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The Stones Will Cry Out

by Scott Campbell

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to be quiet." He replied, "I tell you, if they keep quiet the stones will cry out." Luke 19:39-40

Amy D. is a United Methodist bishop's worst nightmare. This is not because Amy isn't a good pastor or a good preacher or a good person. She is all of those things and more. Amy scares bishops to death because she views the right now from the perspective of the not yet.

In that regard she is a bit like John of Patmos, author of the book of Revelation. John has been exiled to an island. He is living in a time when Christians are being strung up, hung up and torn apart for who they are. When he talks about the great tribulation in his extraordinary vision, he is not speaking of some future event; he is talking about the lived experience of his community. Christians are dying for being faithful. They are crying out in anguish to their God.

"I see what is coming," John tells these persecuted people. The day is coming when all this sorrow will be no more, when the bloodstains will have been washed clean and only joy and justice shall remain. "I see it coming. In that day every tear shall be dry."

John's idea of how that day will come is a little different than the one that many within The United Methodist Church hold. Those of us who live in places of privilege tend to think that if we just keep doing our part, that gradually, imperceptibly maybe, things are going to improve. Little by little, we believe, the world is on its way to getting better—it's making progress. One day, certainly not in our lifetimes, but one day, we'll all get there.

John sees things differently. For John, only the intervention of God is going to set things right. John is not a gradualist. He's been exiled to an island. He knows a thing or two about the way the powerful use their power. John knows that without God barging in and turning over some tables, business as usual will be just that.

Five years ago Amy was exiled to an island. Because she is an out lesbian in a denomination that says we will not ordain, appoint or consider the candidacy of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals, she could no longer serve a local church. So Amy lost her appointment and her health insurance and took another job. But the powers that be didn't want trouble. They didn't charge her with anything. They said "Keep your orders. You can still be a minister, but we can't have you doing it in a local church." Surely they believed they were doing the right thing for all concerned. For many years, decent people in authority who don't agree with the church's position have been looking the other way. This has, in fact, enabled many to continue in ministries that they would otherwise have been forced to abandon. At the same time, looking the other way has meant these authorities didn't have to acknowledge their part in the sin in which the whole church participates.

What they didn't count on was that Amy had seen the same thing John of Patmos saw. Amy had glimpsed a vision of a world in which there were no more tears, a world with no more persecution, no more lies, winks and nods, no more easy shuffling of folks off to less visible places, no more space for bishops and superintendents and pastoral colleagues to pretend that gradually things would get better so it's okay to ignore God's ultimate outcome and concentrate instead on human progress. Amy saw what John saw and she believed it. A bishop's worst nightmare.

Amy, somewhere along her journey with Jesus, had brushed up against hope, and when hope comes into the world the timid had better bar their doors and shutter their windows. When human beings suspect that God will not finally let suffering go unredeemed, they are empowered to proclaim a radical new world and to live as if it were already here.

So Amy, not deprived of her orders you remember, was asked last summer to preside at a service of holy commitment. That's one of the things that pastors do. They represent the church at critical moments in people's lives, times of sorrow or celebration, times of beginning or ending, times of covenant or crisis. Amy, of course, agreed to respond to the pastoral need of the people who came to her. The church had told her, after all, that she was still a pastor.

That would have been fine, but The United Methodist Church has another rule. When institutions are afraid that compassion for people will trump good sound judgment and doctrinal uniformity, when they fear that pastors might start acting in response to the leading of the Holy Spirit instead of following *The Book of Discipline*, they become anxious. Their nervousness sometimes leads them to try to make their rules more intimidating. They might even decide to criminalize conscience. Here is what this particular rule says:

Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.

And just to make sure that all pastors get the point, doing such ceremonies or conducting same gender marriages is listed among the "chargeable offenses" in *The Book of Discipline*.

In November of 1999, the Rev. Jimmy Creech was tried for conducting a same-gender blessing, found guilty and expelled permanently from the United Methodist ministry. He was given the ecclesiological death penalty for the offense of conscience.

So, knowing all this, Amy did the ceremony. She blessed, on behalf of the church, the loving commitment of two people who happened to be of the same gender. And then, at the end of the year, she sent to her bishop, as is required by *The Discipline*, an accounting of her pastoral activities. She could have written that in the summer of 2009 she performed a wedding and let it go at that. That would have fudged things a bit, because in her state gay marriage is not an option. But Amy is out of patience with truth-evading little lies. She wrote to the bishop that she conducted a same-gender covenant ceremony. And she sent copies to her district superintendent, the board of ordained ministry, the secretary of the annual conference and the superintendent who oversees extension ministries -- as required by *The Discipline*. There was no place left for the hierarchy to hide. Truth came out of the closet.

"Are you trying to provoke a trial?" the bishop's assistant asked. "No," Amy said. "I'm just trying to be faithful."

"You've tied my hands" the bishop said. "No, I haven't," Amy said. "You can decide to be faithful too. You can stand with me in telling the truth and let them do to us what they will."

As this article goes to press, the machinations of the church are gearing up to do their grinding. A letter of complaint is being drafted and charges will undoubtedly be filed. Most likely the bishop just wishes it would all go away, because she really, in her heart, can't find any fault in the woman before her. But rules are rules and if she doesn't enforce them, someone else will, and what good would it do for there to be two needless sacrifices? Things will get better if we're just a bit more patient, a little less confrontational.

Amy will go on trial. The church will spend a lot of time, money and energy. Another faithful pastor will be judged. But who knows? Maybe this time the trial court (the jury) will see the same thing that Amy has seen and John of Patmos has seen, and they will grasp that we are called to live right now in response to what God has already done in Jesus Christ and will complete one day in the human community. Maybe the penalty they will mete out for the offense of love will be to require that Amy tell her story in a hundred places. Wouldn't that be something? Wouldn't it be something if the church finally understood that if it tries to silence the ones who welcome Jesus into their midst, the very stones will cry out?

Scott Campbell is the pastor at Harvard Epworth UMC in Cambridge, MA

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