

Covenant Word

An Alternative Story

Exodus 12:1-14; Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 18:15-20

On Tuesday, August 29, when all the world appeared to be focused on Hurricane Harvey, a group of more than 150 conservative, Evangelical pastors, seminary and college professors, ministry leaders and others gathered at the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. It was their national conference, and the results of the meeting was a 14 point manifesto that defines LGBTQ people as "immoral and sinful." It even asserts that those who maintain relationship with LGBTQ persons are also sinners, because we have departed from "Christian faithfulness and witness."

Eva Kendrick, Alabama State Director of the Human Rights Campaign, said in response: "I ache for the thousands and thousands of LGBTQ youth across Alabama – in every town, county and legislative district (and I would add, every church, including our own). [They] are suffering, even to the point of death, as a result of the communal shame and self-hate nurtured by theology [like that] at the heart of The Nashville Statement." (al.com, Sept 3, 2017)

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
September 10, 2017*

It was the last night of Vacation Bible School at the Sweet Fellowship Baptist Church. (Nancy Hastings Sehested "Tired of Being Mean" August 31, 2017) All week, the five year olds had faithfully rehearsed the story of Pharaoh and Moses in order to dramatize it for their parents. When the teacher had asked who wanted to play the part of mean ol' Pharaoh, all four boys raised their hands. The roles cast, the church pews filled with family and friends. The small, but fierce, Pharaoh took his place on the throne.

He held his plastic sword menacingly as little Moses walked up to him with his shepherd's crook. Moses boldly told Pharaoh, "Stop hurting my people. Let my people go." And Pharaoh, wielding his sword in the air, said with confidence, "Never, never, never!" So Moses walked away, but then he returned with the same words. "Pharaoh, stop hurting my people. Let my people go!"

This time, Pharaoh said nothing. With the thought that he had forgotten his lines, the teacher moved towards him and whispered, "Say, 'never, never, never.'" But Pharaoh sat perfectly still and said nothing. Then Pharaoh, jumped down from his throne. He threw down his sword and said for all to hear, "I'm tired of being mean. I don't want to be mean anymore!"

Can you imagine it? What if all the meanness in the world could end due to fatigue?! What if we all, not just the Pharaohs, gave up our fear, threw down our swords, descended from our thrones and announced: "I'm tired of being mean. I'm just not going to play anymore."

It would seem that we simply are not tired enough.

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The Nashville Statement is a clear indicator that some religious Pharaohs are not tired of wielding their sword of hatred and judgment. I am tired of the abusive words spoken and written against gay, lesbian and transgendered people in the name of religion. When we use scripture as a bully stick for meanness, it feels as if our only options are to find a clan of Jebusites to kill as an example to the rest of the world. It feels as if we should stone disrespectful teenagers to death in the town square. (But you pick up the first stone!) Are we to abominate those who are "sowers of discord," women who adorn themselves with jewelry and dare to cut their hair (uh-oh, I am in trouble), or put an end to those who use "haughty eyes"? What a bloodbath we could have every single Sunday! (Sehested) Is this the type of community we want? And if not this, what then?

There are all sorts of communities available to us: cyber communities, social-media communities, work-related and school-centered

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for
wanting to read and
study these thoughts
more carefully.
Please know that I do
not take full credit for
anything that may be
contained within,
because I may have
read or heard
something at some
point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source
and thus, cannot give
the rightful author
his/her credit. I pray
that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.**



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morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible
study at 10:30 a.m.

communities. We have affinity groups like playgroups and running clubs; book clubs and sewing circles; and then there the folks we eat with at school and work and at the elder-care facilities. All of these communities are different, and each shares distinct characteristics. It raises the question: what kind of community do we want for our congregation? Do we desire largely social, somewhat superficial relationships where we always mind our manners and avoid anything uncomfortable? This is, of course so very safe. Do we want something more meaningful, more intimate, a community that is riskier and harder? Do we want a place that can both encourage us and hold us accountable? Are we looking for a place where we can be honest about our hopes and fears, dreams and anxieties? Do we want somewhere we can just blend in or are we looking for a place through which we can really make a difference? (David Lose, "What Kind of Community Will We Be?" Workingpreacher.org, post 1601) If so, how much are we willing to risk...how much are we willing to work for a community that is open and honest in the ways that it expresses the love of Jesus Christ?

Paul, in Romans, describes the power of community when he emphasizes our personal habits and behavior as giving a stronger testimony than any feeling we might possess. Paul seems to say that our neighbors know that we love them by the ways we treat them and not by glib greeting card type blessings. (Rochelle Stackhouse, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vl 4, pp. 40-42)

Therefore, our love has no mystery to it, for love is how we act in God's name. And because it is how we live, then everyone can see clearly who we are. Paul calls it living "honorably." Pastor Peter Gomes says it is living in such a

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way that if your mother knew what you were doing, she would not be disappointed! Paul mentions such matters as drunkenness and sexual immorality, but then, just when we might be feeling safe, Paul adds such things as quarreling and jealousy as being on equal footing, reminding us that the whole body of Christ is damaged whenever we participate in any of these things.

Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, reminds us that we are going to fight, disagree and wound one another, but how we go about addressing and resolving these differences is more

important than whether we engage in conflict or not. And so Jesus gives us some methodology for resolution. He tells us to honor the other person by taking the initiative to speak the truth in love. Pour your whole self into the process for the sake of the relationship AND for the sake of the faith community. Only after we have exhausted ourselves and are still unable to break through do we invite others into the conversation for discernment and guidance. (Jin Kim, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vl 4, pp. 48) The goal is evident. We are to aim for right relationship and peace, NOT punishment.

German theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes in his book *The Open Church* that the church is not the place to come together just to confirm for each other the same eternal stories, jokes, and opinions. Rather, the church is to be "an open and hospitable community which would bring friendliness into the unfriendly corners...the church affirms that no one is alone with his or her problems, that no one has to conceal any disabilities, that there are not some who have the say and others who have nothing to say. That neither the old nor the little ones are isolated, that one bears the other even when it is unpleasant and that finally one can leave the other in peace when the other needs it."

The concept of community continues in the Exodus passage. You may have found yourself dozing with all those instructions for cooking a lamb, the mixing of bitter herbs, the marking of the doorposts, making sure that the Israelites were ready to move at a moment's notice by wearing their sandals and having their staffs in hand. It all seems irrelevant until we realize that it is instruction for a community that has been told by the outside world that they are nobodies and worth nothing. The outside world with a literal Pharaoh was quick to keep them in their place with active oppression and domination. The outside world was doing its very best to submerge their history of being chosen as the people of God. And the way this was happening was for the outside world to rob them of their vitality and power. This force was helping them to forget what it was like to live as those who are free! (Shannon J. Kershner, "Practicing the Story," Fourth Presbyterian Church, 9-7-14)

This Passover Meal, which the Jews still enact today, is the context of Jesus' last meal with the disciples. Every time it is practiced, the Israelites and ultimately, us, remember that whatever the outside world tells us is an illusion. It is untrue, for we are God's people, and we are worth more than the outside world can possibly count. We are meant to live in community as free and whole persons. We are to live out the call of God to bless all the nations of the world. This is the true story, and it runs as an alternative narrative to anything the world may say to us.

In the liturgy of the Passover Meal, a child is instructed to ask, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" It is a question that opens up space for the adults to remind the children of their heritage. It is an opportunity to remind all who sit about the table that we have a responsibility to look out for and to care for any who continue to be enslaved and who continue to live under an oppressive power. (Kershner) It is an occasion to hear an alternative story about who we are as the beloved children of God, a

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community of faith, in spite of any narrative that the outside world might try to give us.

So if and when we are asked, "How is your church different from any other church?" I am wondering about what our alternative story might look like. Here are a few stories that define it for me:

Big Mama's All Stars were at the height of their season, and it was time for us to take our turn at bat. As each team member approached the plate, the fans' chatter increased: "Get a hit Tex!" "Run those bases Amy!" "Bring 'em home, Daniel!" So, to us, it seemed only natural that when Lloyd approached with bat in hand that we began to cheer: "Swing that bat, Big Momma!" As Lloyd took a moment to spit his tobacco juice, the umpire eyed him from top to toe and said, "So, YOU are Big Momma??" We have an alternative story to tell.

A young mother was getting her children into the car after a Wednesday night of church programming. One child was old enough for a seat belt, but the other was in a car seat. They were busy talking about their experience at church when the older one said to the younger one, "What about Miss ___ and Miss _____. Do you think they like each other?" "Yes," came the little voice in the car seat. "Do you think they are friends?" "Yes," came the little voice in the car seat. "Do you think they live together?" And from the car seat came the swift reply, "Duh, they are married!" We have an alternative story to tell.

When Mark and Lori Bateman moved to Birmingham, we visited with one another. They told me that their previous church in Texas had also had a female pastor, so it felt perfectly natural to them that Valerie and I were serving here. What they had not counted on was the impression it made on their three grade-age daughters. The girls asked one Sunday, "Is it ok if a boy wants to be a preacher or do only girls get to do that?" We have an alternative story to tell.

During my first few weeks as your pastor, I discovered a woman sleeping on our back porch. I didn't know anything about her, and at that point, I was afraid to ask. She, apparently, was equally afraid of me because on Sunday mornings, when I would daintily step around her belongings to come into the sanctuary, she dug deeper into her sleeping bag to cover her head. But one Sunday, she got brave enough to sit in the sanctuary for a worship service. She was on the very back row to my far left and as the service began, I noticed that Fisher Humphreys had arrived and slipped into the same pew. As the service progressed, it was obvious that she was lost. She fumbled with her hymn book while squinting at her bulletin. I wondered if she could read or if she just needed glasses. Apparently, Fisher noticed too. With all the gentleness in the world, this esteemed professor of theology, gradually moved down the pew in order to assist her in finding the hymns, locating the scriptures, and prompting her with all the appropriate cues. Now the best part of this story, is that when I recount it to Fisher, he doesn't remember anything about it. He doesn't remember, because it is just what we do around here, isn't it?

We have become so accustomed to our alternative story that we don't think twice when Vincent lights the candles for worship, or Meg shows us her new shoes, or Finley Clair holds her arms up so that we will carry her around the fellowship hall, or when Elaine's pedicure is fresher than your own, or when an undocumented immigrant knows it is safe enough to attend conversational English classes! My friends, these are alternative narratives to those that the world would tell. Holy writ is meant to inspire us to live with hope and grace, not be a bullying stick! The church, our church, is to give the world an alternative story to tell...one of grace and healing.

Our very beginnings speak to the alternative story we tell at Baptist Church of the Covenant. In those beginnings, our charter members gave us words to pledge that insure that we will be a community with an alternative story, because they sure were. I would like to remind you of those words and ask you to renew these commitments. So please stand, if you are able, and answer with the words we use often around here: We will, God being our helper.

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- + Will you commit yourself to a membership that is open to all persons who accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and who desire to pattern their lives after the teachings of Christ?

We will, God being our helper.

- + Will you commit yourself to a caring fellowship that seeks to incarnate the love of Christ in individual lives, expressed in warmth and concern for the spiritual, emotional and physical well-being of one another as we minister in harmonious Christian love?

We will, God being our helper.

- + Will you give yourself in loving concern for individuals within the church, supporting them in life needs, seeking to be an instrument of redemption and reconciliation, and recognizing the freedom and dignity of personal convictions within the bonds of unity?

We will, God being our helper.

With God as our helper, let us continue to tell an alternative story that stands in direct opposition to what the world would have us believe. We have a story to tell. May God give us the courage to live it and tell it. Amen.