Sermon 02-10-19

The Uncertainty of Unsettledness - 3

1 Corinthians 12:12-14

In two weeks, **GRAPHIC: 864 United Methodist delegates from around the world will gather in St. Louis for General Conference 2019**. This special session was called to receive and act upon the **GRAPHIC: Commission on the Way Forward report to the General Conference.** The report put forth three plans, the One Church, the Traditional, and the Connectional Conference Plans for consideration by the General Conference to shape the policies and procedures of the United Methodist Church regarding human sexuality. **GRAPHIC: Two other plans, the Simple and the Modified Traditional Plans are also going to be considered by the General Conference.** I will discuss the plans next week.

Sometimes pastors learn a thing or two from the lessons and sermons we teach and preach. Hard to believe, I know, but it is true. Over the last eight years I have been searching one of those unsettling questions that Jesus posed to us, one that I have preached upon in the past, **GRAPHIC: examining the question who is my neighbor?** I have looked hard at that specific question in light of the issue concerning the acceptance and ordination of gay and lesbian persons, including clergy, in our churches. It has been a really difficult process for me. One that I have struggled with for years.

To compound the issue, as I may have mentioned before, I was appointed to the Committee on an Inclusive Conference in the CA-NV, which was to look at ways of approaching this issue in light of the rules we have and the actions of some of our clergy here in the United States. This issue came to the forefront of our denomination in July of 2016 when the Western Jurisdictional Conference elected our denomination’s first married lesbian Bishop, Rev. Dr. Karen Oliveto.

In my studies I ran across an interesting thought from **GRAPHIC: Morgan Guyton, the author of *How Jesus Saves the World from Us: 12 Antidotes to Toxic Christianity.*** He wrote:

People who think that having strong faith means they’re supposed to be sure of themselves are not going to grow very much in the depth of their spiritual knowledge. Growth requires change, and you can’t change what you believe unless you’re OK with being *uncertain* about what you believe. This is manifested in the irony that people who know the least about a topic are often the most confident in their knowledge. The more you learn, the more you’re exposed to how little you really know. So, if you think faith means self-certainty, then you’re going to remain an infant in your spiritual journey.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Our sermon for this morning is titled, *The Uncertainty of Unsettledness*, **GRAPHIC: with uncertainty being questioning, guesswork, conjecture, speculation, the unknown. Unsettledness refers to being up in the air, undetermined, undecided, unfinished, unresolved.[[2]](#endnote-2)** This is not an original sermon. Part of it comes from a series I preached the summer of 2016. Although it has been over two years since I first preached this text, I am still living in that place of uncertainty and unsettledness. I have come to realize the truth in Morgan’s words.

**GRAPHIC: Just after Bishop Oliveto was consecrated at Jurisdictional Conference, I was asked by the Conference Committee on Reconciliation to participate in and speak at the "Send Off" for Bishop Karen.** So, you can understand the place where I am living, I would like to share those words with you today:

Unsettled. That was the leading word in a short sermon series I just finished. One might categorize the series as “those unsettling questions that disrupt life.” Sort of like Jesus did, asking questions, that is. **GRAPHIC: Did you know that Jesus was more likely to ask questions than to answer them? In the Gospels alone, he asks 307 questions while being asked 187. He only answered 3.**

Unsettled. That could very well describe me. Most often we find that we are searching for answers – we think that having the right answers will not only help us to get ahead but help us to feel more prepared for what lies ahead. However, many leaders would argue that instead, it’s having the courage to ask the right questions is what really matters.

Unsettled. Shortly after the election of Bishop Oliveto at Jurisdictional Conference, Rev. John Oda contacted me asking me to speak at this event. So, the unsettling question “Why me?” started going through my mind until he mentioned the Inclusive Conferencing Committee. Still I asked Why Me?

Unsettled. I recall the first few meetings of the Inclusive Conferencing Committee. Oh, how I asked my DS to remove me from the committee, select someone else, someone who has been around a while longer, someone who has more of a grasp on the issues, someone other than me. Now I don’t know if this is true or not, but my DS said, “The Bishop wants you there.” For those of you who know me, what I am about to say will make sense. I am a good soldier; if the Bishop wants me there, I will stay.

Unsettled. Why am I here? When some of my colleagues heard I was on this committee and the Rev. Dr. Karen Oliveto was a part of it, I got, “I’m glad it is you and not me.” Hey, what’s going on? What do you mean? I had no idea who this Rev. Dr. Karen Oliveto was except for the brief phone introduction we had at our first meeting with the Bishop.

Unsettled. Then I met Karen. A nice person, I thought, though I don’t agree with some of what she is saying. But I listened just as she listened. I could agree on some of the things she was saying. She was agreeing on some of the things I said.

Unsettled. That word is a very good description of the committee until it entered into a process we have come to know as Holy Conferencing. And during that process a change came over us. It seemed the invisible barriers that had been dividing us began to fade away.

Unsettled. At one particular meeting we were deciding how to present our work to the Annual Conference. Someone suggested a skit, but no one would agree to do it, until Karen said, “I’ll do it, but only if Steve agrees to do it with me.” What is she doing? Is she pointing at me? Unsettling, yes; but yes, I would do it.

Unsettled. **GRAPHIC: I had read Hays, Wright, Borg, and Wilson, and there was Hauerwas, Bass, Hamilton, Rollins, Rogers, Gagnon and many others.** I had spent hours of time in prayer and talked with trusted colleagues inside and outside of our denomination, and yet…. why am I so unsettled?

Then came the skit at Annual Conference. Karen on one side, me on the other. Talking . . . slowly moving toward each other. I am going to stop for a few minutes here to show you what I am talking about….

Unsettled. That’s strange . . . she called herself queer. She isn’t queer, that’s Karen. She’s trying to make a point, I know, but Karen isn’t queer, she’s Karen. She is the person I have come to admire and respect. She is not only a colleague but a friend who tries to understand and accept me as I try to understand and accept her. That’s what Holy Conferencing did for me. The feelings expressed in that skit were for real, folks, they were real.

Unsettled. The work of the Inclusive Conferencing committee as we knew it is unsettled and finished; yet it is only beginning. There is a lot more to do. What will it look like? Only time will tell. However, Karen has left her mark and a legacy that will carry on into the future.

Unsettled. Yes, I am. Unsettled because I am still searching, but searching for a way to help others understand. I ran across a story about the Rev. Billy Graham that spoke volumes to me and reminded me of Karen. It was in response to his daughter Gigi asking him questions about former President Clinton and his wife after the Monica Lewinski affair. **GRAPHIC: Billy made the point: It is the Holy Spirit’s job to convict; it is God’s job to judge; it is my job to love.**

At Annual Conference the Holy Spirit was at work. Karen took me aside and told me she was running for Bishop because the Holy Spirit had done its job. It had convicted Karen in what one might call a Bishop-ly sort of way. What happened at Jurisdictional Conference is an indication to me that God has determined Karen should be called Bishop.

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I ended my words that Sunday afternoon by saying as she [Karen] starts the new chapter in the call God had placed on her heart it was also time for me to do what I have been called to do. It was time for me to support my friend and colleague as God loves me.

I believe I have come a long way since 2016. I once said I was a conservative, but my former DS and Kelley both chuckle and say that word does not describe me. Middle of the road, maybe, but definitely not conservative. Yet, as the opening session of the General Conference approaches next Saturday, I can tell you I am still uncertain and unsettled. It is my prayer that we will follow the precepts of Jesus, those we have studied, examined, and talked about over the years, and those of John Wesley who founded our denomination. I pray the Holy Spirit will be working among all the delegates so that the will of God will prevail; not the will of man.

I want to leave you with these words from Albert Camus, French philosopher, author, and journalist, who said, **GRAPHIC: “I would rather live my life as if there is a God and die to find out there isn't, than live my life as if there isn't and die to find out there is.”** [[3]](#endnote-3) I challenge each of us to never forget it is our job to love as God loves us while we keep our minds open to the possibilities of uncertainty and the unsettledness we experience from scripture. **GRAPHIC: Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.**

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. Morgan Guyton, *How Jesus Saves the World from Us* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), Kindle Loc. 1276 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. March McCutcheon, *Roget’s Super Thesaurus, 3rd Ed.* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer’s Digest Books, 2003), 618 & 627 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/42024-i-would-rather-live-my-life-as-if-there-is>, accessed 08/20/2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)