

“Come and See”
John 1:29-42
Andrew Foster Connors
2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 16, 2005

Last Thursday our presbytery voted by a margin of 86-71 to oppose an overture that was sent by our session and seven others. The overture was in support of civil marriage for same-gendered couples in the state of Maryland. This morning I bring my words to what I know is a difficult subject for some of you in this congregation. And I bring my words with a certain amount of trepidation.

I have not wanted to speak on this issue so early in my tenure at this church. I have not wanted to speak because I do not yet have relationships with all of you – relationships that I hope can withstand conflict and differences of opinion in the future. I have not wanted to speak because I do not yet have relationships with many of our clergy in the community, some of whom do not share my views in this area. I have not wanted to speak because I do not yet have solid relationships with presbyters in the presbytery. I have not wanted to speak because in the short time that I have been in this church I have grown to love you and to love this place and I do not want to do anything to harm this congregation or jeopardize the deepening of our relationship.

But as I told the presbytery on Thursday, remaining silent is also a choice with sometimes heavy consequences. And I have come to believe this week, that my conscience and my integrity, and my deep respect for all of you require that I speak what is on my heart. I hope that my words will serve not to close doors between any of us, but to open them wide so that we can invite each other into those tender places in our hearts, places that we are sometimes afraid to share with others.

When I was interviewed by the Pastor Nominating Committee of this church, the entire committee made it clear that Brown Memorial is a More Light church, inclusive of all persons, and that any pastor of this congregation must be comfortable nurturing all people in this church, including gay and lesbian members of our community. The examination committee of the presbytery also wanted to be sure that I understood this. Part of the discussion was surely prompted by first impressions – my wife is always telling me that I look like a straight, white-bread, conservative boy from a wholesome family, so I should expect people to be suspicious.

Since that time, I have learned more deeply the complexity of this community’s More Light status. While I believe the desire to be a welcoming and inclusive community is virtually universal, I understand that there are varying opinions on just how far the congregation should go in advocating on behalf of gay and lesbian concerns within the wider church and beyond it. These opinions are diverse in and of themselves, meaning that our church is not made up of factions for or against, but of people with thoughtful reflections on the complexities of when and why we take public stands for justice and the ways in which those stands can affect other areas in the life of the Church.

I respect those concerns and I share some of them. I, too, understand that our More Light status could affect our international mission relationships. I understand that our More Light status could affect some of our relationships with some in the African-American community. I, too, do not want our congregation to become a “single-issue” church. But my deepest concerns and convictions are not about issues. They are about people.

In the text for today, the first disciples begin following Jesus. Jesus doesn’t ask them to follow. They just do. They’re curious. They want to know more. And when Jesus asks them the existential question that most of us struggle with, “What are you looking for?” those two disciples respond with the most unexpected of questions – “where are you staying?” Of all the questions they could ask about the meaning of life, or what happens after death; about love or suffering or why bad things happen to good people; of all the questions they could ask about peace, or comfort, or hope, they want to know where Jesus is staying.

But this question proves to be the right question. Where does Jesus stay? Where does he locate himself in the world? And his response has proven to be paradigmatic for my own life and faith. “Come and see,” Jesus says. Following Jesus does not have to start with a confession of faith. It can start with a curiosity about Jesus, an openness to be invited to places that you never envisioned visiting, to be with people you never expected to know, to come and see the places Jesus goes and people he loves.

My journey, like some of yours, starts with people. I did not think about “the issue of homosexuality” as a child. Heterosexuality was the norm. In college I first encountered people who were “out” but I didn’t think much about “those people.” It was not until I met Kate and began attending her church in Chapel Hill, NC – a More Light church – that I began to think about “the issue.” We began serving as youth group leaders with our Christian educator and her partner. It was as if God had invited me to a place I had not yet seen. “You want to see something of the people I love? Come and see.”

A year later, six months following my graduation from college, one of my best friends called me to tell me that he was gay. “How long have you known?” I asked him. “For most of my time at Duke,” he said. I was flabbergasted. Dave and I shared a house together our senior year. We had traveled across Europe together. I had stayed at his place in Germany. I had visited his parents. “Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked him, selfishly focusing on my own hurt at being kept in the dark. “Because I didn’t know if you want to still be my friend,” he said. I was convicted. I knew I had never said anything positive about gay people, and maybe I had even said some things negative. Again, I had been led to an unexpected place. “You want to learn something about the people I love?” Jesus asks, “Come and see.”

Later that year, our fellow youth group leaders decided to become foster parents. Social Services gave them a crack-addicted HIV+ child because, I learned, gay people are given and more often welcome, the babies that no one else wants. Kate and I later became this child’s sponsor at her baptism. I believe God was saying to me, “You want to see the people with whom I suffer? You want to see the way my joy is found in the middle of that suffering? Come and see.”

We went to seminary, and my eyes were opened even more. I met Katie Ricks, a lesbian woman who is one of the most caring, compassionate, intelligent, capable pastors I have ever met. You all know her. She preached at my installation. When she came on the floor of the Greater Atlanta Presbytery to be examined for the ministry, the committee that had examined her said that she was among the most qualified candidates they had ever seen. She knows Reformed theology backwards and forwards. Her preaching is top-notch. Her pastoral presence is one that congregations crave. But she will not be ordained by the Church. When she came here to Baltimore, I did not tell her what to preach. Do you remember her message? It was reconciliation. She stood here and listened to me answer Constitutional questions that the Church continues to deny for her while preaching reconciliation.

Katie, Kate, I, and several others started Columbia Seminary's gay-straight alliance. We named it, "Imago Dei," the image of God. Every year we petitioned the seminary to allow us to use the chapel for one worship service to praise God for the gifts of gay and lesbian people. Every year we were refused. Behind the closed doors of the president's office we heard the true reasons for not allowing us the service – it was not theology, but money. Donors might withdraw their monies. The President was trying to make us feel better. I felt sick. I had been led to this place to see the places of power where Jesus is put on trial. I had been led to "come and see" the powers and principalities that will compete for your allegiance in the church. Come and see.

That summer as I worked in a hospital, a fellow chaplain who knew of my involvement in Imago Dei asked me to lunch. She told me she was gay. I told her how happy I was for her that she was able to accept who she was. She cried. "You are the first person who didn't say, 'I'm so sorry,'" she said. I began to understand the power of witness and the power of speech and the great weight of responsibility that is placed on those of us who are called to carefully handle speech, called to proclaim the Word, the speech, of God. I felt God was saying to me, "You want to hand on what I will give to you? Come and see."

In Memphis, the only Christian support group for gay and lesbian people is in the Episcopal Church. They had heard I was supportive. I had preached a couple of sermons that mentioned gay and lesbian people. Because of my words and the words of my colleagues, some conservative ministers had told their parishioners that they were worried about my salvation, Kate's, and that of our head minister. The support group called. I led worship. A year later, I got a phone call. It was a young woman from a conservative Presbyterian church – married – but beginning to understand that she was gay. She didn't know where to turn. She typed in the words gay, Christian, and Memphis on the Internet and found the group that I had spoken to. The leader of the group sent her to me. "You want to serve the least of these, those who are reviled, those who are in need of God's words of grace? Come and see."

My life, like many of your lives has been a journey and invitation into the lives of people who I did not always ask to meet, places where I did not always ask to go. And yet I have tried to follow where I believe God has led me to go and see where Jesus is staying, who he is redeeming, who he is suffering with, who he is raising to new life. I

tell you these stories, because “the issue” of homosexuality is no issue to me. It is about people – good, loving, faithful people who want to live a meaningful life, and who want to be loved and accepted by the church of Jesus Christ that according to our Book of Order is supposed to “demonstrate by the love of its members for one another and by its common life the new reality in Christ.”¹ I tell you these stories, because whenever a so-called “GLBT issue” comes before the church or society, what first comes to my mind are not issues, but faces of people I love.

They are the reason that I speak. They are the reason that I weep. They are the reason that I cannot remain silent in these difficult, difficult times when a single voice of exclusion seeks to represent the whole of Christian thought and practice. They are the reasons that I spoke before the presbytery this past Thursday in support of our Session, in support of civil marriage for same-gendered couples, in support of granting the civil rights and protections of marriage to all couples, regardless of sexual orientation. They will be the reason that I travel to Annapolis during this legislative session, not to represent you, but to stand with other religious leaders who to show the people of this state that not all leaders who call themselves Christian believe that gay and lesbian people should be second class citizens.

When Christian ministers gather together and promise to make gay people “black and blue” before the legislative session is over;² when Christian ministers take the Bible that I love so deeply, whose words I wrestle with and seek follow every day of my life; when they take it and use it as a weapon to bludgeon people who already are excluded from the Church, I cannot remain silent. I cannot remain silent because I have been the places where Jesus is staying, among the outcast, the despised, the scapegoats of our time, and there I have seen the suffering face of Christ calling me to speak.

I had lunch on Thursday with a minister who does not agree with me or with our Session on these issues. I invited him to lunch because I continue to believe that the only way to live with conflict is by staying in relationship with those who are in a different place. He conceded to me that his own teenage children say to him, “What’s the big deal?” “Maybe this will all go your way by another generation,” he said.

But while he may be right, I do not believe in the inevitability of progress. The truth of history going back to the life and death of Jesus is that the dignity of human beings is always bought with a price. It requires people who are willing to testify to the truth of what they have seen, and ready to put their bodies on the line to back up their speech. That is in essence the call of discipleship. I believe this church is filled with those kinds of people. In every generation, you have faced issues that were not crystal clear in their time. And in every time, you chose to take a risk. If you were going to err, you chose to err on the side of grace.

William Sloane Coffin defines hell as “truth seen too late.” I think he may be right. But I don’t think it’s too late to take a risk and follow Jesus in search of the places where he is staying. The call is as fresh today as it was to those first disciples. You want to see where Jesus is staying, who he is redeeming, who he is suffering with, who he is raising to new life? You want to know the places where joy and suffering persist? You want to know the plans that God has for you in this world? Come and see.

¹ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II, G-3.0300.*

² “Seventy Pastors Ready to Fight Against Gay Marriage,” *The Baltimore Sun*, November 17, 2004.