

Kirby Lawrence Hill
June 15, 2014
Psalm 86
Matthew 10:24-31

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

FROM THE HOUSETOPS

This past Thursday was Juneteenth. For those unfamiliar with that term, let me share some background. The Civil War had ended in April of 1865, but it wasn't until June 19 of that year that Union soldiers landed at Galveston, Texas with news that the Civil War had ended. That Juneteenth was the long-awaited day that the enslaved in the most distant state in the Confederacy were finally free. Almost 150 years later, Juneteenth observances take place not just in Texas, but in many places in our country, as a celebration of when the last slaves got news of their liberation. ¹ As the insert in our bulletin indicates, this past Thursday was also the day when our denomination's General Assembly, our highest governing body, took action to recognize same-gender marriage and allow Presbyterian pastors to officiate in such marriage ceremonies in those states where it is legal to do so.

I think even those of us who did not have ancestors who were enslaved can understand the joy of liberating news. I hope even those who disagree with the action General Assembly took can understand the joy of same-gender couples who long for the church to recognize Christian marriage as an option for them. Then on Friday, our General Assembly made another decision that has gotten it even more media attention from the Post and others outlets than the earlier decision about change in marriage policy. Our assembly decided it was time to withdraw any financial investment in three companies whose products have been used by Israel in support of its military occupation of Palestinian areas.

Every two years, our Presbyterian General Assembly gathers to make policy decisions for our denomination. It consists of half teaching elders or clergy and half ruling elders or laity who are elected by presbyteries to attend. And of course, the media focus almost exclusively on the actions that are most controversial. There have been articles in the Post about our denomination the last two days. Why do we go through this process? Why make these public decisions that delight some and anger others?

We do so out of a desire to address the issues that our own churches and that events in the world are bringing up. We do so because we believe that our faith ought to shape our policies and our actions as a church. We seek to have some integrity and consistency, so that we don't just talk the talk, but that we also walk the walk. Since our denomination opened the door to ordain gays and lesbians as pastors and officers, many, including me, have viewed the lack of denominational support for same gender marriage as being inconsistent with the understandings that led to an openness to ordination. I am thankful for the prospect that I now could officiate the wedding of a same gender couple, if through pre-marital counseling, as with other couples, I came to believe that it was in God's will that they be married. Session has oversight in regards to building use and worship services, so requests for such a wedding to take place here at Warner would require our Session's approval. That is now an option our Session could consider.

Has the church made this decision to purposely alienate those who have what has been termed a more traditional understanding of marriage as to be only between a man and a woman? Absolutely not! I have been a commissioner at General Assembly before. I have

been a part of the Bible studies, the times of prayer, the listening sessions, the long, late night meetings between those who disagree with one another. I have seen the pains taken to try to find ways to reach the broadest agreements on difficult issues. I have members of my own extended family with whom I disagree on some of these issues. The goal is to seek to be in accord with God's will while still maintaining loving relationship with those with whom we might disagree. I am thankful there is room for disagreement in our church. I am thankful there is room for dialogue in our church. Some diversity of thought can make for a good atmosphere for a community to grow in its faith. I am thankful that as Presbyterians, we are committed to open meetings on the local and national levels where we pray and discuss and debate and vote and pray together again. As Presbyterians, as sisters and brothers in Christ, we humbly seek God's will and we seek to respect and try to understand those who hold a variety of positions. The early church had similar difficult decisions, as it sought Christ's way when it came to bringing together Christians with Gentile and Jewish backgrounds. When it made its decisions, it continued to reach out in love to those who disagreed with its policies. We seek to do the same.

I welcome the opportunity to meet with any who have questions or concerns about these policies. We have put in the narthex information about both of these decisions so that you can have accurate information. I want you to clearly understand that we are not pulling out investments in Israel. But after years of discussions and shareholder resolutions with three specific companies, after trying to get these companies to change their practices where their products are being used in ways that violate human rights, we have chosen to no longer profit from non-peaceful pursuits. As an example, one of the companies, Caterpillar, even in violation of its own company policies, allows its bulldozers to be used by Israel's military in ways that violates international law as it destroys Palestinian houses and olive groves and continues to confiscate land that belongs to others.

There already are groups who are characterizing this action for their own purposes as anti-Semitic. It is not. The church maintains significant investments in companies that do business in Israel. We also have had success in working with some companies which needed to change their policies in order to prevent money transfers for terrorist groups. Our church has been supportive of the state of Israel and has worked hard for what is in the best interests of Israel, including a needed two-state solution to the Israeli conflict with the Palestinian people. This divestment will challenge the relationships we have with some of our Jewish sisters and brothers, which is why many Presbyterians did not favor it. I am thankful for very good relations Warner has with our neighbors at Temple Emanuel next door and I will reach out to Rabbi Stone and Cantor Boxt to make sure they have accurate information about what our assembly did in this decision. I hope you will reach out to your Jewish friends as well.

I am very thankful to be a part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). We are open in our decision-making processes and we know that the church has at times been in error. Yet that does not drive us to become irrelevant by shutting ourselves off from issues that are affecting all who are beloved by God. We continue to look to God's Spirit for grace and guidance. Even those who might disagree on various issues have come together in this place, most recently on Friday night, to raise funds to send our mission team to Oklahoma to rebuild homes destroyed in tornadoes last year. Our elevator tower nears completion, but we still have work to do to make a reality out of our building theme, "A House of Prayer

for all People.” We agree that we have a God whose love calls us to commitment, whose desire for justice calls us to action.

On that first Juneteenth, imagine the joy of those who had been held as slaves all of their lives, who heard the good news of their liberation. And imagine the great privilege that General Gordon Granger of the Union Army had in getting to convey that good news.² As a church, we seek to embody the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are called to proclaim even from the housetops our celebration of God’s liberating love. What a joyful privilege it is to get to convey such a message.

¹ <http://www.juneteenth.com/history.htm>

² <http://www.juneteenth.com/history.htm>