

Scars and Stripes : Liberty and the Trial of Rev. Amy DeLong
July 3, 2011

The First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto
Galatians 6:1-10

The Declaration of Independence was lost and not found for 213 years. Well, not the Declaration itself, but one of the 24 known surviving copies. It was found in 1989, folded and tucked into the the back of a picture frame that a shopper bought in a Pennsylvania flea market. The painting was “a dismal dark country scene” and he bought it for the frame, but thought it too dilapidated and un-suitable for use. The document itself had been printed and stored in haste, the ink still wet and leaving an imprint of “In congress, July 4, 1776,” offset and in reverse on the bottom margin. What a find! What a treasure that was almost lost for good!

We are so often surrounded by amazing graces that could slip by us unnoticed, or unappreciated.

Another treasure, discovered when I returned from Annual Conference. I opened a card from the Bradshaw family of Bucyrus, Kansas, members of Church of the Resurrection UMC. Their pastor, Rev. Adam Hamilton was our teaching pastor at conference and they were writing to say their prayers were being lifted up for me. This is the kind of grace that surrounded us. What a treasure! The ACS itself was blessed by clear and plain evidence of God's grace; in the worship, in the Christian conferencing of colleagues and friends. And, in the landscape of our nation : WI, NY, NH soon RI moved closer to equity in marriage for all people. In the broader landscape of the world neighborhood we are awestruck by the rising tide of people's movements in the Arab world. We celebrate news of the reduction of forces in Afghanistan. There is grace in all that news as well.

We might say we we're in a *moment*, however brief, of grace. But I think there is more here. I believe we in a *movement* of grace, a sustained pressing forward of God's Holy Spirit that we might know God is at work in the world. We need to be careful lest we think this is merely the annual after-glow of annual conference. As people of faith we are called to seize upon times such as these. Moments that aren't transformed into movements can be lost. And we know that in the process, things of extraordinary value can be lost.

What is the issue in the text, in the original setting/day?

Although the churches of Galatia were steeped in this same grace, the movement was in danger of turning back into a moment, and then, even a lost moment. Paul is noticeably astonished to find himself re-teaching, re-planting those churches. It's pretty easy when reading this letter to catch on that there is some kind of conflict. It's only from outside of the church that folk are puzzled that we don't live like saints INSIDE the Church. But the church conflict sweeping through Galatia is not news, really to us. Church is like everywhere else, stuff happens.

Is there a contemporary parallel?

Well, church as we think about liberty on this Independence Day weekend, there *is* a parallel to the Galatian experience that I want to explore with you. It's the case of Rev. Amy DeLong.

Briefly, Rev. Amy DeLong is an ordained elder in the Wisconsin Conference. She came to trial before her bishop when she notified her bishop that she is a lesbian in a committed relationship and that she has officiated at a ceremony of Christian Union for a homosexual couple. This notification tripped the lever on a process the bishops are obliged to enter into, which is to hold a trial. Our book of rules, the Book of Discipline allows for and describes this process. Her trial was held recently, in fact it was in our prayers and attention during Annual Conference. We who were following this case knew that Rev. DeLong could be de-frocked, asked to turn in her credentials.

How is God at work in the original text?

Back to Galatia, Is God at work in a way that we can see and apply to the Rev. Amy's trial? is this what Paul teaches to the Galatians? The churches in Galatia *were* in turmoil. We across United Methodism are in turmoil, have been for over 2 decades. But is this the kind of thing that lends itself to my analogy? I would say it “fits to a t.”

There is a lot more to the Galatian churches than to merely notice they were in turmoil. God is at work here. This text reminds us of that. It reminds us that Paul was working to lift up something of key importance. Something missing that was threatening to tear the churches apart. The churches were in need, not of doctrinal unity, but in need of becoming centered in liberty from strife so they could focus on the higher level goal of being followers and doers of the Way. Because Paul is so situational in his teaching, it's easy to see him in an overly dogmatic light. But he can also remind us of John Wesley, in his application of practical theology to the realities of the day. So, in my view, God is working through Paul so they might become skilled at living as if Grace is Everything. How do they “keep the law of Christ” (which Paul holds up in comparison to micromanaging doctrine, in this case the doctrine of circumcision as a marker of faith. Paul saw that you could win the argument about circumcision and lose the mission to the gentiles. The circumcision party had the more powerful argument, it was backed by tradition and ample amounts of institutional law. But what a treasure would have been lost. How does Paul ask them to “keep the Law of Christ”? Again, by and with grace.

How is God at work in our example today?

Rev. DeLong could have been defrocked. But something wonderful happened instead. She was acquitted of the charge of practicing a lifestyle which our Discipline describes strangely as incompatible with Christian teaching. (The only place I can find in our Discipline, which ordinarily strives for grace and openness in it's language. This is the only place I can find where our book of order feels the need to make such a value

judgment about a group of people, in the negative.)

But, let me share the literal verdict so I don't mess this up: Verdicts: on being a "self-avowed practicing homosexual" Not Guilty (12-1) on celebrating a Holy Union Guilty (13-0) Penalty: "Opportunity" Given Instead of "Penalty" (starting July 1, 2011): 20 day suspension for discernment (suspension is not for punishment, but preparation for the following work) Participate with bishop and complainant. Initiate written document for clergy to outline procedures to help resolve issues that harm the clergy covenant, create an adversarial spirit or lead to future clergy trials. Send draft to Board of Ordained Ministry by January 2012. After BOOM review, redraft and submit to Clergy Session at 2012 Annual Conference for their action. Failure to comply will result in a 1 year suspension starting June 3, 2012.

What a remarkable and even surprising outcome! If we ask ourselves "How do we keep the law of Christ" as Paul recommends, in this case of church strife, the answer seems resoundingly to be "by and with grace." This is a moment that is more than a moment. It is a movement. It is a chance to redeem ourselves from almost losing a treasure of inestimable wealth. We have in our churches been richly blessed. We have people of various sexual identities who decide to enter into a fairly difficult, modestly paid at best, endless labor of love and concentration we call the ordained ministry. I can testify that they did not enter into the work lightly. Those who have braved even higher risks of entry into this work, notably women, people of color and yes, even gay and lesbian and transgendered individuals are utterly amazing to me in their dedication to their call. They do the work sometimes knowing that they are not preferred as the leaders of some churches. I give thanks to God for their clarity of call and vision. And so I give this call to action: I invite this church to the degree that it is capable to move beyond merely hanging a banner calling ourselves "Reconciling." The time is right for dancing in the streets, as the old song goes, to make this a thing in which United Methodists lead with grace not political parsing and bullying and in-fighting. Frankly, no one on the street cares if we tear each other apart about this. This fight is one of the least visitor-friendly things we do. What the people on the street care about is How do we live the Law of Christ. How, in other words, do we love the Lord with all our heart and mind and strength AND our neighbor as ourselves?

We are richly blessed that folk like Rev. Amy DeLong have bothered with us at all. Let's not lose the treasure that we have found, as we have done with others, like Rev. Beth Stroud, who lost her credentials in 2004, for similar charges. And Rev. Jimmy Creach for conducting marriages for same sex couples 1999 before her, among others.

I have taken a modest first step to pave the way so that you might have a compass for this call to action I am making on this Independence Day weekend, 2011. I have found great liberty in participating in a combined action of my colleagues at Annual Conference, which is where my church membership resides.

Here is the petition some of us added our names to:

ACS 2011 Petition : Equality for All in Christian Marriage California Nevada Annual Conference 2011 *We joyfully affirm that we will offer the grace of the Church's blessing to any prepared couple desiring Christian marriage. We are convinced by the witness of others and are compelled by Spirit and conscience to act. We thank the many United Methodists who have already called for full equality and inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in the life of the Church. We repent that it has taken us so long to act. We realize that our church's discriminatory policies tarnish the witness of the Church to the world, and we are complicit. We value our covenant relationships and ask everyone to hold the divided community of the United Methodist Church in prayer. Any United Methodist person in California Nevada Annual Conference who conducts Christian marriages is welcomed to sign. I have chosen to sign the Equality for All in Christian Marriage Statement and I belong to the California Nevada Annual Conference.*

This petition has been also signed by clergy of the Minn, Northern IL, Oregon Idaho, New England & Upper NY Annual Conferences. I suspect my research is incomplete and that others of our over 60 annual conferences have signed as well.

Until this becomes not a matter of church in-fighting, but a positive opportunity to shed spiritual holiness abroad and to relentlessly share grace, the UMC will churn and struggle and follow the currents of the culture.

But I am convince that the treasure has been found, and once found, we will not let it be abandoned.

In the translation by Eugene Peterson's Message of today's text, the last verse goes like this : "Let us work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith." Friends, we must declare as a church that we will no longer preach justice and liberty and yet not extend that to the ones who lead us and the ones who come to us for a word of hope and a place of grace.

I invite this church to unite in a voice to support true reconciliation by adding it's collective signature to the petition or one like. I invite this church to rediscover the treasure of its prophetic voice and join with United Methodist clergy and laity across our connection. Today is the day that God has made and we are richly blessed by the treasures we have received. Rev. Amy DeLong is only one such treasure. Let us become a church that is known for a spirit of gentleness. Let our passion for Jesus not be a way to avoid the hard issues of living together in a wonderfully diverse world. Let's truly start working for the good of all. And may God guide us in the Name of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit.