

Inclusive Worship, MCUSA Convention, Kansas City

June 30, 2015

“Preach, Preachers!”

Luke 24.13-25

Sarah Klaassen

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Let’s try something, shall we?

I’m going to say something, and you finish the sentence:

We’ll start easy: Mary had a little lamb --- *fleece was white as snow*

How about in song: This little light of mine --- *I’m gonna let it shine*

And a little bit more difficult but from our own movement: Fabulous, Fierce -- *and Sacred*

What about this one: That’s the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, the men are good looking, and the children are -- *above average*.

We could go on and on.

Now there’s another one I want to share, one that you probably don’t know. But if you were sitting with me at Vanderbilt Divinity School on the ground floor classroom with windows looking out onto the magnolia tree, spring of 2008, you’d know it too. The queer folks in the room, the people of color, the one or two straight white guys, we all learned it together, and so we could all say it together, a call and response of sorts for our introduction to homiletics class. “Preach, preacher,” is how it starts. Preach, preacher. And the response: *We need the good news. Preach, preacher, we need the Good News.*

Will you respond with me: preach, preacher, (we need the Good News).

Don’t we all need the Good News?

They needed the Good News too, in first century Galilee. The land, under occupation by the Roman Empire. The people living under the crushing burden of poverty. The social and cultural norms prescribing separation and segregation. And along came a preacher, an itinerant, a carpenter named Jesus from Nazareth. Luke borrows Isaiah’s poetic words to tell us that he came and proclaimed release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. For the captive he declared freedom and for the poor he announced Good News; Good News.

And the people, they follow him. Disciples, named and unnamed follow him, together down the road, bound toward freedom. It is a magnificent vision and an inspiring journey.

Last fall, the Fabulous, Fierce and Sacred gathering was both magnificent and inspiring. Some of you were there and for those who weren’t picture this: queer people, friends, allies from across the country, Mennonite and Mennonite-ish, gathering for a weekend to celebrate who we are as the church.

We danced conga lines through the sanctuary. We received glitter blessings. We used words like intersectionality. Together we participated in our own freedom-making.

Good News. Good News, like when the Supreme Court with one decision legalized my marriage and some of yours in all fifty states. Good News like when someone scales a flagpole in an act of civil disobedience to remove a confederate symbol of slavery and white supremacy and puts action behind the words we believe.

Don't we all need the Good News?

Because in spite of our greatest hopes and grandest visions, the world is full of Bad News. Not only the world but the church. Not only *the* church, but *our* church.

Across this country, consciousness is being raised about systemic oppressions: racism and white privilege, police violence, structural evils. And some of us are learning what others of us already knew, that no matter how smart we are, no matter convincing, we just can't quite persuade everyone that Black Lives Matter.

No matter how Anabaptist we are, we can't quite convince everyone that Mennonite churches should welcome LGBTQ members and call queer clergy. No matter how articulate and passionate we are, we can't quite convince everyone that we are *all* connected, that regardless of color, culture, gender, sexuality, your liberation is bound together with mine or that my destiny is tied up with yours.

And, I'm sorry to say, friends, that no matter how filled you are by this worship space and these people here, there are still some of you that have to attend the upcoming delegate sessions and dialogue about proposals that do harm to people in this sanctuary.

Sometimes the proclaimed Good News rips apart and reveals a whole lot of bad.

I suppose that's more how it is too for those unnamed disciples by the time they walk together on the road to Emmaus. The hope they had, the great passion, diminishing by the step. Their Jesus, dead and gone, the freedom they'd pieced together even under the chains of Empire, that freedom slipping away.

The world is full of bad news.

A few years ago I was working on a quilting project. I can't remember what it was - something simple, lots of squares and rectangles, probably the bright colors that I like. I was piecing fabric together, happy with how things were going. And then something went wrong. It always does, doesn't it? The shapes don't quite line up. The corners aren't as precise as they need to be... It's bad news all around when you have to start ripping pieces apart. A few months later I was telling my grandma about this project and how frustrating it had become. Without missing a

beat, she said, well, Sarah, it's not really a quilting project until you've ripped something apart and pieced it back together.

My dual (double) religious identity includes not only our sometimes-beloved Mennonite Church USA but also membership and ministerial credentials in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

As I was preparing for my ordination, I had to piece together a portfolio of my work, a nurture team of supporters, a statement of ordination detailing my theology and sense of ministry and calling. And during all of this, I also pieced together a banner. The design is by Bob Regier. He calls it the "Peace and Service Banner." (Peace/Reconciliation Banner)

I brought it today - you can see the story it tells: the dove under a rainbow, the wash basin and towel, the olive branch. Symbols of peace, service, faith, life, freedom.

The same banner, just with different colors hangs in Grace Hill Mennonite Church, the church of my growing up years. Someone from there gave me tips on how to piece it together; which corner to begin with; how to copy the pattern onto a huge roll of paper at FedEx. She let me add her as a friend on Facebook and said to call if I had questions as I went. I'd like to think she and everyone else there would be proud, not just of my banner, but of my work and my calling. Some of them are. Many are not.

And so I hold, we hold both of these things. This banner that hangs here, the other Peace and Service banners that hang in other, less welcoming spaces. We hold both these things: the longing for freedom, the brokenness all around. Things rip apart. Things rip apart. Things rip apart.

We piece them back together.

Their world ripped apart, the disciples encounter a stranger on the road to Emmaus. He begins to tell them stories. He starts with Moses: remember, he says, how our people were slaves in Egypt? Remember how Yahweh set them free? Remember the prophets how they lived for justice; how they challenged kings and empires? Remember, remember, this is how you sit down together, break bread, bless it.



Jesus picks up these unnamed, unmoored, directionless disciples, and he sets them down in their traditions and their stories. Jesus comes along, and Jesus starts stitching, he starts piecing them back together.

When the world is ripping apart, when injustice and violence surround us, it is our stories, yours and mine, that remind us who we are. When people and policies and processes threaten our queer bodies and our queer faith, even in the midst of that, here we are piecing ourselves back together. Telling our own truths. Sharing stories. Speaking freedom and Good News even in this mess of brokenness happening now. Even in the mess that may unfold in the days to come.

At Fabulous, Fierce and Sacred, one evening worship service created space for sharing, and those who were present gave voice and witness to the Good News. That's the good thing about our low-church traditions: anyone can preach. Anyone can piece together what has been ripped apart. A college student got up and did this in just a sentence or two: I came to this gathering to find out if I could still be Mennonite, and because of you (*because of you*), I can.

Another way to say it might be this, a blessing and charge to you for this week and beyond:

Preach, preachers. We need the Good News.