

Just Resolution Remarks – Rev. Anna Blaedel

November 12, 2019

A few weeks ago, I was able to attend the Broadway musical *Hadestown*. *Hadestown* adapts the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to a setting not unlike the Great Depression. Orpheus, who is the son of the muse of epic poetry, is engaged to Eurydice, a tree nymph. However, when Hades, who is the god of the dead and king of the underworld, asks Eurydice to join him in the underworld, she agrees. Hades is a hard and cruel taskmaster, however, and Orpheus, who is left behind, sings this song about Hades.

And what has become of the heart of that man

Now that the man is King?

What has become of the heart of that man,

Now that he has everything?

The more he has, the more he holds,

The greater the weight of the world on his shoulders

See how he labors beneath that load

Afraid to look up, and afraid to let go.

Where is the treasure inside your chest?

The song cut me to the core. What has become of my heart? What has become of the heart of The United Methodist Church? What are we afraid to let go of? Where is the treasure inside our chest? I am here today, humbly acknowledging

the unrelenting pain that our sister Anna Blaedel has experienced because of the complaint that was filed against her eighteen months ago against them and the length of the process that has led us to this point. What have we become when a complaint process that was meant to produce justice and reconciliation only results in more pain?

Anna, I want to apologize to you today publicly for the harm that you have experienced, not only because of this complaint, but because of previous complaints as well. Our complaint process in The United Methodist Church is brutal, and the weight of the LGBTQIA community has been on your shoulders. Punishing people because of how God created them is not what God ever intended for us as human beings. Each person is created in God's image.

The United Methodist Church is broken because we are still not able to honor our differences around human sexuality. When the entire denomination votes at General Conference on issues that are only related to the United States, it sets the stage for further dysfunction. I am deeply grateful that our *Book of Discipline* grants freedom to the Central Conferences to organize according to their unique contexts. However, when some parts of our denomination have the flexibility to create a church in their context that provides grace, hope, and justice, but other parts don't, we are on a collision course.

The tide is turning, however. I am seeing United Methodists around the globe find their voice and declare that we are not the same United Methodist Church that we were before the 2019 General Conference, and we are not going back. The Spirit is moving in the Iowa Annual Conference and around the connection. The make-up of our General Conference delegations in the United States has shifted considerably. In addition, I believe that our brothers and sisters in the Central Conferences have a better understanding of what is happening in the United States and why it is important to make adjustments in our polity so that our worldwide denomination can reach out together to more people with the good news of Jesus Christ in a way that transcends all boundaries.

Learning to live with difference is a critical skill not only in the church but in today's world. Our children in the US grow up in diverse school systems and in a culture where it is illegal to discriminate, yet somehow the church is different. Where did Jesus say it's okay to hate and exclude? How can we justify this? And how do we explain it to our children and grandchildren? Is division more important than the ministry we have in common? What has become of our heart? Jesus invites us to acknowledge that mission and ministry and sharing the love of Jesus is more important than being right.

In Iowa, we are developing a comprehensive strategy for how we will live as United Methodists in a diverse world with less financial and material resources. At

the same time, we have a clear vision for who we are as United Methodists and how God is calling us to form disciples of Jesus Christ, transform the world, and make a difference wherever God calls us.

I have already started another series of district gatherings this fall to dialogue around the necessity of reducing our conference budget to better align with our mission and resources. I can't help but remember the second round of district meetings in the fall of 2018 around the Commission on a Way Forward. I used a scripture from Philippians chapter 2:1-4, where the apostle Paul urges us to be like Jesus, who humbled himself on the cross.

“Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others.”

I remind you that Paul is not saying that we all have to believe the same way. But we are called to let go of whatever holds us back from a unity that encourages and embraces diversity as a fundamental principle of creation.

In these district meetings, we talked about convicted humility, which has been one of the core values of the Commission on a Way Forward. The word

“humility” comes from the Latin adjective *humilis*, which may be translated as “humble.” But *humilis* also means “grounded” or “from the earth.” In the first gathering, I mentioned the fact that since Iowa is a farming state, everyone would know that the word “humility” is also related to the word hummus, which is the organic component of soil, formed by the decomposition of leaves and other plant material by soil microorganisms.

Whereupon a kindly farmer stood up to say (and I am taking some poetic license here), “Bishop Laurie, we’re aware that you’re not from Iowa, but in order to have a successful ministry here, you need to know that the organic component of soil is not hummus, with two ‘m’s’. It’s humus, with one ‘m’. Hummus is mashed up chickpeas, and in Iowa, we’ll take steak, bacon, and pork over chickpeas any day.”

My friends, with humility and grace, it is time to throw open the doors of the church for everyone. I am the episcopal leader of Iowa, but I am also a pastor to the laity and clergy in the Iowa Conference. The complaint process in our *Book of Discipline*, including trials, may be necessary, but it does not always facilitate reconciliation and justice. In fact, church trials can be destructive and serve to divide rather than heal.

Therefore, as we move forward toward the 2020 General Conference, I have made a commitment to avoid, if at all possible, the processing of complaints,

charges, and trials related to officiating at same gendered weddings and LGBTQIA identity and credentialing, and I will always seek just resolution first.

In addition, I ask that both laity and clergy exercise restraint in filing complaints at this time. I invite your prayers for healing for Rev. Anna Blaedel, I ask for forgiveness for the ways in which our LGBTQIA sisters and brothers around the world have been disenfranchised and mistreated, and I covenant to continue leading with my heart into the future to which God has called us all.

I will work toward a future where every child has the opportunity to become who God has called them to be, and a future where no one is ever rejected because of their sexual orientation, immigration status, the color of their skin, the job they hold, or the neighborhood where they live. And I will devote my ministry to creating a future where every person is inspired to deeds of justice and mercy through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Anna, you are a trailblazer, and as one who is out in front, you have offered your very self to speak out on behalf of your queer brothers and sisters. You have carried a heavy load, the weight of the world has been on your shoulders, and I deeply regret the toll this process has taken on your mind, body, and spirit.

As an episcopal and pastoral leader, I covenant to create as much space for differences of opinion as possible in these next months and will work toward unity of heart. I still believe that there is a place at the table for everyone and that we are

better witnesses to the love and grace of God when we are able to agree to disagree and live together in covenant as the body of Christ.

And so I ask today, what has become of your heart? What has become of my heart? What has become of the heart of The United Methodist Church? What are you afraid to let go of? Where is the treasure inside your chest? Can we still move forward together in humility by deep listening, mutual respect, finding common ground, and showing grace to each other? Even though we may not think alike, may we all love alike? I pray so.

May God's grace give us the courage to be creators of justice and joy, where everyone born has a place at the table. Thanks be to God.

I would like to read a poem written by Rev. M. Barclay from a website called enfleshed.com, published by Anna Blaedel and M. Barclay.

Dreaming of More

Dreaming of more

If you need to be reminded:

(as we all do

from time to time)

you are beloved.

your flesh bears Sacred worth.

neither prejudice nor power should keep you

from safety nor community, nor a place to learn, nor a place to work, nor a place to practice your faith.

neither should it keep your neighbor from the same.

in a world and time where systems of violence

entice us to compromise our values,

use us as pawns, tokenize us,

ban us, exploit us,
 and teach us to turn on one another,
 may we be reminded
 of our collective power;
 of the possibilities we bear;
 of our divine calling...
 not to settle for dreams of access to what is corrupt.
 but to seek, and create, and imagine and protest our way
 to something altogether better.
 feeding each other until we get there;
 clothing one another until we get there;
 protecting one another until we get there;
 hiring one another until we get there;
 building community with one another until we get there;
 creating sacred space with one another until we get there;
 sharing all that we have with one another until we get there;
 trusting that these practices
 in small and ordinary and extravagant ways,
 will in and of themselves
 en flesh that which we dream of.

By M. Barclay from www.enfleshed.com

For Everyone Born – Shirley Erena Murray

For everyone born, a place at the table,
 for everyone born, clean water and bread,
 a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing,
 for everyone born, a star overhead,
 and God will delight when we are creators
 of justice and joy, compassion and peace:
 yes, God will delight when we are creators
 of justice, justice and joy!