

One Must Be Wrong, Both May Be

**A Sermon Preached by
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Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

James 4:9-11

*In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever.
Amen.*

1 Peter 5:5-11

This year marks the 150th anniversary of start of the Civil War. And today is the 148th anniversary of the last day of the Battle of Gettysburg. One of the joys of moving to Carlisle has been having a chance to see for myself some of the places where the war was fought, including the front porch of our own old courthouse downtown. As a child I learned about the civil war in morally black and white terms: the North was right, the South was wrong.

Now I can see that there were mixed motives on both sides. Many in the North, including Lincoln, were more interested in preserving the Union – at any cost -- than in ending slavery universally. Many in the South – while blinded to the evils of slavery – justly felt that they had been attacked by the North and that American and Biblical history favored the side of freedom.

Both sides saw their cause in spiritual terms and they justified the battle using spiritual language. Surprising to me is the fact that the Southern army – the “bad guys” -- was outwardly much more pious. They knew their Bibles well and quoted from them freely. They had more chaplains per unit. Their leaders – Stonewall Jackson (a Presbyterian) and Robert E. Lee among them – were some of the most devout soldiers ever. They identified with the Hebrews seeking freedom and independence from Egypt and trusted that God heard their cries just like God heard those of Moses’ people. One Presbyterian pastor from Fayetteville, NC, summarized the battle this way for his congregation:

Our cause is sacred. It should ever be so in the eyes of all true men.... How can we doubt it when we know it has been consecrated by a holy baptism of fire and blood? It has been rendered glorious by the martyr-like devotion of... hundreds...who have offered their lives as a sacrifice on the altar of the country’s freedom. [O]ur cause is the cause of God, of Christ, of humanity. It is a conflict of truth with error—of the Bible with...infidelity—of a pure Christianity with...fanaticism.... In such a cause victory is with the...good, the pure, the true, the noble, the brave....

Rev. L.W. Tucker, May 1862

(as quoted in Faith in God and Generals, by Ted Baehr and Susan Wales)

Most Northern leaders were just as blind to their own faults. Up until the start of the war northern pulpits were divided on whether the Bible permitted slavery. Abolitionists, of course, appealed to the very same Exodus story, arguing that it proves God is on the side of those who would end slavery. In 1860 Henry Ward Beecher made the distinction between North and South very clear:

[They, i.e. the South] have organized society around a rotten core; [we] have organized society about a vital heart—liberty. God holds them up to ages that men might see the difference. Now that there is a conflict, I ask which is to yield?

(as quoted in Faith in God and Generals, by Ted Baehr and Susan Wales)

How could people on both sides appeal to the same Bible, and even the same scriptures within the same Bible, and reach such different conclusions about the justice of their cause? Abraham Lincoln pointed out the logical inconsistency of this situation in his Second Inaugural Address, saying of the battle: “one [side] must be, and both may be wrong.”

Our own Presbyterian denomination split into north and south in 1861: not over the issue of *slavery* – but over the issue of loyalty to the Union (as long as you were loyal to the Union it didn’t matter to the church if you kept slaves). Southern Presbyterian pastors who were unwilling to take the oath started their own denomination, and the church remained split for 120 years.

Our own congregation must have been similarly conflicted in the early 1860s when it learned that one of our former pastors, Thomas Moore – who left here after some controversy long before the war – went on to become a trusted confidant of Jackson and Lee. After leaving here Moore pursued a truly distinguished career as a theologian, Biblical Scholar, pastor, and Moderator of the Southern Presbyterian Church’s General Assembly, their highest office: how could such a faithful person have not seen the error of slavery? [see Richard Arnold’s *Sesquicentennial History of Second Presbyterian Church*, 112]

The moral blindness of these truly great military, national, and congregational leaders humbles me. It reminds me that when we are most certain we are right and that we have found all the Bible verses to support our position, we are most in danger of being wrong. It reminds me that the people who gave Jesus the hardest time were the ones who knew the Bible best, the Pharisees. Jesus called them, “Blind Guides.” [Mathew 15:14] They could see the scriptures but they were blind to the truth on their pages, which can only be discovered with the heart.

Deeply faithful people have missed the mark on so many issues in history – issues that we now take for granted as wrong: slavery, spousal abuse, anti-semitism, and racial segregation among them. What makes us think that we have it right today? I have to wonder, what sins am *I* blind to all around me right now? What attitudes and actions do I blindly accept – and even justify using the Bible – that will make future Christians cringe in disgust, wondering, “how he could have tolerated *this* or defended *that*?” Before I throw stones at Stonewall Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Moore or others for their moral near-sightedness, I need to be sure that I am without sin in this area – and I can’t do that. Aren’t we *all* blind to our specific blindnesses? Don’t we all need to say, “I think I’m right on this issue, but I may be wrong”?

I’m strangely comforted by the moral confusion of the past. It helps me to see that if I am wrong on a particular theological issue or a matter of Biblical interpretation, it won’t be the first time that a Christian was sincerely and faithfully wrong. If giants of the faith refused to speak against slavery for thousands of years, then it’s not necessarily up to me to have all the “correct” answers right now on controversial matters that are before our national church.

I’m bringing all this up today because just like 150 years ago, there is another issue that threatens to divide families, portions of our country, and even our Presbyterian denomination. That issue is human sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. A few months ago the Presbyterian Church (USA) narrowly passed an amendment that, among other things, removed homosexuality and living together outside of marriage -- as the only two explicit bars to ordination for pastors, elders, and deacons. The amendment simply removes these mandatory prohibitions – it does not encourage or endorse homosexuality or other sexual activity outside of marriage. The change takes effect next Sunday.

We are not the first generations to deal with these issues. Matters of sexuality and sexual orientation have been openly debated for all of my adult life – and quietly long before that. Some of you, including people much older than me, have shared your own struggles to understand and adapt to these and other changes in society.

I'm not sure we've made a lot of progress in the debate over the decades. Both sides appeal to Scripture to support their arguments. Both sides claim to be the defenders of the true faith. Both sides ascribe less than the best motives to the other side. Both sides claim that in time the truth of their cause – and the error of the other side's cause – will be born out. I wonder what President Lincoln would have to say about this. Perhaps, "One side must be, both sides *may* be wrong."

For most congregations, including ours, the amendment will have little impact in the short run. Our Session has discussed the amendment at length. We will continue to nominate officers as we always have, prayerfully considering their lifestyle, spiritual gifts, faithfulness, and so on, recognizing that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We believe that *all* Christians – not just leaders – are called to a new way of life modeled after Jesus Christ.

We are not just Presbyterians; we are a Second Family. That means we're going to stick together and trust that our family ties are strong enough for us to be open about our differences. We are not all going to agree on the issues, but we can agree on a few things: unity in essentials; diversity in everything else; respect for all. This can be our family motto as we move forward to address the challenges ahead.

Some congregations, some of the largest in our denomination, are already gearing up for a fight. They are threatening to secede. We are not one of those congregations.

We did not lead the charge *against* this amendment. We did not lead the charge *for* it, either. We were privileged, however, to be asked to be the congregation that hosted the Presbytery meeting in which these matters were debated and voted on locally. (By the way, while the amendment passed nationally, it was narrowly defeated locally in a secret ballot.) This congregation was chosen to host that meeting for many reasons. I think one of them is that we are seen as leaders in our Presbytery – not leaders for one issue or another – but leaders in moderation, humility, and understanding. Our own Presbytery Council saw our particular sanctuary as a true *sanctuary*: a safe space, not allied with one side or the other, where everyone could feel welcome and respected, where the Holy Spirit has room to work in people's minds and hearts.

This isn't the first time we have insisted that our unity in Christ trumps our differences. It was late June, 1863, the weekend before the Battle of Gettysburg. While clearly supporting the Union, almost everyone in Carlisle had a friend or relative who was fighting for the Confederacy, whose troops were advancing on the way to Harrisburg. A group of pastors from Carlisle gathered and discussed the likely occupation of our town and how they should respond. Twenty-six year old Rev. John Collins Bliss was our congregation's representative. He had been installed thirty days

earlier. This was his first ordained call. [These facts bring new meaning to the phrase “ignorance is *bliss*.”]

When the pastors met they didn’t know if the occupation would last for days, months, or years. They didn’t know how the townspeople would be treated by the Southern troops. Would the town and its buildings be ransacked for supplies? Would churches be burned? Would people be taken prisoner?

All but two churches decided to keep their doors closed. Second Presbyterian was one of the congregations that chose to stay open and welcome everyone who came through our doors.

Our forebears in faith didn’t care that they might be taken advantage of by the occupying troops. They didn’t care that some might say they were giving aid and comfort to the enemy. What mattered to them was that their Lord and Savior had commanded them to love their neighbor and their enemy alike. They knew that Christian brotherhood ran deeper than national division and moral differences. So on the Sunday when Confederate troops were in Carlisle, soldiers from the South sat side by side with civilians from the North, and they prayed together in our sanctuary in a display of unity between warring peoples that is almost impossible to imagine today in many other places. The Confederate troops soon withdrew, shelling Carlisle as they left, but at least a few of them would never forget the day they experienced radical hospitality from their brothers and sisters in Christ at Second Pres.

I’m wondering if such acts of humility, respect, and mutual forbearance are again possible as we move forward into an era that promises to bring even more change and soul-searching.

Over 50,000 people were killed, wounded, or captured there in the three-days’ battle that has become known as the Battle of Gettysburg. Some, therefore, have called Gettysburg itself the Altar of the Nation, arguing that the blood shed there was a necessary atonement for our nation’s sins. Even Lincoln suggested that the war was a punishment from God.

This makes for compelling story-telling, but it is bad theology. God does not require that we shed blood – neither our own – and certainly not anybody else’s – to atone for sin. Jesus took care of that once and for all time on an altar called Calvary. This communion table – while not an altar -- represents blood shed for a cause – for all people – not just people who think like us or even think like Jesus – people of all classes and marital statuses, races, religions and sexual orientations. It is blood shed that we might be “at-one” with God and with each other – in good times and bad. We don’t need to agree with everything the church teaches to come to this table. We don’t need to agree on all points with each other. We simply need to agree that our oneness in Christ trumps everything else.

The most helpful thing we can do right now is pray.

Pray for yourself . Ask God to remove your blinders (and we all have blinders); ask God to help you see the world as others do.

Pray for people who disagree with you. Ask God to help them to understand and have compassion. Ask God to help them to see the world from your perspective in addition to their own – not to convince them of the error of their cause but to build respect.

Pray for individuals, families, congregations and presbyteries that are deeply conflicted. These are not merely *hypothetical* issues for most of us. Almost every family – including my own extended family -- has dealt in some way with homosexuality and people living together outside of marriage. Matters of human sexuality are intimately bound up with our feelings about marriage, the family, and the Bible. Passionate emotions are wrapped up in all of these topics. We all need God's help and guidance in dealing with these issues. The Session will be creating some opportunities for us all to increase our understanding on these matters in the fall. In the meantime, let's pray that God will help us to not only have the mind of Christ Jesus, but his heart as well as we move forward in faith together. Amen.

A Note from Jeff Wood on Rev. Moore: Rev. Thomas Moore, who was at Second from 1842-1844, did not serve as a chaplain in a formal sense, but he was pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Richmond VA from 1847-1868, was strongly supportive of the Confederate cause, and so was a high-profile visitor and counselor to the wounded and families of the capital city. There he was friends with Robert E. Lee and Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, the latter of course because of the Presbyterian connection (and if you really wanted to get into it, because of the connection of Jackson's first wife, who was from New Kingstown, while Moore was from Newville -- the families would have known each other). Moore stayed strongly Southern in all his orientations for the rest of his life, ending his pastorate and his life in Nashville, where he was quite a figure and where he is buried. For more on Rev. Moore see Richard Arnold's *Sesquicentennial History of Second Presbyterian Church*, p.112ff]

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