

PRINCIPLES TOWARD: A WAY FORWARD

1. Introduction

We live in challenging times. The Anglican Church of Canada and the worldwide Anglican Communion are presently embroiled in a painful, difficult and deeply challenging conversation about how we as a community relate to the reality of same gender relationships.

This issue touches many deep places in our church. It raises strong emotions and important questions. We must not diminish the challenge these questions represent. But it is essential, in the midst of our need to wrestle with issues that we keep in mind that the church exists to focus our attention compellingly upon the living presence of God, known in Jesus Christ. The church does not exist primarily to concern itself with issues, no matter how important they may be. If there is one factor perhaps more than any other that has brought us to this difficult place it may well be that our attention has been at times more focused upon issues than on the transcendent, living presence of God in our midst.

When we keep ourselves focused upon the living presence of God among us, it is possible to view issues that bedevil the church in a calmer light than sometimes characterizes our discussions. Jesus said of the church that, *“the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”* (Matthew 16:18) Whatever appearances may suggest on the surface, the church is God’s church and God’s church is strong. Storms may rise and fall; but the waves will not overwhelm the church that is established upon the firm rock that is Christ.

So, what is the way forward for the church in these stormy times?

If we are to move ahead in the church we must each ask ourselves how we in our own communities, are conducting ourselves in the face of the challenges, difficulties, questions and struggles that confront us. If we are willing to enter into the processes of our church life with openness and willingness to hear one another, the challenges we face can provide an opportunity for God to form and shape us more fully into the image of God that is our true identity. We will then be able more effectively to bear testimony to the living presence of Jesus Christ in our midst.

If the debate in which our church is presently engaged is going to be for us a source of growth and new life it will only be as we conduct ourselves in ways that are honouring to God and in ways that lead to life, light and hope for all people.

We need to focus not so much on what’s going on “out there.” Rather we need to focus our attention first on what is going on in our own hearts. We each need to ask ourselves what role we are playing in the present unrest in our church. When Jesus sent seventy of his followers out into the world to proclaim the kingdom of God, he told them that they should enter a house and *“first say, ‘Peace to this house!’”* (Luke 10:5). We need to ask ourselves if our behaviour, our words, and all of our actions are directed towards bringing

“Peace to this house.” Do we bring peaceful energy or agitated energy to the deliberations of our community?

Having examined our own hearts, we need to look carefully and honestly at our own local communities. How are we relating to one another and what do our closest relationships say about God’s place in our lives? True discipleship begins with honest self-examination. Only when we have looked at our own situation can we begin to examine our role in the wider community. The wider church will only ever be as strong and healthy as each small part of the church.

So I have five principles upon which I believe we need to base our life together as a community in these difficult times. These are not commandments. They are merely principles to ponder, guidelines for a possible way forward in unsettled times.

2. People before issues

My first principle is that we must always keep in mind that God is vastly more concerned with people than God is concerned with issues or even right answers.

The Bible is an unrelentingly relational book. It is fundamentally concerned with how people get along with God and about how people get along with one another as an expression of their relationship with God. If you look at the Ten Commandments as a paradigm for the whole of Scripture, you will notice that, out of ten commandments, the first four are concerned specifically with our relationship to God. The remaining six commandments are concerned entirely with how people get along with one another as an expression of their relationship to God. That’s four commandments for God and six for people. Of course, they are all about God because how we relate to God is expressed in how we relate to one another. But the issue is relationship. And the scriptures are deeply concerned with how we relate -- to God, and to one another.

Jesus was profoundly concerned, throughout his entire ministry, with anything that might create a barrier between people and God or between people in community. One of Jesus’ paradigmatic acts was, the moment when he entered the Temple of Jerusalem and swept aside all the money changers in the Temple. Jesus drove the money changers and the sellers of doves out of the Temple because they were a barrier. They were separating people from access to God. And in doing so, they were separating people from access to one another. They were undermining the integrity of the human community and Jesus was deeply concerned with the integrity of human community and that human beings should be together in relationships of love, of harmony and of mutual respect.

The fundamental goal of Jesus’ ministry was opening the way between God and individual human beings. If you look at the sins Jesus focused upon most often, you will see that Jesus was concerned primarily with religious sins. Jesus attacked the religious officials of his day accusing them of tying *“up heavy burdens, hard to bear,”* and laying *“them on the shoulders of others.”* (Matthew 23:4) The burden of the law these officials imposed upon others was a burden no human being could be expected to bear. Instead,

Jesus saw the purpose of religion as removing burdens and setting people free. As Paul put it, *“For freedom Christ has set us free.”* (Galatians 5:1)

Jesus was concerned with sins that might in any way, get in the way of people being open to God. Jesus did not focus his attention on the issues of his day. There were social, political and religious issues in Jesus’ day. He did not talk about them. Jesus talked about the human heart. Jesus talked about loving your brother and loving your sister. Jesus talked about opening in deeper ways to the living presence of God.

It is true that the writers of the letters in the New Testament address certain issues facing the church of their day. But the first concern for all the epistle writers was to prevent the issues facing the church from becoming a barrier to people preserving their unity and oneness in Christ. Paul berates the divisive Corinthians saying, *“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.”* (I Corinthians 3:16, 17) Our bias in the church is always to make *“every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”* (Ephesians 4:3)

The primary concern for the church is people. When we put people before issues, we will only ever move with extreme caution towards any position that might increase the division within the body of Christ.

If we follow the pattern of Jesus we will always concern ourselves first with how people relate to God and how people relate to one another. And we will never allow issues to become a barrier between ourselves and any other person.

3. I am responsible

My second principle is to acknowledge that I am responsible for my conduct in relationship to all other people who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, *“just as you did it to one of the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it to me.”* (Matthew 25:40) So the way I treat someone in the church, is the way I treat Jesus. And if I am going to be judged by God, it is not going to be on the basis of whether I got my theology right. It is not going to be on the basis of my adherence to some strict moral code. I will be judged on the basis of whether or not, in spite of what a difficult person you may be, I was able to love you.

Those who share with me in the bread and wine of the Lord’s table are *“the least of these, who are members of my family.”* Every time I extend my hands to receive the bread and the wine of God’s grace, I need to know that I am inextricably linked to all of those who share in this action. This is why Paul says in I Corinthians 11:29, *“For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves.”* To *“discern the body”* is to acknowledge our deep inner connection to all those with whom we share the body and the blood of Christ.

This is a difficult thing. Paul calls the church a “*family*.” You don’t get to choose your family. Families are not perfect. They are given. The important question for families is how the members work together to live within the context of the givenness of each person in the family.

The Christian Church is an extraordinarily diverse, broad and incredibly varied body. There are people who call themselves Christians, with whom I personally can find almost nothing in common. I recently saw a clip of a television preacher. I do not doubt this man’s sincerity, or his absolute conviction about the things he was preaching in the name of Jesus Christ. But what I heard from that particular preacher bears almost no resemblance to what I understand to be the heart of the Christian Gospel. But nonetheless, whether I am institutionally connected to this man or not, the fact that he claims to be a follower of Jesus Christ means that he is my brother in Christ and I cannot get away from him.

Institutions are simply ways humans beings organize themselves in order to get a job done. And we need to not take them *too* seriously. God does not look down from heaven on the earth and see the artificial boundaries that humans beings have drawn on a piece of paper to distinguish one nation from another. Neither does God look down on the church and see the artificial boundaries humans have drawn to distinguish one denomination from another.

If you call yourself a follower of Jesus Christ, you are linked to all other followers of Jesus Christ -- whether they go to your church or to the church across town. It does not matter how they express their faith or what they may believe on the issue of same sex relationships or any other contentious issue facing any part of the Christian fellowship at any time. We do belong together. You can’t get away from those you disagree with. Wherever you may run, you remain linked to those from whom you flee. You are connected to them in Christ. And you are not in a position by yourself to simply decide to disenfranchise them because they don’t agree with you. We are one in Christ whether we like it or not. We belong together in Christ and there is nothing we can do to get away from that fact. So I am responsible to live in respectful relationship with that television preacher with whom I may feel I have nothing in common.

And I am responsible for my conduct, in my relationship with all other people who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ.

4. Support for your life in Christ

My third principle is that my only responsibility to you is to support you in your life in Christ.

Now this can be extremely challenging. If you look at the Gospel stories, you will find that Jesus dealt differently with each person. He had something unique to say to everyone

he encountered. He had different ways of responding in every situation. In Jesus we see that God works uniquely in every situation. There is no identical prescription that can be applied to every person at every stage of their spiritual life. We must extend grace, openness, and acceptance to one another. We are all at different places in our journey. Therefore, we must all people wherever they may be.

I may need something at this point in my journey that is quite different from what you need. That doesn't mean my need is wrong and yours is right. It does not mean that the need you experience at this point in your life is legitimate and mine is somehow a sign that I have gone astray. It simply indicates that you and I are at different places. And that is a good thing. God understands that we are different people. And ultimately, your spiritual journey is not between you and me. You are not responsible to me for your life. Your spiritual journey is between you and God. And I must honour the fact that God's Holy Spirit is, in fact, at work in your life even though your life may look quite different than mine.

I may not always know what is best for you. In a passage that has always puzzled me, the writer of Philippians says, "*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.*" (Philippians 2:3) At the very least, this verse warns us that we must avoid arrogance in relationship to one another. We must always be willing to consider that my understanding of your condition may be lacking. My vision is only partial. I must be willing to consider that your self-assessment is valid and true. Humility requires that I be willing to accept that I may not fully understand the depth and complexity of your situation. There may be factors that lead you to be the person you are of which I am unaware. Only God sees fully. So judgement must be left to God.

If you deeply and sincerely believe that God's Holy Spirit is telling you that what you need in order to be free and to grow in Christ, is to eat chocolate ice cream, then I have to allow you to eat chocolate ice cream. If you are genuinely eating chocolate ice cream out of a deep desire to open more fully to God then I must accept that you genuinely believe in your heart that God has told you that to grow in Christ you need to eat chocolate ice cream. I will continue to honour and respect you, in the face of your eating all the chocolate ice cream you want, until one of two things happens. Either God eventually shows you a better way, not because I tell you the right way but because God's Holy Spirit reveals it to you. Or, God will show me that, in fact, eating chocolate ice cream is truly the best way to grow in Christian faith.

I am not the Holy Spirit. That job is taken. So I entrust you to God's care and I let you eat chocolate ice cream until you get tired of it and begin to seek a different way. Paul states that our responsibility is not to set one another straight on the errors of their ways, but to conduct ourselves in such a way that we avoid undue upset, "*if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.*" (I Corinthians 8:13)

My only responsibility is to support your life in Christ. Like Paul, I choose to live in such a way that, I may not be guilty of causing you “*to fall.*”

5. The goal is love

The fourth principle says simply that our only goal, individually, and as a community -- is love.

It's not very sophisticated. It's not very complicated. Our *only* goal. - not our first goal – our only goal is love. When Jesus was asked to summarize the law, he said that the “*first and greatest commandment,*” is “*You shall love.*” And the second is like it, “*You shall love.*” (Matthew 22:38, 39) In other words there is only one commandment. The commandment is *love*. It is expressed in many ways, but the commandment itself is only one. As Paul says simply, “*love is the fulfilling of the law.*” (Romans 13:10)

Now let me be clear here. There is a difference between love and sentimentality. I do believe in truth. Human beings are created by God in order to operate in a certain way. If we operate in tune with the way we were created to be, we will live more fully and more richly.

I do not believe that it would be loving for me to pretend that I believe that eating all the chocolate ice cream you want, all the time, is in fact, good for you. It is incumbent upon me, by the way that I live, to demonstrate to you that eating a healthy, balanced diet will allow you to be a strong, radiant human being. I have a responsibility to demonstrate to you that a more balanced diet will be healthier. I have a responsibility, by the life that I live to bear testimony to you of the truth that I believe.

Love in the Christian faith is always an active word. Love convinces not by argument or reason. When God desired to demonstrate perfect love to the world, God did not send a book. God sent a human being capable of living and loving in the midst of the mess and confusion of the human race. Love does not need to tell; love shows. Love demonstrates truth by living in loving relationship with all people and with all of Creation. Words only become necessary in order to explain the questions raised by the radical nature of loving behaviour.

Jesus said, “*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*” (John 13:34) So my goal is not to set you right, it's not to prove you wrong. My *only* goal is to love you. And to love you means to be open to you, it means to listen deeply to your life. To love as Jesus loved, means to enter into relationship to you with compassion and with honesty – with absolute transparency. It means being willing to admit that I may have all kinds of agendas. It means that I am always willing to acknowledge that my vision is only partial. I do not always see clearly and I need to hear you deeply in order to be able to understand you more fully. I may have all kinds of hidden, warped understandings of life, and I desire never to impose these upon you. I desire only to see your flourishing and to live with you

in a relationship of tolerance and respect. Love means that I will place no condemnation or judgment on you. To live in love with you means that at all costs, I will do no violence to you. I will not manipulate you. I will not abuse you. I will not force you to go anywhere that your conscience will not allow you to go. It means that I accept you and embrace you, as you are, where you are, what ever is going on in your life.

Love requires that I meet you with an attitude of welcome. It means that I communicate to you acceptance and trust and confidence. I honour you by honouring God's presence in your life.

All Christian relationships are always grounded in the radical nature of the love that is Christ. And our only goal is to fulfill that love in relation to one another.

6. Faithfulness is always our base – part 1

My fifth principle is simply faithfulness.

There are two parts to this faithfulness principle. Each of these parts is vitally important. They are integrally linked; you cannot have one without the other.

The Faithfulness of God to us

First, we trust in the faithfulness of God. Paul writes with extraordinary confidence that he is convinced *“that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:38,39) Paul believed this, not because everything in his life always went smoothly and easily. Paul believed in the faithfulness of God because, God's faithfulness was ultimately demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Like Paul, I choose to trust in God's faithfulness. God is faithful to me, to us, to the church throughout the world, to all people. There is nothing that can undo God's faithfulness. God has declared, in Jesus Christ, absolute, and perfect love for all people. There is nothing and no one that can undo that relationship. All I need to know is that I am loved by God. All I need to do is to live from that deep inner awareness of being loved by the one who gave me the gift of life. I don't need to win. I don't need to be right. I don't need to succeed. I don't even need to save the world. All I need is to know, deep in my inner being that I am loved. All people with whom I share this planet, from the beginning of time until the end of time are equally and every bit as much loved by God. God's faithfulness never changes. That means I can relax. I can relax and trust that God is at work in all the processes of life.

One of the great hooks in any institutional turmoil is drama. It is easy to get caught up in the excitement of votes, the intensity of parliamentary procedure, resolutions and counter resolutions, of intrigues, gossip, and back room politics. We need to know that the instant

we find ourselves caught up in the drama there is a great risk that we are following something other than God. Drama, urgency, and intensity are often warnings that we have a personal agenda at work and that we risk losing perspective and openness. When we feel that sense of urgency, we need to be cautious and take a step back from the intensity. We need to seek a more peaceful, calm and balanced place from which to live.

The gospel story of the Gerasene Demoniac (Luke 8:26-39) is an extraordinary picture of the human condition. Perhaps you don't think of yourself as a demon possessed person. But we are all filled with a bedlam of conflicting voices, pulling us in one direction and another. Go here; go there; do this; don't do that; this is right; this is wrong. Some of these voices are driven by self-interest, some by ego, some by unresolved issues in our own past. So we cannot always trust all these voices. Some of them are leading to violence and destruction, as the demons destroyed the herd of pigs in Luke's story.

Peace comes only when we stop attending to all those conflicting voices and listen to the one clear tone of Jesus Christ speaking in our inner most being. The sign of the voice of God, is the peace, quiet and stillness that comes from resting in the centre of Jesus' love. When the demon possessed man heard the voice of Jesus, suddenly he was no longer agitated, no longer thrashing about in the throes of this great conflict. Suddenly this man was *"sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind"* (Luke 8:35) – no more drama, no more agitation. So sit still. Stop. Listen carefully. Be at peace. We will know God's faithfulness when we rest and trust that God is at work among us.

7. Faithfulness is always our base - part 2

Our Faithfulness to one another

In the same way that God is faithful to us, God desires us to be faithful to one another. Our faithfulness to one another is a demonstration of our love for God. The writer of I John says, *"Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go."* (I John 1:9-11) How we live in relationship to one another has a direct indicator of the health of our relationship to God.

The writer of Colossians says, *"Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other."* (Colossians 3:13) My responsibility is not to change you, fix you, or straighten you out but to keep faith with you, to forgive you. You are the people, for good or ill, whom God has given me to be in relationship with, around the table of the Lord's Supper. You are the people to whom I am related by a bond of love and fellowship because Jesus Christ lives in you, and because you give expression to that reality in this place, at this time.

The pattern of forgiveness we are given by Christ is the pattern Jesus demonstrated on the cross from which he looked down upon his tormentors and said to God, *"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."* They have not asked for forgiveness;

they have not repented, or seen the errors of their ways. But Jesus pleads for their forgiveness none the less. Christian forgiveness precedes any sins, misunderstandings or wrong doings that may occur between us. The community of the church is the one place in the world, where we should be able to know that we are accepted and welcomed regardless of anything in our lives. We are not called to be right. We are called to be forgiving. In the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-15), the gracious landowner asks, “*are you envious because I am generous?*” It is generous faithfulness, not necessarily agreement, which enables the church to remain united.

The heresy of division far surpasses any potential heresy that might rub off on me by virtue of being associated with a person whose ideas I believe to be untrue. The litmus test of Christian discipleship is not a theology exam, or an ethics seminar. The litmus test of the Christian faith is always relationships between people. The demonstration of the work of God’s Spirit is the way I relate to you. Or, as Paul says in Galatians 5:22,23, “*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*” These are all relational qualities. The evidence/fruit of the Spirit is always demonstrated in the way we treat one another.

Our world is desperately torn apart by conflicts and unrest, by the extraordinary inhumanity of people to one another. Everywhere we look we see disharmony and tension in the human community. It is essential that we in the church, demonstrate to the world that there is a different way of being together even with people with whom we may disagree. There are different ways of dealing with conflict.

The world is looking for an example, for a vision of how people of diverse understandings might get along together. If there is one unique calling for the Christian church at this time it may be the call for us to demonstrate that it is possible for people of extraordinarily diverse backgrounds to come together and be united, simply because they share the invisible reality of the living Jesus Christ at the centre of their being. This is our bond. Jesus cements us in relationship with one another.

Faithfulness is always our base: God’s faithfulness to us and ours to one another.

8. In Conclusion

We are a community of faith. Our life together is based upon and is rooted in, the living presence of God, known to us in Jesus Christ. We are only together because, as Paul says in Galatians, we “*have clothed ourselves with Christ.*” (Galatians 3:27)

Despite our vast differences, we all wear the same uniform; we share a common identity. We are one. It is the bond of Christ that unites us. The bond of Christ forges a fellowship that cannot be broken. As long as we each continue to be “*clothed with Christ,*” there is never a time to give up on one another. We follow Jesus who took the defeat and humiliation of the cross and transformed it into the victory of resurrection, so there is never a time to admit defeat. There are no dead ends in Christian faith.

Struggles and difficulties in any community are burnishing. Friction provides an opportunity for us to grow. If we are willing to allow our struggles to do their work, they can become for us, a means of grace. Turmoil and pain have the power to polish us so that we might shine with the love of Christ in our midst.

If we run too quickly from struggle, we risk condemning ourselves to perpetual spiritual infancy. If we are only willing to remain where we feel comfortable and at home, we will never really feel comfortable or at home anywhere. In any community larger than one, there will always be struggles; there will always be disagreements. Wherever we go there will be people we find difficult. Our culture puts a high premium upon personal comfort. Followers of Christ, put a high premium upon the uncomfortable task of taking up our cross daily and following Jesus.

In response to a would-be follower who longed to cling to the familiar and the safe, Jesus replied, *"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."* (Luke 9:62) Our task is to keep our hand to the plow that is Christ. We are not called to look around at how the person next to us is plowing. We are not called to examine our neighbour's furrow to see if it is straighter or more crooked than ours. We are called to set our face towards Christ, hold firm to the love of the one who holds firmly to us, and trust him. It is Jesus who makes the garden grow. It is Jesus who builds the church. We can trust always in God's presence in our midst, no matter how difficult it may be for us at times to discern the outline of God's Spirit in one another.

As long as those around us continue to profess that they hold to the plow, there is nothing more we can demand of them. There are no further criteria by which faithfulness to God can be judged. We are not called to disenfranchise one another. We are not called to give up on anyone. We are called to continue to plow together so that the wonder of God's work might grow among us. We are called to plow the best furrow we can, confident that God will honour our faithfulness and trusting that, as we plow in obedience to Christ, the light of truth will shine in our work.

I do not know what the future holds. But I do know that the way we live in the present will shape the future we are able to embrace. If we live with love, humility, acceptance, and grace, then that's what our future together will look like.

None of us in ourselves is of any real importance. *"Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."* So, we cling to and trust in the God who makes the church grow. We do our planting and our watering. But we entrust the growth to God's gracious loving presence. Complete confidence and trust in God provide for us the only possible way forward in the midst of turmoil and unrest.

An Address presented by Christopher Page
June 20, 2004 at St. Philip's Anglican Church