

Luther College Chapel
Monday, October 5, 2015
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Acts 18: 9-17

One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; ¹⁰for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.' ¹¹He stayed there for a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

12 But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Corinthians made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal. ¹³They said, 'This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law.' ¹⁴Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Corinthians, 'If it were a matter of crime or serious villainy, I would be justified in accepting your complaint; ¹⁵but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters.' ¹⁶And he dismissed them from the tribunal. ¹⁷Then all of them seized Sosthenes, the official of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of these things."

The Message, which is a contemporary reading of scripture, gives us another way to hear the exchange between Paul & God and the one between Gallio and the Jewish Corinthians.

One night the Master spoke to Paul in a dream: "Keep it up, and don't let anyone intimidate or silence you. No matter what happens, I'm with you and no one is going to be able to hurt you. You have no idea how many people I have on my side in this city." That was all he needed to stick it out...

And listen to Gallio's exchange with the Corinthians - "If this was a matter of criminal conduct, I would gladly hear you out. But it sounds to me like one more squabble, another of your endless hairsplitting quarrels over religion. Take care of it on your own time. I can't be bothered with this nonsense..."

Let's see: a text where God calls us to speak out AND one that tackles the futility of church squabbles? Well, I could preach on this one all day!

Don't worry, Pastor Mike – I timed it.

As luck would have it, I have just come back from Chicago, where I spent several days attending the fall meeting of all bishops in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I was attending as an observer. I've been doing that since 2009 when the ELCA Churchwide Assembly voted to allow partnered gay and lesbian persons to serve as pastors in the Lutheran church. And over the years in that room of church leaders, I have witnessed some remarkable moments of raw faith. And I have seen my share of pointless church squabbles.

I attend in my role as Executive Director of Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries – a ministry that believes lesbian and gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people have extraordinary gifts for ministry – and that through their public witness these leaders proclaim the Gospel now.

What are these extraordinary gifts? Consider what it means when an LGBTQ person decides to be a pastor. You've got yourself, asking, "Who am I, really?" You've got the church, for the most part, saying "How can this be?" You've got the gay community, for the most part, saying, "Why on earth would you do that?" And figuring out the who, how and why are some of the most pressing questions in our church today. LGBTQ people have to figure that out all the time – and it makes them extraordinary pastors.

And our work through Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries is to affirm and support these ministers, which we do through our Proclaim, Accompaniment, and Ministry Engagement programs. And from time to time, we do that by my paying attention to the big church squabbles over words and language.

Which takes me back to Chicago. There I was last Wednesday, hauling my suitcase from the L train to the hotel, and as I crossed the parking lot I was thinking about how every time I show up at these bishops

meetings, someone inevitably asks, "So, why are you here?" And then I realized that the real question on my mind was: "Why AM I here?"

And I didn't mean just in the parking lot outside a chain hotel in the Chicago suburbs. I had a rapid and massive existential crisis.

I'll sum that experience thusly: Why am I continuing to bang my big bisexual head against the brick wall of the ELCA?

When church leaders talk and talk not about the diverse and wonderful new church, but rather about all of the congregations and money lost since 2009, which for many of us who are LGBTQ creates an implicit sense of blame, why stay? When church leaders argue that conversion therapy, required celibacy, and lying about relationships are appropriate ways to "live into" welcoming LGBTQ people, why stay? When a lesbian couple, rejoicing in the Supreme Court's decision decides to get married and the pastor says the congregation will have to vote on it, why stay? Indeed, when your alma mater stops doing wedding ceremonies altogether in 2009 and then denies it had anything to do lesbian and gay couples, why stay?

How many people hear something inviting and captivating about God, or the Lutheran church, or grace, or communion and come check things out only to get completely fed up with the reality of what they find in our churches, and like Gallio finally say – "I can't be bothered with this nonsense!"

How many? Too many. And more and more all the time.

But, thank God, some have heard the call from God, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; ¹⁰for I am with you,"

Speak – and do not be silent.

Because there is so much good here in the church and in the Gospel. Can you tire of hearing you are beautifully, wonderfully made just for who you are? Can you tire of hearing you are free from the pressure, competition, and materialism of this world? Can you tire of hearing that there is nothing that separates you from God's love? Can you tire

of hearing of a place where the most violent creatures are gentle to the most vulnerable; when those with the least power are given the most respect? Can you tire of hearing that the worst things you've ever done can be forgiven and that you can be renewed? Can you tire of hearing that you are deeply, relentlessly loved beyond all human reason?

I can't tire of that. In fact, part of how I answered that question – “Why AM I here?” came through the writing of this very chapel talk – Speak – and do not be silent.

And it came in the form of a bishop, who this last Saturday morning, took time to tell me of the importance of the presence of LGBTQ people in the church and of the urgent need for us to not give up – “Be of good courage,” he said. “And keep the pressure on, and do not stop being yourself.”

Sometimes words and support like that are all a person needs to stick it out.

And by the strength of those words and this scripture story, I bring that same message to you, especially to those of you who because of your race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, disability, or economic class or those of you who for any other reason have been told this church is not ready for you simply because of who you are.

God says, ‘Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; ¹⁰for I am with you,’ and the bishop says: “Be of good courage. And keep the pressure on. And do not stop being yourself.”

Amen.