orientation. Many rooms.

After naming the rooms, in John 14, the Johannine Jesus goes on to say that he is Way, Truth and Life. That is, wherever there is a way, wherever there is truth, and wherever there is life, there He is. So no one comes to the Father except through a way that in truth leads to life. And wherever anyone truly finds that way and truth and life, there and then they have found, or been found by Jesus Christ. We used to sing, growing up, give me 'land lots of land beneath the starry skies above'. That is a musical setting, it could be, for the liberality of today's gospel. In finding our way, the rest of the Bible can help us, and teach us, too. Jesus could teach us in Matthew 25, about caring for the least. Paul could teach us in Galatians 3, about the end of social distinctions. John could teach us, as he does today in John 12, and also later in John 14, about the priority of love. That is, as we continue to pray and work for the acceptance and full affirmation of sexual minorities in our time and in our churches, we do so listening to and for the gospel.

Again, today, you will be puzzled that there is no ethical teaching in John, no moral exhortation, no sermon the mount or sermon on the plain. None. With one exception: ‘love one another, as I have loved you’.

I grew up among people whom I think of when I go to the quiet mountains of Stockbridge, MA whence Jonathan Edwards was banished in about 1750. It is about half way home, I guess. They were practical people. They loved God by loving the things of God. They loved Nature. They loved Work. They loved other people. They loved OTHER people, people down on luck, different, in the minority, outside, excluded. They loved Country. They loved Church. They loved Family. At their best, their love was as high as Mt Marcy, and as deep as Seneca Lake, and as shimmering as Glimmer Glass, and as powerful as Niagara, and as steady as the Hudson, and as wide as Ontario and all outdoors. They knew from harsh experience the brevity of life, the horror of loss in death, the stinging pain of grief. They trusted the giver of life to give eternal life,
and then tried to live eternal life here and now, in service. I see them, these loving people, many now dead. Instinctively they eschewed exclusion, owing to a dim memory of their own times of being excluded. I wonder over time if we could see our way clear to do the same?

**Finding Our Way Book Review**


I move in five steps here: summary, overview, review, conference discussion, and concluding thoughts.

1. **Summary:** After a personal introductory frame from Job and Alexander, seven UMC general superintendents offer 10-20 page statements about Methodism and gay people, following which Job concludes with a call to prayer. Two write directly about the full humanity of gay people, one in affirmation (Talbert) and one in denial (Yambasu). Three offer administrative worries (Palmer—the discipline must be upheld), (Lowry—the center cannot hold), (Carter—the connection needs support). Two offer mildly inclusive reflections on recent conference level experience (Ward, Wenner).

2. **Overview:** The most striking feature of this collection is its nearly complete lack of theological reflection, biblical interpretation, and homiletical assessment. Does the gospel offer grace, freedom, love, acceptance, pardon, and hope to sexual minorities or not? Does the gospel disdain silent or spoken bigotry against sexual minorities or not? Where do the Scriptures (John 14, Galatians 3, Ecclesiastes, Amos 5), or the tradition (Bristol, Appomatox, Seneca Falls), or human reason (diagnostic library, psychological research,) and experience (case studies and stories of gay children harmed by religious bigotry) intersect with these chapters? Hardly at all, granted occasional interjections, more from Talbert and Carter than others. One major exception is the attention Lowry pays to Acts 15 (and so Galatians 2, which he somehow neglects), the Jerusalem Conference. He is right to do so. His reading of the passages however is exactly the full opposite
of their meaning (see, for example, J. L. Martyn, Anchor Bible Commentary, Galatians, among many others). Lowry argues that the point of the Jerusalem Conference was order. It was not. It was freedom, the freedom for which Christ sets free. Other than our own current debate the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15, Gal. 2) is the historical high water mark of religious interest in detailed sexual debate—circumcision then, gay love now. In the Bible, Paul leaves behind tradition for gospel and Peter accedes. (Freedom not order.) The uncircumcised are the recipients of the gospel (then) as are gay people (today). Lowry: ‘the famous debate at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 is a debate over order, the doctrinal discipline of the church’ (74). No. No it is not. In choosing to leave behind religious order, textual rigidity and an inherited holiness code in order to preach the gospel to the ‘genitally unclean’, men who were not circumcised on the eighth day, the church decided that gospel ever trumps tradition, and grace ever trumps order. It is the perfect biblical citation for this debate, only Lowry reads it upside down. We will not ever ‘find our (administrative) way’ until and unless we first reflect theologically, interpret biblically, and assess homiletically. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, there is no male or female. Nor gay nor straight. Are gay people people or not? 5/5 or 3/5 human? (We have a bad habit in this country, of finding ways to fractionalize the marginalized.)

We baptize, confirm, commune, forgive and bury gay people. We somehow cannot find our way to marry or ordain them? We baptize, confirm, commune, marry, ordain, forgive and bury those who have undergone surgical abortion, and offer the same to those who oppose abortion. Can we not live ‘in all things charity’?

3. Review: Palmer’s distinction to affirm ‘uphold’ more than ‘enforce’ (his assigned theme), in interpretation of the book of discipline has some merit and more grace, and reflects his own sincere, irenic temperament. Ward does honor the ‘brave witness’ of a lesbian couple who suffered the bigotry of the Mississippi conference to bear witness to their love for each other. Talbert has said and done the right thing, well prior to this collection, and his essay is the truest of the seven. He and his African colleague are the only two who directly state what they personally think regarding the full humanity of gay people. (Carter
rightly affirms that every person is created in God’s image, and laments theological incoherence.)

4. Conference (that is, Discussion): Carter. Carter calculates (perhaps accurately, but there is no documentation) that small progressive jurisdictions (we could read here, ‘northern’ could we not?) have more presence, voice, vote and leadership on boards and agencies than do larger and more moderate (we are meant to read here, ‘southern’, are we not?) jurisdictions. Talbert. Talbert simply and categorically states that the discriminatory language about gays in our church is wrong and cannot claim allegiance, loyalty or support. The UMC today provides ‘liturgical resources for pastors who may choose to use facilities of congregations to bless animals, fowls, inanimate objects, and more. Are not our LGBT sisters and brothers of sacred worth like all God’s creatures? (37) Yambasu. Yambasu equates homosexuality with promiscuity, sexual slavery, and adultery, describes the Bible as infallible, and places the denigration of gay people on par with the venerable inheritance of the ten commandments (87). The voice, or at least a voice, of Methodism in Africa. To the extent that his view represents African Methodism, it is a communicative benefit to have his remarkable and disappointing perspective stated in the raw. Lowry. Lowry implores us to keep covenant with one another, as he stated in a recent interview, ‘covenant is Old Testament 101’. Many would respond that the question is not whether to keep covenant, but in and about what to keep covenant. If the gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified, requires the affirmation of the full humanity of gay people and the full rejection of bigotry against sexual minorities in the name of scriptural authority, then the point of covenant is mutually to commit to that gospel. Covenant on behalf of rules of discipline that deny the gospel is false covenant. In the recent interview Lowry admits that a substantial USA UMC majority now affirms same gender marriage and ordination for gay people; he speaks wisely and protectively of the guaranteed appointment; he depletes the waste of resources in time and money which are going into this ongoing debacle. Wenner concludes: “I pray and work for a future where we will find ways to embrace diversity on many issues, including human sexuality, allowing us to think differently. Perhaps we may even be able to live with different answers concerning clergy who live in faithful and loving homosexual partnerships and those who choose to conduct same-gender marriages.”
Thoughts: 1. The Book of Discipline affirms a moderate pro-choice position regarding abortion. But when it comes to marriage and ordination, we do not exclude those who practice surgical abortion, nor those who reject such practice. We have a position as a church. But we allow for differences in practice, practices that both agree with and conflict with our stated position. We do not deny ardent pro-life preachers ordination because they refuse to practice or affirm others to practice abortion. Nor do we exclude from ordination women who have had abortions or men who have provided pastoral help to others in the course of such a procedure. If we can find a way to live together, regarding marriage and ordination, when it comes to abortion, we should be able to do so regarding homosexuality. 2. The first task of an interpreter is to honor and affirm the texts interpreted. In this case, rightly, our general superintendents, interpreters of the book of discipline, affirm the value of the book to be interpreted. Once the general conference has passed off a version of the discipline for another four years, it falls to the bishops, along with others to interpret and apply it. It may help our leaders to rehearse again some of the basic modes of interpretation of texts, biblical texts and others, taught and learned years earlier. Most passages, including your favorite scriptural passage, parable, story, psalm or teaching, allow more than one faithful reading. There may for sure be out of bounds readings, but multiple legitimate ones, too. Simply on a non-literalist hermeneutic, diversity of readings of the discipline itself should be expected. So the dozen affirmations in the discipline of the requirement of pastoral care for gay people may rightly be read as a requirement for pastoral ministry for gay people who are getting married or discerning vocations. Gay marriage and ordination may be understood as not only permissible, but required, to the fulfillment of these paragraphs. 3. We further do admit that while all abhor war, some are pacifist and some are not and all are part of the UMC. Why we can allow latitude regarding issues of life and death, abortion and warfare, but not regarding love and marriage, is a mystery and truly says much about the remains of the mind of the church (UMC). 4. Marriage: UMCBOD Para. 340 2.a.3.a. (Duties of pastor) To perform the marriage ceremony after due counsel with the parties involved and in accordance with the laws of the state and the rules of the United Methodist Church. The decision to perform the ceremony shall be the right and responsibility of the pastor. So. Do we mean this? Are we going to ‘enforce’ as Br. Palmer says ‘enforce the
discipline”? Here the burden of responsibility is clearly, unequivocally placed upon the pastor whose ‘right and responsibility’ it is to decide to marry a couple. There is no shading here, no hem or haw. The pastor decides. After due counsel (pastoral care) and in accordance with state law and church rules. No comment here is offered to the situation when state law and church rules, both of which are to be upheld, are different. Rightly, the BOD leaves these difficult (pastoral) decisions in the hands of the minister. “The decision to perform the ceremony shall be the right and responsibility of the pastor”. Not the General Conference. Not the General Superintendent. Not the District Superintendent. Not the Charge Conference. The pastor. As it should be.

Fire Alarm

Our Annual Conference in Syracuse concluded yesterday. Among many other earthly delights it included a fire alarm—no harm, no injuries—during opening worship. Imagine 1500 Methodists fleeing and stampeding out of a convention center, ‘fleeing from the wrath to come’. No flames, just apocalyptic mirth and moments in the sunshine for fellowship, and for conference. It was also a truth moment. A fire alarm is ringing, right now, across Methodism. Since 2010 from Albany to Buffalo my beloved conference has lost 11% of its people. For those under 45, the disaffection is highly specific. We refuse to affirm the full humanity of gay people. Can we be surprised that people of conscience go elsewhere? What kind of future could you honestly want or expect for an excluding denomination? During the fire alarm, I took the occasion to find and meet a pastor from Binghamton, whose blog post I had read the week before. I close with Stephen Heiss’s words, for they are truly my very own:

To Bishop Mark Webb, my brother in Christ!
In the spirit of the One who said the truth will set us free, and emboldened by the freedom given by grace for which Jesus lived and died, I want and need to share with you how God has led me (and many of our colleagues) in ministries to help set at liberty those who have been held captive by the tyranny against people who are gay.
In the last few years I have officiated at several weddings for brothers and sisters who are lesbian or gay. One of those weddings—the highlight of my
ministry—was for my own daughter and the woman who is now her wife. They are so happy!

Further, much to my delight, I have plans to officiate in the near future at yet another wedding for two women, that their joy may also be complete. Bishop Webb—the long bitter era of scorn and hatred against gay people is dissolving before our very eyes. Christ has broken down the walls. Those who have lived within the law and those who have lived outside the law are sitting down together at the table of grace. The parable of the Kingdom of God as a wedding banquet has become an event in real time for hundreds of gay couples across our state. Finally, like the guest list in Jesus’ parable, those on the outside are invited to the inside of God’s grace. They must come! Nevertheless, some yet refuse the invitation. They make excuses. They cite Scriptures, yet offer no interpretive principle by which their claims are validated. They prefer the “tradition of the elders” to Jesus’ teachings about “not judging the other.” They screen for the gnats of sexual correctness while the elephants of consumer materialism, environmental degradation, and global starvation pass right by, completely unnoticed. We cannot judge them, of course, for they too are given grace. Who among us can say we have always accepted every invitation toward grace and away from judgment? And so, grace abounds!

Further, the harvest of that grace is found everywhere—even in the church!

With regard to homosexuality, we who count ourselves as United Methodists have been wandering in the wilderness of uncertainty about all things gay for 40 long years. Now the Promised Land is coming into view. During those 40 years we have attempted to trap gay folks in nets of shame. We stalked them with bible verses. We legislated against them – whereas this, and whereas that. We sent them to trials. In righteous rage we lifted stones against them.

Now, in our own time, we are dropping those stones, one by one - at first – mothers, dads, sisters, brothers, school mates, talk show hosts,
the neighbor next door.
We were learning.

Then—psychologists, pediatricians, sociologists, school teachers, neuro-scientists, biologists, counselors.
We were learning.

We were learning.

And now – baseball players, bible scholars, theologians, professional ethicists, Sunday school teachers, pastors . . . and bishops.
We are learning.
We are finally learning that being gay harms no one.
No one.
No one.

We are learning it is not a sin to be gay nor was it ever “incompatible with Christian teaching”.

We are learning that it is really OK with God if one is gay - (just as eating shrimp is OK, regardless stern biblical injunctions to the contrary!)

And so a new circle is forming.
A new circle is being created, and it is being drawn wide.
A circle of understanding.
A circle of compassion.
A circle of truth.

The complex name for that circle might be:
“the fellowship of those who are no longer throwing stones at people just because they happen to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender”

A simpler name for that circle might be:
“those who are trying to live in the light of God’s grace”

But the name of the circle I most hope for, is this one:
Resolution Presentation

You may want to affirm the full humanity of gay people. This resolution is meant to provide that chance. You may have a niece and grandson committed in a same sex marriage, and you want to affirm the full humanity of gay people. This resolution is meant to provide you that chance. You may remember the great history of upstate NY and F Douglass, ECStanton, S B Anthony and want to expand the circle of freedom to include gay people, in all and full humanity. So, this resolution, which you may want to affirm.

But.

You love the Bible, as I do. And you wonder whether you are denying the authority of Scripture, by voting for this resolution. You wonder whether you should vote for it, in spite of your love of the Bible.

What if you could vote for it, not in spite of, but because of your love of the Bible, and your concern for the authority of Scripture?

In fact, the New Testament affirms the full humanity of gay people. In Matthew 25 we are enjoined to focus on the least of these, the minority not the majority, and so there to find Christ. In John 14, we are taught that another Counselor, an Advocate, a Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth, for there were many things, too many things for Christ, in the first century, to be able to tell us, in full, then: like a creation 15 billion years in the making, and like life emerging from natural selection and random mutation, and like a certain percentage of women and men who are sexual minorities. Especially, in Galatians 3, we read that in Christ the forms of separation—religious, economic, and gender separation—no longer exist: neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, no male or female (note the slight grammatical change, a reference back to Genesis 1). No, in Christ, all these forms of separation are dead, so that we might live in love of God and neighbor. In fact, the New Testament affirms the full humanity of gay people.

But.
You have been told about verses in Romans 2 and elsewhere, wherein gay people are denied the full humanity accorded to straight people. And there is no mistaking that there are such verses. Be careful. There are also verses that prohibit women from speaking in church. There are also verses that assume the ongoing institution of slavery. There are also verses that deny the possibility of divorce. But you do not exclude women or those whose ancestors were slaves or people who have been divorced. Why not? Because you know that these verses, obscure and difficult, must be understood in the light of the main point of the Bible. The point of the Bible is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, and the gospel of Jesus Christ—the gospel of grace, freedom, acceptance, pardon, love, forgiveness and peace.

Resolution
Concerning the General Conference and Homosexuality

WHEREAS, according to The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching” and,

WHEREAS, two "agree to disagree" proposals were soundly defeated during separate votes by the nearly 1,000 delegates gathered for the United Methodist Church's 2012 General Conference in Tampa, Fla, therefore keeping the current discriminatory disciplinary language, and

WHEREAS, One defeated 2012 proposal would have changed the Book of Discipline simply to say that gays and lesbians are "people of sacred worth" and that church members “differ about whether homosexual practices (are) contrary to the will of God” and,

WHEREAS, at least 15 regional Annual Conferences have rejected the denomination’s stance on homosexuality, and

WHEREAS, 35 states now allow gay marriage, and the United Methodist Book of Discipline (para. 340 2a.3a) states that the decision to perform the ceremony shall be the right and responsibility of the pastor “in accordance with the laws of the state and the rules of the United Methodist Church.” and
WHEREAS, “one of the top reasons 59 percent of young adults with a Christian background have left the church is because they perceive the church to be too exclusive, particularly regarding their LGBT friends” (Kinnaman, David, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*), and

WHEREAS, many United Methodists in the United States, as well as persons from other countries, acknowledge that the church is divided on this issue but feel that current discriminatory disciplinary language is harmful not only to the groups that it attacks but to the future of the church, as such language is alienating to both present and future members, and

WHEREAS, a resolution very similar to this one was presented and passed by the North Carolina Conference in 2013,

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Upper New York Conference of 2015, gathered in Syracuse, NY, implore the 2016 General Conference to change the language used in The Social Principles, and to affirm the place of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) members within the church, including access both to marriage and to ordination.

*J L Martyn*

“From reading others of Paul’s letters, we know that the apostle was aware of the fact that even in the church, the beachhead of God’s new creation, there were as yet some marks of sexual and social differentiation (e.g. 1 Cor 7; Philemon). He had later therefore to think very seriously about the tension between the affirmation of real unity in Christ and the disconcerting continuation of the distinguishing marks of the old creation. In writing to the Galatians he does not pause over that matter.

“In Rom 1: 18-32, Paul uses an argument explicitly based on creation, drawing certain conclusions from the “things God has made” in “the creation of the cosmos” (Rom 1:20). In effect, Paul says in this passage that God’s identity and the true sexual identity of human beings as male and female can both be inferred from creation.
“What a different argument lies before us in Gal 3:26-29, 6:14-15! Here the basis is explicitly not creation, but rather the new creation in which the building blocks of the old creation are declared to be non-existent. If one were to recall the affirmation ‘It is not good that man should be alone’ (Gen 2:18), one would also remember that the creational response to loneliness is married fidelity between man and woman (Gen 2:24, Mark 10:6-7). But in its announcement of the new creation, the apocalyptic baptismal formula declares the erasure of the distinction between male and female. Now the answer to loneliness is not only marriage, but rather the new-creational community that God is calling into being in Christ, the church marked by mutual love, as it is led by the Spirit of Christ (Gal 3:28). The result of such a radical vision and of its radical argumentation is the new-creational view of the people of God...It is Christ and the community of those incorporated into him who lie beyond religious distinctions...Baptism is a participation both in Christ’s death and in his life; for genuine, eschatological life commences when one is taken into the community of the new creation, in which unity in God’s Christ has replaced religious-ethnic differentiation. In a word, religious and ethnic differentiations and that which underlies them—the Law— are identified in effect as the “old things” that have now “passed away”, giving place to the new creation (2 Cor 5:17).” (Martyn, in passim)

**Quadrilateral**

There are indeed theological temptations in the unbalanced love of Scripture, tradition, reason or experience. As we come soon to Lent let us face them down. Let us face them down together. Let us do so by lifting our voices to admit errancy, affirm equality, explore evolution, and admire existence. The measure of preaching today in the tradition of a responsible Christian liberalism is found in our willingness to address errancy, equality, evolution and existence:

1. **God is love.**
2. **Love is both mercy and justice, both compassion and holiness.**
3. **Compassion is more important than holiness.**
4. **God loves the world (not just the church).**
5. The church lives in the culture. The church lives in the culture to transform it. (Not above it to disdain it, not below it to obey it, not behind it to mimic it, not before it hector it).

6. The church is the Body of Christ.

7. Christ is alive. Wherever there is way, truth, life...

8. Life is sacred.

9. Life is a sacred journey to freedom.

10. The Bible is freedom’s book.

11. The Bible is a source, not the source, of truth.

12. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

13. War is hell.

14. Peace is heaven. Jesus is the prince of Peace.

15. Gay people are people.

16. Women’s bodies are women’s bodies.

17. Women and men need each other.

18. There is a self-correcting spirit of truth loose in the universe.

19. The founder of Methodism is John Wesley (not John Calvin).

20. The ministers of the conference are the conference. Period.

21. Ministry is preaching.

22. The fun of faith is in tithing and inviting. ‘Remember the poor.’

23. Tithing is required. It is core, not elective.

24. Death is the last enemy. As Forest Gump said, atop his beloved’s grave, ‘My momma told me that ‘death is a part of life’. But I wish it weren’t.’

25. God’s love outlasts death.

**Exemplum Docet**

Phyllis Tribble taught us long ago that reading the Bible involves your own perspective. It matters what you bring with you into the reading room. I see women, and men, on this Sunday, trying desperately to balance the generational claims of relationship. You are trying to raise another generation to be Christian boys and girls, women and men. They know what they see.

A little boy was wandering around a hotel swimming pool, dipping his foot in the water. He said to one woman, “Are you a Christian?” “Well, I guess I am...I go to church sometimes.” And the same question to another: “Oh, yes, I try to be, I go to church now and
then, and I read the Bible when I have a chance.” Then he came to a third who said, “I most certainly am a Christian young man. I worship, pray, tithe, read the Bible and I teach Sunday school too. But tell me, why do you ask?” “Well, said the 9 year old, I a want to go swimming, and so I need to find somebody I can trust to hold my quarter, and I guess I found someone!” (ex libris: R Wilmoth). We look to examples all around us.

Our Methodist Church can happily recall the example of Peter and Paul. In the first generation of church life, there was major division just like the one we have today in our church. Does our division alienate the orthodox from the progressive? Do we wonder about the balance of tradition and gospel? Are we awkwardly trying to discuss intimate matters of the flesh, particularly the use of the male body? Peter and Paul faced it all, nearly 2000 years ago. Why can we not recall? The gospel was best received by uncircumcised people. Let me be direct without being offensive. The good news was preached and heard by men who were not circumcised—a revulsive horror to the traditional Jewish Christians. Hard enough, we may suspect, for Paul himself. If you simply substitute gay men for uncircumcised gentiles, you will see the exact parallel with our debate today. What was the example given us? In the first ‘general conference’, Jerusalem 48ad, left and right, Paul and Peter, traditional and progressive found a way forward. For the sake of the gospel they included all those ritually unclean, repulsively uncircumcised, culturally different, gentile men—and sent them Paul as their apostle. Peter went to the Jews, Paul to the Gentiles. The church agreed to disagree, agreeably. With one footnote: all would remember the poor. What does our text say today...new..commandment? Paul and Peter found a way to handle something new, and still to make full space for what had been received. This is the example that Jesus has shown us, in his life, and in the lives of his own.

**Conference Quadrilateral**

Born a Methodist, ordained to the Methodist ministry, I will die a Methodist, a superannuated Methodist preacher. I am not leaving the church with which I have grown up and old. All the lastingly good things of my life have come as gifts of grace, in and through this very

The church though is human, very human. As Tillich wrote long ago, ‘the church is always both a representation and a distortion of the divine’. 2012 has proven that again. I did not leave my church, but in significant measure my church has left me. Methodism lives on four levels, or through four forms of conference. A conference, incidentally, is a time and place in which to confer with one another. Each of the four has one specific task. Our general conference, 1000 global delegates gathered once every four years, is responsible to write and rewrite our Book of Discipline, our church law. The jurisdictional conferences, split up regionally across the country, meet every four years to elect general superintendents, our bishops whose job is to appoint clergy. The annual conference, a gathering of representatives from 800 or more churches, around the globe in various spots, has the single job of recruiting and retaining ministers, and ordaining them every year. Our charge conference, our local church, is in the work of making disciples, people of faith who love and give in the spirit of Jesus. Disciple, Minister, Bishop, Discipline: these are the products of our conferences.

2012 is a quadrennial year, our first having been 1784, so all four conferences met. In 2012, each was an unmitigated disaster.

Our general conference met in Tampa, in late April. Rather than affirming the full humanity of gay people, and granting the 10% of children who are gay all the graces I have happily received (name, confirmation, community, marriage, orders, forgiveness, and heaven—see above), the Discipline excludes them from marriage and ordination. We have learned the horrific habits in this country, especially in the south, of finding ways to fractionalize the marginalized. It has been heavy lifting over decades to affirm that all people are people, imbued with integrity by the grace of God. Integers not fractions. Poor people are 5/5 not 3/5 human. Former slaves are 5/5 not 3/5
human. Immigrants are 5/5 not 3/5 human. The otherwise abled are 5/5 not 3/5 human. Women are 5/5 not 3/5 human. What about gays? 3/5 still. The US constitution, later amended thank God, calculates blacks as 3/5 human. No wonder that great Boston abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, called the document, ‘a compact with the devil and a covenant with hell’. I wonder what he would say about our 2012 Discipline? “A compact with the devil and a covenant with hell”.

Our jurisdictional conferences met in five cities across the country. In the northeast, after 36 ballots, 36 ballots, 3 general superintendents were elected. As has been the case for 30 years, they were chosen not on the basis of proven ability, leadership experience, measures of churches grown or people rescued or dollars raised or buildings constructed. The role requires two proven abilities: communication and administration, preaching and leadership, speaking and deciding. Before 1970, the elections were largely of ministers from strong churches and significant pulpits, who had shown the ability to speak well to large groups and to lead complex organizations and to raise money. But over the last 30 or 40 years, at least in the north, the elections have been based not on ability or proven strength, but on representation. So we elect a woman, a black, a gay, a conservative, a liberal, an Hispanic, a native American, in order to be able to show a ‘rainbow’ of representative general superintendents. Whether or not they have any preparation or capacity to do the job, and, ironically in consequence, whether or not their tenure will have any positive impact on women, blacks, gays, conservatives, liberals, Hispanics, Native Americans or others. The gospel is about redemption, not representation. I have paid the prices needed to support the full humanity and inclusion of all these and other groups, at every level of church life, and will continue to do so—that is part of the redemptive work of the Spirit in the church. But in what other walk of life do we select significant leadership on a representative basis? Dentists? Pilots? Surgeons? And what good will it do to open up the church (I stress, I fully support this, and have done, with cost) if the church itself shrinks, ages, weakens and dies, for lack of building up? Our jurisdiction has off loaded 60% of its membership since my confirmation at age 13 in 1968. The chief reason for this is poor leadership, starting with the top. The fish rots from the head down. We have bishops who are not bishops, or are so in name only.
Our annual conference, a new and unformed body across New York State, met in June. Two overarching issues should have been engaged, because they affect dramatically the present and future quality of the clergy. Other than my questions, posed in the few minutes still allowed at annual conference for conference, that is for a time to confer, no one addressed them. The first is the proposal, supported let it be starkly recalled, by every northern so-called bishop, to eliminate the security of appointment, or guaranteed appointment, for ordained clergy (who have 4 years of college, 3 years of seminary, 3 years of supervised work—all before ordination; who earn about $45,000 a year plus housing; who agree to move, potentially every year, at the direction or whim of the general superintendent and cabinet; who are responsible to raise apportionment dollars equivalent to 25% of their church budgets (even the Mafia is kinder in percentage pickup); and who will work, if they are to be effective, 60-80 hours a week, 48 weeks a year, for 40 years: and we cannot even tell them that they somehow, in whatever tiny rural parish or other, will at least be able to feed, house and care for their children?) The second is related. With fewer people willing and able to take the deal described above, the superintendents are driven to hire non-elders, people who are not trained, not educated, not ordained, not in covenant, not traveling elders. In our yet to be fully born conference, this means that 540 of 931 pulpits are occupied, occupied by good hearted people who have not studied the Bible in depth, do not know the history or teaching of the church, have had no preparation in counseling, in sacramental understanding, in worship and preaching, in administration, in pastoral care. It is one thing to have laity Sunday once a year. But every Sunday? Do you go to laity Wednesday when the emergency room lets people who would like to be doctors administer drugs, set bones, and use ct scanners? Do you go to laity Friday when people who would like to be bankers get to open and close the vault, rig accounts, and make investments of your savings? How about housing? Do you sign up aspiring carpenters, who think they might have some talent in digging foundations and setting roof lines to build your house? Is it OK with you if the principal of your daughter’s junior high school never graduated from high school himself? Do you want child care programs run under the oversight of people who have no ongoing commitment to the host organization, and no significant formation in the potential abuses therein? Granted: education alone is not enough. Heart and head we need together. But
you cannot be both good and stupid, especially in the influential, delicate, personal, salvific work of pastoral care and preaching. Not 540, but 40 lay pastors is all we should accommodate. Have the elders preach multiple times: better one great sermon preached 7 times, than 7 dogs once each. Our annual conference provides everything but the one thing needful—a chance to confer. Our annual conference attends to everything except its job—providing excellent clergy.

I had one free Sunday this summer, when I was neither preaching or officiating or otherwise engaged. I went for worship to the church we served in Syracuse for 11 years. My mother is still a member of that Charge Conference, and we wanted to worship with her. We take a vow when we move from pulpit to pulpit not to interfere with our successors. I had not been back for Sunday worship since we left in June 1995. We left a vibrant congregation, 230 in worship in 2 services, a 7 day full building, the second strongest salary in the conference, a warm formal worship service not unlike ours here at Marsh, and, most proudly, the finest parsonage, a presidential 7 bedroom 4000 square foot beautiful colonial home, ideal for entertaining, gathering, fellowship, and simply stunning in its design, appointments, decorations, and brand new kitchen from 1991. What did we find that sad Sunday? We found a worship service that is not a worship service, with 60 present, and learned that the church was in the process of selling the parsonage. They need the money and lack the vision to hold on. And worship? Is it worship when the minister roves the sanctuary (ceiling peeling paint by the way) with a microphone, like Phil Donahue? Is it worship when beautiful four part hymn harmonies are ditched in favor of follow the bouncing ball screen pseudo music? Is it worship when the sermon is a potpourri of miscellania, unrelated to text, to setting, to mission to soul? Is it worship without a choir, without order, without reverence, without silence, without offering, without a sense of Presence? No, it has become a hodgepodge of vain attempts to be entertaining, which are not even entertaining. And enchantment? Gone, baby, gone. People do not need the church to be their Rotary Club, their neighborhood cookout, their reality TV show. They need the word of God rightly preached, the sacraments duly administered, and service rendered to the poor. When this happens, Sunday by Sunday, churches grow. You cannot preach without theology, and you cannot worship without preaching.
I love my church. I love the charge conference in Syracuse to which I and my family gave 11 of our best years. But that congregation no longer loves what I do, and what once it did. I love the Annual Conference, wherein my Dad and I and now my son in law have served with gratitude and pride. But that conference no longer respects what I do, and what laity need. I may not as rapturously love jurisdictional or general conference, but I have been to six of each, offering myself in every conceivable and available capacity, from General Board Member, to Episcopal Candidate, to Conference Preacher. But these conferences elect people whom I cannot affirm, and they affirm a Discipline I do not elect to support.

So what is a preacher to do?

I plan to slog ahead. I will find means to advocate for the disciplinary inclusion of gay people, like the ministry we have here at Marsh. I will find ways to encourage the real leadership of the church to be selected for leadership, just as we are doing here at Marsh. I will find words to convey my ongoing respect for the noble calling, the challenging adventure, that is, gospel ministry, in my annual conference, in the same fashion we do here at Marsh. And I will continue to grow the churches of the church, to live up to my Harry Denman evangelism award, and to appeal to all who have received seven helpings of faith, once in while to think of inviting a neighbor who has not had the first course of the religious meal, to come worship at Marsh. Some of my friends are leaving the UMC. Some of my friends continue to labor at night, on the back roads, the underground railroad of church inclusion. Some of my friends continue the parliamentary, the losing parliamentary, struggle. Some others are like people I see on the highway after an accident, stumbling about, trying to internalize what has happened, shaken and shaking, wandering in the haze. I have something in common with all groups. My own investment will be to continue to lift my voice, in eight words: Gay people are people. Lay people are people.

People!

Gay people are people. Gay people are more than 3/5 human. They are endowed by their creator, and ours. Life, liberty, happiness—they deserve these two, including work and friendship, ordination and marriage. Jesus can teach us this if we will let him.
Remember he said to consider the lilies of the field, and how much God loves even these slight creatures in God’s garden. Gay identity is creation, not fall, God’s gift, not human sin. Love the Lord your God, and your neighbor as yourself. Try to imagine what it must be like to be a gay 9 year old. Paul can teach us this if we will listen to him. Paul? Yes, Paul. He places the pinnacle of the good news at Galatians 3:28: ‘in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, no male and female’. And no gay and straight. The gospel is about redemption, not about tradition. Gospel trumps tradition. Gay people have integrity, are beloved, by God’s grace, just as you are and just as you do. John can help us, if we will read what he says. He says there will be another advocate, even a spirit of truth, which will lead us, lead us out into further truth, which is not in that gospel, or, even, in the Bible. There is a self-correcting spirit of truth loose in the universe. Truth involves continuity with past teaching and also discontinuity through new insight, by the gift of the spirit of truth. Our failure regarding gay people is theological. Our doctrine of creation could use a recollection of Jesus. Our doctrine of redemption could use a re-reading of Galatians. Our doctrine of the Spirit could use the voice of John. Gay people are people: the Bible tells me so. Say it with me:

Lay people are people. Beloved, it will do us no good only to open up the church. We also have responsibility to build up the church. The needs, longings, reports and voices of lay people count, matter, last, have meaning. The church exists for mission, as fire for burning. Fishing and planting, evangelism and stewardship—these are the joy of faith. And the fun, too. Lay people deserve and desire enchanting worship. We have every reason to provide vibrant, warm, ordered, traditional worship. Sixty minutes of fire and love, every Sunday. We will want to draw on the deep well of tradition—not traditionalism but tradition. Listen to the lay people. They have no need for bongo drums, shallow hymns, neglected liturgy, or bad music. They respond to excellence. They deserve it. Tradition worship is what we owe them. Likewise, lay people deserve loving, intelligent, devoted, competent pastoral ministry and preaching. We once knew that so deeply we needed no reminder. Traveling preachers, taking grace and freedom and love from post to post—this is what we once did best. Please: no more lay pastors, local pastors, deacons. Give us excellent ministers, educated and ordained, the brightest and the best! And are some of
these local pastors excellent? Excellent! Then educate them and ordain them. Put up or shut up. And lay people deserve the best that money can provide. They need to be taught, by the example of the clergy, to tithe. Tradition in worship, Traveling elders in the pulpit, Tithing all day long—I cannot begin to tell you how much difference these three currently neglected features of spiritual life make when they are practiced, and especially when they are practiced together!

Let us open up the Methodist church by living the gospel:
Gay people are people.

Let us open up the Methodist church by living the gospel:
Lay people are people.