

Ask the Pastor

February 8, 2015 – 11:15am

Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

Charles Parker: One of the things that you do as a pastor a great deal is try to figure out the theological questions that people in the congregation have or that maybe they should have and then come up with an answer. And so, we're doing something a little bit different today which is we gave you all a chance to ask questions you actually have and I'll see how I answer them. I have not seen the questions so they're all sort of coming fresh to me and there's a chance for us to have some conversation. Carol, you should move up so people see you in the light. It's always important to be in the light. That's a theological statement.

Carol Bartlett: I didn't want to overshadow you. That's how this is going to go. The first question is, "will our denomination split over same-gender marriage?"

Charles Parker: Okay.

Carol Bartlett: A light one to start.

Charles Parker: I'm going to do what I did the first service which is I think better on my feet so I'm going to walk just a little bit.

Will our denomination split over same-gender marriage? I don't believe we will. I think though that there are some interesting options for re-organizing our denomination that might happen. There's a lot of different possibilities that are sort of being floated among our denomination, one of which is to develop a core discipline that doesn't deal with issues like same-gender weddings that we all abide by worldwide and then allowing each region to develop some specific policies around issues that are not part of the core. So, there might be some re-organizing in our denomination that happens.

Some of you may not know how decisions are made in our denomination. We engage in a process that in our denomination we call "holy conferencing" which frankly sometimes feels more holy than others. But it's John Wesley's conviction that we discern the movement of the Holy Spirit best when we are in conversation with one another. And that happens at every level of our church. So, every year we have a church conference together as a Metropolitan family. Every year there's what's called the Annual Conference which is the 642 churches in this region and we get together and have conversation about important issues. Every four years, we have a meeting of what's called General Conference which is all the Methodists worldwide. There's a little bit under eight million of us that are in the United States, and there's another close to four million that are in other parts of the world. We all gather together to set our church law, which we call the Discipline. So, we re-write our church law every four years, and it is in that church law that we as pastors are forbidden from officiating at same-gender weddings.

You all know that I, as a statement of conscience and as an act of civil disobedience, have told you all that I will marry any members of our church family who come and ask me to officiate at their wedding, whether that's same gender or not. So, we as a congregation have placed ourselves in a group that we call the reconciling churches, which is people who are intentionally welcoming to folks who are lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, and we have been urging our denomination to reverse its stance on this issue. My very strong sense is we do not have the votes at next year's General Conference to make that happen. I wish we did but I don't think that we do.

But it is a divisive enough issue and there are enough folks like myself and our congregation who are pushing our denomination on this issue that there are a variety of proposals about how to re-organize our denomination in ways that would allow a little bit more freedom, and I think that it's not unlikely that something along those lines could happen. There's also, of course, talk about splitting our denomination along the lines of those churches that think that we should be welcoming to LGBTQ folks and those that don't. We have split at a number of places in our history, one of those was right before the Civil War in 1844 which in many ways foreshadowed the Civil War that would come. It is my hope that we do not divide as a denomination. I think that we are a richer community of believers by having some diversity within our body. John Wesley was very clear in saying that, "On all issues that don't strike at the heart of Christianity," that's a direct quote, "we should think and let think." And I think we have some wonderful precedents in our church for providing some spectrum of theological belief, and I would hope that we could continue to honor that very rich tradition while I think I would also love to have us move forward in a way that deals with the civil rights of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters.

Carol Bartlett: That was a good one, huh?

Charles Parker: That was good. That was a softball. Give me a new one!

Carol Bartlett: "Say a parishioner of yours won \$300 million in the Maryland State Mega Millions Lottery and this parishioner has been a faithful member of your congregation for many years and they always make a point to be active in the church and pledge at least 10 percent ever year. They aren't addicted to the lottery or gambling. As a matter of fact, they bought this ticket on a whim. They want to give their church 10 percent of the winnings. Do you accept the donation? And if not, bear in mind that for the rest of their life, it could be argued that any future earnings they receive are a direct result of their winning the lottery. Do you ever accept their future donations?"

Charles Parker: Oh, golly. Okay, so –

Carol Bartlett: You offered to do this, you know?

Charles Parker: I know. So, here is the answer to that question. And I can't tell you how much it pains me to say this. Our church has taken a stand against gambling and we have taken that stand because we understand the entire enterprise of gambling to

be corrosive to our community, and particularly corrosive and unhealthy to those who are low income because it purports to offer a means out of poverty and in fact exploits people's poverty. So, our denomination has been very clear across the board in opposing any spread of the gambling industry. And I think that's the right stand. What that also means is that we consider all gambling winnings to be somewhat tainted. And so, again, this pains me enormously to say but if any of you won \$300 million and wanted to tithe to the church, I can't accept that. If you didn't tell me where you got the \$30 million -- no, I'm just teasing. So, I am not allowed to accept the tithes on your winnings.

I'm going to also say just as Charlie Parker, not as representative of the church, I love the fact that you're interested in tithing on your \$300 million and I would encourage you frankly to continue to make that tithe and find another place that would receive it and use it well. Because there are a lot of places that would use that \$30 million wonderfully well. Frankly, we would too but that stands in opposition to our position on gambling. So, I would praise you and encourage you to tithe that \$30 million to a really good cause.

The other question's a really interesting one, which is, do we continue to take a pledge that in many ways is going to derive from that? And I'm going to nuance this and say I don't actually ask any of you where your pledging money comes from. I don't. And in fairness, there are all kinds of things -- here is an example: We don't take money from the tobacco industry, but some of you are attorneys who represent the tobacco industry and therefore your income comes from the tobacco industry. We don't get into that kind of detailed analysis of where your income comes from. I take your pledge as a gift and as face value as your worship of God and furthering of our ministry, so I'm going to -- this may seem a little bit contradictory but I would take an ongoing pledge from someone whose income may include some lottery winnings. And if that's inconsistent, welcome to my world. Okay.

Carol Bartlett: "How must our own church community evolve over the next 15 to 20 years in order to anticipate and respond to the changing demographics, attitudes, beliefs, and interests of the current young adult generation as that generation ages?"

Charles Parker: Wow! If I had the answer to that, I'd have won my own lottery. So, how do we take our church into a new generation, into the 21st Century and include the new generation and invite the new generation to be a part of it? We are in an age that is very, very different from the ones that our parents grew up in, where going to church was just what people did. We had a large percentage of the population that was identified with some church and attended that church and sometimes were obliged to attend that church.

We're in an age now where there is no social pressure to attend church. You all are here because you get something from it, because you want to worship God. And while frankly I miss the days when our church was packed to the rafters, I am grateful for being part of a community in which you all feel no moral obligation to be here. You are

here because it's important to you and you want to worship and be together as a community.

One of the things that you realize immediately when you start working with young adults is that they value enormously authenticity and honesty, and one of the primary criticisms that young people offer our church -- and there is a vast amount of research about this recently -- is that the things that turns them off the most off about our church is our hypocrisy and our inauthenticity.

So, if we are going to engage a new generation of Christian believers, it's going to be because we're living out our faith in a way that comes across as authentic and genuine and real. The young people do not want to hear doctrine. You all remember that wonderful song in *My Fair Lady*, *Show Me*, "don't talk of love, show me." This is a show-me generation. Don't tell me what you believe about God. How is that being lived out in your life as a community?

So, I think one of the great gifts of our Metropolitan community is that we have some amazing structures and history in living out our faith. We are engaged in so many vital and exciting ministries around our city and around our world, and I think that translates to young people.

In our last academic year, we had 426 students that were involved in just our campus kitchen program alone. Four hundred twenty six students. That dwarfs the number of people that will be here this Sunday in worship. So, the question then for me is, how do we help young people who are interested in changing the world see that longing as a spiritual longing and how do we help them, how do we grab those young folks that are coming to do work with us and help make them part of our broader worshipping and learning community? And I think that really is the key to the church moving into the 21st Century in a healthy, powerful way.

Our young folks don't need to hear about our doctrine. They need to see us living out the love of Jesus Christ in the world and we've got that happening here. So, what we need to figure out, and frankly we haven't quite done it yet, but I think this is the challenge for us, is how do we help young folks make that link between the incredibly vital and exciting work that we are doing and that we're doing that out of our love for Jesus Christ and the work that Christ has done in our lives. I think if we could start figuring out how to make that link happen, I think we will create a model that will transform what our church looks like in this next century. Is that good?

Carol Bartlett: All right. "If you could add any writing to our scriptural canon, the work can be sacred or secular, contemporary or ancient, from the past 2000 years, what book would you choose and why? And no, not Harry Potter, something else."

Charles Parker: Something else? Okay. I don't know if you all remember, a couple of months ago we had a rabbi come in and do a couple of presentations with us on the

nature of the canon and the Torah. And that rabbi talked about this very wonderful Jewish doctrine of the oral Torah. And so, there is the written Torah which is the history of our walk with God that is canonized in those books of the Bible, but then there's the oral Torah which is all of the amazing and wondrous ways in which God has continued to speak to us over the centuries.

I find that a very compelling idea and the UCC Church has picked this up in their PR program which is that God is still speaking. So, here is the theological point, God is still speaking. God is speaking to us as a community. God is speaking to us as individuals right now, in this moment, as God has for the last 2000 years since Christ. So, I think we need to get away from this idea that God's words are locked -- and you all know that I love reading the scripture, I love doing Bible study, and I agree completely with John Wesley that the witness of scripture is our primary formative document as we understand who God is. However, God is still speaking. And so, we've got as a Christian church to get out of this idea that God stopped speaking with the book of Revelation. God is still speaking.

And so, your question is, what are those pieces of that witness in the last 2000 years that I think would be a helpful addition? And I can give you some thoughts but I will also say having the canon fixed at least gives us -- I think one of the blessings of having the canon fixed is it gives us a common authority and witness for us to all draw on. Because I'm going to tell you some things that I would put in the canon that you may disagree with and that's good. But the gift of the canon as it stands is that we all have this body of work that we all recognize as authoritative and that gives us a common language to dialogue about.

Having said that, I think I was reading just a couple of months ago Dr. King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* and I think some of Dr. King's writings are so powerful and beautiful and capture the spirit of the gospel. That letter fits right in with this wonderful Pauline history of writing churches from prison that I think is so compelling.

I think the preaching and writing of Archbishop Oscar Romero has been very formative to me in terms of continuing to call us, to hear God's voice among those who are most vulnerable and disenfranchised.

There's a whole raft of theological works that have been very formative for me and frankly I'm not sure I would put them in the canon, because it feels like the canon is a body that we theologize about. It's not necessarily systematic theology in and of itself, so I'm going to veer away from some of the great witnesses of our church in terms of Thomas Aquinas and Augustine.

There are some very compelling sermons of John Wesley that I think would be a helpful addition to the canon. So, I think I'll leave it there. Am I missing something?

Carol Bartlett: No, that's all I have though.

Charles Parker: You have no more questions? I thought there was a whole book of them?

Carol Bartlett: Shall I go back to the nine o'clock questions?

Charles Parker: No, no. Don't do that. Then this is an opportunity to ask some questions. What are some of the issues around scripture and theology that you would find it helpful to have some conversation about? Yes, George?

Charles Parker: Okay. So, George's question was from his Muslim students that the same things that we're criticizing radical Islam for are things that we still do or have done, is that -- and what's the answer to that?

I think actually President Obama addressed this issue very nicely at the prayer breakfast this very week when he talked about the way in which faith traditions get manipulated to justify violence and hatred, and how in whatever tradition that happens, that is a misuse of the gift of our faith life and that all faith traditions are about seeking to know the one who is the creator and lover of humankind. And the President then said we are in a historic place where we identify a lot of that extremism in the Muslim community.

And then the President said I thought in a very helpful way something akin to, lest we get on our high horses as Christians about this, we need to acknowledge that we have also perpetrated violence on behalf Christian extremism at various points in our history, the Crusades and the Inquisition being primary examples of that.

So, there is, I think, a human tendency to often try to warp the message of the faith in ways that exclude and do violence to other people, and that part of our ongoing work is figuring out how to engage a God who has revealed God's self to us and yet remains on some level an utter mystery. And what that means is that we need to bring a little humility to our own beliefs and acknowledging that this is how I have encountered God but God's mystery transcends my faith and my understanding.

I'm going to push back just a tiny bit, George, on your line that we have done away with the Old Testament. We have not done away with the Old Testament. And in fact, you may or may not pick up on this but I make a very intentional point every single Sunday to read passages both out of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament because I think we've got to be intentional about making that link.

We understand and interpret the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures through the lens of Jesus so that our New Testament witness guides our understanding of that very powerful Old Testament witness. But the Old Testament witness is still God's divine word speaking. We have an interpretative lens that we bring to it and the Hebrew Scriptures are a part of who we are, they are what formed and shaped Jesus of Nazareth, and we need to embrace and celebrate those.

But at the same time, as we were studying in our study of II Samuel this past month, we acknowledged there's a lot of troubling stuff there that we need to parse, a lot of directions that are about propagating violence and wiping out our enemies. And I think on some level we need to understand that because something is in the Bible does not necessarily mean that it is true on a surface reading. Because some of the things we find in the Bible are object lessons, right? They are to say that this was a failed experiment. And I think the model of spreading the Gospel through violence is a failed experiment, whether that was done in the Jewish community, the Christian community or the Muslim community or the Buddhist community or the Hindu community or the Sikh. I mean, we all have done it.

Carol Bartlett: I have to stop you.

Charles Parker: Am I done?

Carol Bartlett: I think you're finished. But I want to say thank you so very, very much. I think this was a really brave thing to do to have this just come out of the blue. So, thank you. Thank you from all of us.

Charles Parker: You're welcome.