A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“*Grace in* *This Place*”

Luke 9.28-36

March 3, 2019

I come to this last Sunday of the Epiphany season with the words of blessing from the first: Christ bless this house. *Christus mansionem benedicat*. DaySpringers in this blessed house, we are preparing to receive communion on Transfiguration Sunday. On this high and holy day, we peek over the shoulders of three disciples as they wake up from sleep to see Jesus unveiled in his divine glory before their eyes. Where they saw gleaming white, we see bread and cup; may we also see with their faith. Where they climbed the mountain with Jesus, we walk together to his Table with hope of our redemption. Where they heard the voice of God, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him” we listen for God’s voice speaking to us by the Holy Spirit of his love for all the world. Indeed, by faith, hope, and love, we too may catch sight of Jesus’ glory revealed, even in this sacred place.

Today is important for all those reasons. It is also important for the subject I wish to address today. Today is an anniversary of a very challenging time in our church’s life, but one that holds hopeful promise for our shared life together. Three years ago this Spring, many members in the DaySpring community met together over a series of weeks to discuss same-sex marriage and whether DS would allow same-sex weddings in the church. The timing was driven in large part by the Supreme Court ruling the year before that legalized same-sex marriage in the US. The answer would invariably gesture toward larger, unasked questions: Are we open and affirming of homosexuality? Are we a hospitable place for the LGBT community? How do we read scripture? What is our decision, and, just as importantly, how do we make it as a Baptist congregation? A question it prompted for many people along the way was: Can I stay at DaySpring? Ultimately, we adopted a Statement on Same-Sex weddings that said in part that we would not perform same-sex weddings at DaySpring.

We haven’t said much, and perhaps nothing from the pulpit, since then about that season of our church’s life or the Statement that brought it to a conclusion. Today, I think it’s time to do so, which I know can heighten anxieties. Yet, I think three years is a long enough time to sit with this in silence. At some point we need to remember, reflect, and go forward. I’d like to start that today: to remember our journey, affirm the work we did, and to set a path. This Transfiguration Sunday seems like a fitting time, especially considering the theme of this Sunday: seeing Jesus in his glory, which is what we all want, and what we all need.

You are welcome here. All of you. Each of you. You are known. You are loved. You are seen by God. I may not share your story. I may not agree with choices you make or convictions you hold and vice versa. I may need to do some listening. I may ask you to do some as well. Regardless, I hope we can always live in God’s wild, redemptive, transformative love. This place is a place of grace and loving mercy for all people. May it ever be, even as we do the work of discernment about God’s will and intention for our lives.

At key moments in their history, the ancient Israelites would pause to construct a stack of rocks, called a *tse-yun*, at sacred places where they had encountered the Divine. They stacked rocks in the Jordan River as they crossed over to the promised land after 40 years of wandering. Later, they stacked rocks in the wilderness on their way to exile so future generations may find their way back. *Tse-yun* or cairns marked sacred places to remember the past and walk confidently in God’s covenant faithfulness.

This has felt like a *tse-yun* moment to me on this journey with you. A time to remember and to reflect and to prepare for the future. I’ve been thinking about this for a long time, but this week, I finally went out in the woods back there and stacked rocks to make a *tse-yun* of my own. I knelt in the grass over the stacked rocks and prayed God’s presence in this message, I prayed for you, as many of you by name as I could, and for the journey we have taken until today and continue from here.

Three years ago, we did some hard work. I want to affirm the statement we adopted at the end of the Church Conversations. I’m not bring this up today to change the statement. I think the statement is quite good. It represents church practices I find consistent with biblical witness and historic Christian teaching on sexuality and marriage. Just as importantly, to me, it encompasses the diversity and reflects the temperament of DaySpring, and it sets a course for discernment by our gathered community.

**Our Story**

How did we get there? Three years ago, on Transfiguration Sunday, just as Lent was about to begin, we were beginning to talk through “Church Conversations” about marriage and sexuality. DaySpring had been a place until then that just didn’t talk about things, on purpose. It was a way to embody sabbath, which we all need. Worship, prayer, silence, relationships. This is what we were about. “Leave everything else on Highway 6 when you come down Renewal Way.” That served us so very well for a long time. Then we sat down to talk . . .and not just talk about some random subject, but talk about sexuality: one of the most central, tender, important topics, one too big to wrap arms around in a brief conversation or single sermon. And one that seems so simple so some and so impossibly nuanced to others. And all in the context of a wedding policy at DaySpring.

Y’all . . . it was hard. I felt it. You felt it. I’m not sure I made things better by not communicating clearly and consistently where I stood on things and where I thought we should stand together. I was too cautious about my pastoral role, hoping I could best help the congregation come to consensus by giving space for a conversation rather than lead it from the front. I confess, I think part of that was I didn’t trust you who might disagree with me to still love me and still love this church. That’s not fair to you, but there’s an enneagram number for that, right?

I’m not sure you made things better when you let your anxiety, your resentment, and your fear close your mind and heart to one another. You should confess too, I think. My “enneagramic” friends say something like: our greatest strengths are also our weaknesses. Our virtues show up as our vices. They say when we realize that, we realize once again how deep the truth: we are all sinners in need of God’s grace. Only then can we do the inner work of our spiritual transformation. The Bible says something like: we work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

It’s not that it was all bad; a lot of good happened in that room, and over coffees, and in living rooms. A lot of good happened in friendship and in mutual understanding. But it was hard. People were hurt, some by the Statement we adopted, which I’ll get to; others by the way they felt like they were treated along the way. Clarity, humility, and trust go a long way all the time. We needed more of each.

We felt all the feelings: love and anger, hope and frustration; we were our best selves, and… sometimes not, but we were present to one another. I’m really proud of you for that. It wasn’t easy. Since then other church communities have approached this issue in different ways. You may have watched Methodist representatives hammer each other over this in the last week. But you did it in a way that I’ve not seen elsewhere. You did it as a community, together, sitting eyeball to eyeball with people you may have sometimes disagreed with, but you did it and stayed at it. That’s the DaySpring charism our founders gave to us. Whatever we do, we do together.

I’m proud of that, of the way we took seriously and leaned into a way of doing church as a community of people whose lives are intertwined with one another. You did that in some pretty stressful ways. And I’m proud of you. I’m not trying to gloss it, but just to also say you get a tremendous credit for it. That’s not been said often enough, and it needs to be said. And I need you to hear it. From the beginning DaySpring, even among other Baptist churches, has had a profound trust in congregational life, and that’s what Baptists were made for. For 400 years, a Baptist gift to the world has been a radical trust in the Holy Spirit working through regular people who together make a church. It’s simpler for a board of elders or a general conference or a bishop to tell you what we believe and what we’re going to do so you can be passive in it or just drift away. We were set on a different course. It’s the most Baptist thing we’ve done.

I know this about 2016: Everyone in that room loved this church. They loved people in this church; they loved the drive down here to this place; the sanctuary, the music, occaisionally the sermons; they loved the liturgical seasons and those who bring them to life, the Chart and its trust in one another to share the work of the church. They loved DaySpring. Some of them who loved the church could hardly believe they were finding themselves asking, “Can I stay here at DaySpring?” Some left. People left here for different reasons, but all of them who left had one thing in common: they loved the church and were heartbroken to leave.

About 30-40 people left DaySpring during that season. That’s 10-15% of our congregation, gone. But who thinks about numbers? I think about friends, about faces and voices, conversations and shared life. Friends of yours left the church over this. Friends of mine left over this. And I miss them. You miss them. If I could speak to those who left right now, I would say, we miss you. Your absence is felt. I think about you often, and I miss you here. Each of you. I pray for you, that your journey would lead you to a congregation you will bless as much as you did this one and from whom you will receive life as you did here. I wish you no ill-will, none at all. I wish you peace.

It was a major season in our church’s life that was pretty painful for a lot of people. A lot of needed healing has slowly come since then in the space provided by our shared life together. I’m thankful for that. It is evidence of the mercy of God. Most of us stayed. Those who did are part of DaySpring’s life ordered, at least in some way, by the Statement on Same-sex weddings adopted in May 2016.

I want to turn now to the actual statement.

**Traditional Practices/ Biblical Reasoning**

In our Statement we answered the specific, core question that prompted our discussions. We did so, stating, “Recognizing that we do not have congregational consensus to change a practice this important to the life of the church, we continue to perform weddings between a man and a woman, and do not practice same-sex weddings.”

We do not practice same-sex weddings. I suppose it would have been straight to the point if we had just made a one-sentence statement, “we do not practice same-sex weddings” but I don’t think any of us felt like that would do justice to the journey that got us there, the complexities of congregational discernment, or the reasons why a church might not practice same-sex weddings. So, we said that our practice was grounded in “longstanding interpretation of the authoritative biblical witness concerning same-sex physical intimacy and the historic teaching of the Church on sexual ethics.” Admittedly, that is a long-winded way of saying, “Scripture is authoritative. The long-standing interpretation of scripture does not affirm same-sex intimacy, and the scripture’s witness on this point is part of a much larger whole of the church’s teaching on sexuality and marriage.”

That still seems right to me. Scripture is our primary authority for discernment. Everything that shapes and informs our discernment relates back to scripture: the church’s teaching, our reasoning, our experiences; our faith, hope, love. Reading the Bible well demands patience, care and wisdom, and a community of faithful lovers of God. We do well to be humble before the interpretive task. All that to say is that a lot more can be said about this, but it seems to me that the architecture of scripture’s vision of sexuality offers three guides relevant and challenging to our time:

1) *celibacy*: biblical witness elevates celibacy as a gift and calling to be honored as a way to love God, not as a failure to marry or achieve personal fulfillment; St. Paul addresses this in 1 Corinthians 7. Celibacy is a calling to a refrain from sexual activity for a period of time or a lifetime. Abstinence is the biblical recommendation for unmarried Christians. Celibacy is a step further. It is not a failure or a curse; it is a sacred gift, even a vocational calling some embrace as an extension of the abstinence that is expected outside of marriage. Celibacy is a counter-witness to the idolatry of sex.

2) *fidelity*: the biblical/ theological vision locates sexual intimacy as part of marriage; sex is not merely for personal satisfaction or for expressing our true identity, or is the point of all of life’s work, or is the ticket to happiness, or any other concept that minimizes our sexuality. Sexual expression is the embodiment of spiritual union that is sacred marriage; adultery is tearing asunder what God has made one. Song of Solomon is the poetic and romantic version of this.

My old professor was more plain-spoken. He would caution: When someone says, “I love you,” be careful; what is often meant is “I love me and want to use you to love me more.” He also advised: “only share a bed with a person you also share a checking account with.” What he was getting at is the old Christian wisdom, out of style in some quarters, but not out of date: sexuality is intended to be expressed in marriage, which is to be honored by fidelity to the covenant. Fidelity is a witness to God’s covenantal faithfulness.

3) Third, and this comes closer to the crux of our discussion here: human sexuality is either declared or assumed by biblical writers to be rightly ordered when between a married man and woman. There are not very many passages that consider the alternative, but there are a few, from Leviticus 18 and 20 to 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1. Romans 1 is widely considered the most crucial text. In these texts, homosexual acts are not described as especially reprehensible or worse than other human activities, but the writers assume a world-view that rightly ordered sexual expression is abstinence outside of marriage and fidelity in marriage. This was the Jewish view continued by Paul and the New Testament writers.

In an interview he gave, New Testament Scholar NT Wright summarizes this well: “For Jews homosexual behavior wasn’t an issue, except as part of a larger whole [teaching about marriage] to which Jesus refers in traditional biblical terms. For non-Jews, such as those addressed by Paul, it was an obvious issue, since every possible kind of sexual expression was well-known in cities like Corinth and Rome . . .”

This about more than just laying down rules, Wright said, “For the Jew, it was a matter of living in accordance with the covenant, which was the means of God rescuing creation from the mess into which it had fallen. For Paul, it was [a matter of living in accordance with] the death and resurrection of Jesus, through which God had launched his project of new creation. . .Paul (and all early Christian known to us, right through the centuries) stuck with the Jewish view: no worship of idols, no sex outside of marriage. And marriage of course meant man/woman.”

I appreciate the way Wright ended his comments: “There’s much more to say about this but this is for starters. I do not plan to write more about this anytime soon; it’s complex and obviously contentious, and it wouldn’t be a short book.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed.

There is much more than can and should be said about all of this, but this it seems to me is the architecture of historic Christian understanding on marriage and sexuality. I affirm then what we said then in our Statement: that we prioritize scripture, reflect on it theologically in conversation with the church’s tradition, and bring to bear its guidance to our practices. That all seems like what a church ought to be about. We did that, we did it together, and I’m glad for it.

**The Lives that Challenge us**

But that’s not all we said, and I’m glad for this too. Congregational discernment is rarely simple on issues that are complex and obviously contentious. And so, in our Statement we wrote, “We also embrace those in our fellowship who are inspired by the committed relationships of gay friends and family and who desire to see DaySpring affirm same-sex marriages.” The witness of faithful gay Christians may not be the only challenge to a traditional Christian sexual ethic, but it is powerful.

The Gospel isn’t just a rule book about dos and don’ts about sexuality or anything else, but a story of radical grace, remarkable inclusion, surprising embrace of outcasts and sinners. For most of us, that’s the first thing we learned: God is love. God so loved the world he sent his son. Love is the greatest. All are welcome to Jesus. The tension is obvious to predict, when ancient teaching on how sexuality is to be expressed is brought face to face with sincere people who say, “As best as I understand myself, I am gay and I don’t know how I could be otherwise.” Would you please raise your hand if you know and love someone who understands themselves to be gay? This touches almost everyone.

Just this week, someone in our church had two friends come out to her as gay. They are Christians who want to be faithful to the biblical witness. Another DaySpring friend wrote this week from across the country saying, “This is not the only important conversation we as Christians need to be having. But it might be the most important one right now. It’s certainly the loudest.” He said “our next door neighbors are gay; the neighbors across the alley are gay. Their neighbors are gay. They’re amazing people. Talking with one of the neighbors the other day, it turns out we have a lot in common. We get in exactly the same kind of conflicts with our spouses.”

If you’re not feeling tension between the historic Christian teaching on sexuality and the implication for people you know and love, well, other people here are. Many of us struggle with what we understand to be the Bible’s consistent prohibition of same-sex behavior with what we understand to be the Gospel’s message of radical, inclusive grace. Friends who wrote me this week and many others--we feel that tension and in our Statement, we had the courage to honor it, not be afraid of it, or ignore or squash it. We honor it. We hear you. We see you. We want to walk together with you.

**Tension**

One way of expressing that was when we said that we are “choosing to hold the tension of our differences so that the fullness of truth may be known and lived out together.” In many ways, we’ve been doing that for these three years. We’ve been holding the tension. Some tension between individuals one with another and a prayer for forgiveness and reconciliation; some tension within individuals and a prayer for clarity and wisdom. We’ve held the tension. As far as I can tell, this is part of living in community. A lot of needed healing has slowly come in the space provided by our shared life together. God’s Spirit of consolation has been at work among us.

We also expressed our willingness to “test our theological convictions by the study of scripture, in the context of the Church’s history and tradition, and with the guidance of the Spirit as discerned by the gathered congregation.” Except it wasn’t just a willingness we expressed. We said we were *called* to do this and *empowered* to do it. Yet for three years I’ve not prompted us to do so. I thought we needed some time and some space for wounds to heal. I know I did.

But now I think we’re ready, not necessarily to dive back into to adjudicating our Statement on our wedding policy. I think we should agree to keep it serving us for at least another 3 years, if not longer. I don’t even mean I think we’re ready now to study sexuality and marriage as a church together yet. Maybe I’m wrong about that, but I think that can wait.

Instead, what I mean is that I think we’re ready at DaySpring to expand the way we live contemplative spirituality. For years, from the beginning, intentionally we were a kind of shelter, a place of rest from the world and its pressures and demands, and especially its controversies. This was intentional, and it has been so good. I don’t want to leave behind this image of a shelter. We need shelters. Jesus didn’t need the one Peter wanted to build him on the Mount of Transfiguration, but the rest of us do. And this place and its life together has been a place to come and simply be for many people who were barely holding onto their faith, or their families, or their sanity, or their sobriety and some who couldn’t hold on anymore at all and just needed to be held in the arms of grace. It’s been a strong shelter. Thanks be to God.

But it’s also a place from which to build some pathways. Today I want to invite you into a way of congregational life that can surface a range of topics including, but not limited to, sexuality and marriage. We don’t need to make Statements about everything, thanks to God, but we can benefit from seeking guidance on some complex issues and where our faith and spirituality give us paths to follow. We haven’t done much of that over the years, but it’s time to begin.

Contemplative spirituality is not a place to hide; it is a restorative place from which to engage. It is not a path away from a fallen world, but a path to re-imagine creation’s fullness in its gracious Creator made known in the Incarnation. St. Francis and Maximus the Confessor have been teaching me this. It’s time for us to build pathways of engagement with issues and challenges we’re confronting in ourselves and in the world. You do an amazing job of leaving your partisan politics out on Highway 6, but you’re bringing with you, how could you not, what you’re worried about, perplexed about, passionate about, and angry about when you come down Renewal Way. In a fracturing society, church may be the last place where people can talk and listen to one another, and not just that but read scripture and reflect on it together, and discern how the Spirit is leading. What does faith, discipleship, Christian practices, contemplative spirituality offer to us pilgrims as we try to live as Christians in the world we live in every day? We crave a place to seek answers. So, from time to time, we’ll plan for a 3-4-week study, during the week, on various important topics. Anyone that wants to come is welcome. All perspectives are welcome. We’ll study scripture, tradition, the issues, our stories. We’ll do our best to do as much as we can as well as we can. I can think of many important studies: Ecology and Simplicity, Immigration and Hospitality, Economics and Eucharistic living, Life and Death as creatures of God; Marriage and Sexuality in an incarnational faith.

We’ve been a church community whose life and love were sustained, we were convinced, by not talking about certain things. It’s time to become a church community who trusts its life and love are sustained with time and space for talking about certain things, together. We can do this. This is the shape of a path forward, and I’m eager to teach you and learn what you have to teach me.

“The world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.” One of my pastors used to bless us with that in his benediction each week. Those are the kinds of words that get planted in your soul. The world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.

With that, it’s time to come to the Table.

We remembered our Conversations from three years ago. Now, “May the Lord bless us and keep us.”

We reflected on our Statement, our policy toward marriage and its biblical and theological grounding, our posture toward one another and its compassionate heartbeat. Now, “May God grant us peace, even perfect peace.”

We affirmed our openness to “test our theological convictions by the study of scripture, in the context of the Church’s history and tradition, and with the guidance of the Spirit as discerned by the gathered congregation.” Now, “May God give us courage in every endeavor.”

Trusting that openness, we step forward confidently, prayerfully, humbly, thoughtfully on a path toward engagement of our faith and spirituality with the most important issues of our lives including sexuality and marriage. Now, “May we lift our eyes and see his face and know his grace forever.”

The grace of God is offered to us right here at Christ’s Table as we all come in need of redemption and as we share the signs of our salvation with one another. Brothers and sisters, may this prayer fill this blessed house as we come:

May the Lord Bless You and Keep You;
May the Lord Make His Face to Shine Upon You
And Be Gracious Unto You.
May God Give You the Grace
Not to Sell Yourself Short,
Grace to Risk Something Big
For Something Good,
Grace to Remember that
The World is Now
Too Dangerous for Anything but Truth, and

Too Small for Anything but Love.

So May God Take Your Minds and
Think Through Them;

May God Take Your Lips and
Speak Through Them; and
May God Take Your Hearts and
Set Them On Fire,
Through
the Father and
the Son and
the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

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1. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/revangelical/2014/06/01/exclusive-n-t-wright-speaks-about-his-new-book.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)