

Love on Trial

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The Offense of Love

by Scott Campbell

1999 was a year of ferment by gay marriage advocates in the United Methodist Church. 68 pastors in California co-celebrated a same gender union in January. None was ever disciplined. In March, the Rev. Greg Dell of Chicago was suspended for a year from his ministry for doing the same thing. Then, on November 17 the Rev. Jimmy Creech was convicted by a jury of 13 Nebraska United Methodist clergy of officiating at a same gender covenant service, a chargeable offense under the Discipline of the church. The penalty for his conviction was that his clergy orders, both as a deacon and an elder in the church, were permanently removed. He was given the ecclesiastical death penalty for the offense of love.

The hope of those who have enshrined the prohibition against this act of pastoral conscience in the language of “chargeable offenses” has been that intimidation would suppress the moral integrity of clergy who might otherwise be inclined to minister to the needs of gay and lesbian people in the same way they do to their heterosexual constituents. To some degree it has been a successful strategy. There have been no further trials or expulsions from the church over the last decade for this particular offense. That is not to say, of course, that there have not been pastors who have conducted same gender commitment services and, now, marriages in a number of places. The practice has simply been driven underground.

There have been a few exceptions to this retreat into secrecy. Karen Oliveto, a San Francisco pastor, openly married a number of same gender couples after such marriages briefly became legal in that city. Charges were brought against her and subsequently resolved in meetings with her bishop. A group of retired clergy in New England, organized in 1999 and now numbering close to 100 members, pledged to make themselves available to perform such services. The group recently issued an open letter in which it acknowledged that many of its members have conducted such ceremonies and pledged that they will continue to do so. No charges have been filed to date.

Another exception is more recent. Thirteen clergy members affiliated with Dumbarton United Methodist Church in Washington D.C., where same gender marriage recently became legal, have pledged to perform same and opposite gender marriages on the same basis. Their covenant reads in part:

Today we affirm that God's grace is open to all, and we witness to that grace through our commitment to justice and equality in our congregation, the District of Columbia, the United Methodist Church, and the world. We will honor and celebrate the wedding of any couple, licensed in the District of Columbia, who seek to commit their lives to one another in marriage.

Not only did the pastors covenant with one another, but the church's board unanimously endorsed their intention. In a subsequent action the entire worshipping congregation of the church signed a document indicating their support for the decision taken by these clergy.

Dumbarton's action has initiated a flurry of conversation among other progressive pastors and congregations. Many are wondering

whether the time has come to make public what has been taking place quietly for years. For some this is a question of strategy, while for others it is a matter of conscience. The bishop in the Baltimore/Washington Area, the Rev. John Schol, has informed all of his pastors that he will enforce the current Disciplinary prohibitions. His letter, while attempting to be pastoral in tone, was conspicuously deficient of any challenge to act prophetically for the sake of the Gospel. The clear implication was to raise again the specter of Jimmy Creech. The possibility of defrocking exists for each pastor who violates the rules.

So the question before the progressive movement (if indeed it is a movement and not simply an amalgamation of ideas) is whether this is a time to advance or retreat? Is it a time to hunker back down and quietly do in secret what we ought to be doing not only in the sight of God, but in the plain sight of the world? Or could this be a kairos moment in the life of this particular denomination and others as well? Could this be the time when clergy and other Christians might finally begin to find the courage of their convictions by refusing to give credibility to unjust laws within the church? Could it be a time for massive noncooperation with those laws, a time when those called to serve as jurors in church trials would decide to mete out sentences that fit the crime? What should the penalty be for exercising (rather than exorcizing) pastoral conscience? How about a week away from pastoral duties to reflect on the "crime" of caring for all of God's people? Jesus was crucified for the offense of love. Must the church continue to do the same thing in our own day?

I don't know whether this is such a moment, but I do know that there is something new in the air. Civil society is leading the church to look at itself. Courts and legislatures are extending civil rights to all citizens. Change is coming and those of us who believe the church can do better than it has are either going to have to make our witness or one day be ashamed that we did not. One day our sons and daughters or our granddaughters and grandsons will look back on this time and wonder where we were in the fight. I further suspect that when they do, the name of Jimmy Creech will be remembered long after many who held onto their orders and retired without rocking the boat too much. I wonder. Can orders be restored posthumously?

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