

Sunday, February 8, 2015

Courageous Conversations: Speaking and Living for the Sake of the Gospel

Isaiah 40: 21-31; Psalm 147: 1-11, 20c; 1 Corinthians 9: 16-23; Mark 1: 29-39

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Speak your mind!

Be your own person!

Do what feels right to you!

Be who you were meant to be!

That might be the kind of advice that is given when people are wrestling with breaking free from what fills their lives with drudgery, keeps them confined or trapped within their jobs.

Is this consistent with being the people of God?

Well, Jesus came to bring abundant life, and to bind that which steals, kills, and destroys – but is the message of Tony Robbins aligned with the message of Jesus, of the Gospel, the Gospel of the kingdom?

Diversity is a good thing

– it's an expression of God's creation purpose.

We see it in all that God has created.

We see it in humans created in God's image – as male and female.

Diversity is intrinsic to God's creative design.

Yet, how we understand and engage in diversity, or how we misunderstand this diversity creates something not created by God

– tension, anger, arguing, using power to coerce a particular understanding upon another.

We also approach our understanding of diversity with theological assumptions

– especially, as we seek to understand our being created in the image of God as human beings.

And, how is our sexual identity, our sexual biology integrated with our understanding of being created in God's image?

This goes beyond arguing about biblical texts.

“It is admitted by all that the biblical literature includes no positive statements regarding same-sex [genital] relations*, regardless of what the context may be” (Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 270).

*(important distinction: because not all same-sex relationships are genital relationships; heterosexuals have same-sex friendships, and homosexuals have same-sex friendships. Not all same-sex relationships are genital relationships)

Scripture simply does not address committed or covenantal same-sex relationships among loving partners.

“To argue biblically, one must argue from silence” (Anderson, 270).

And that is where the confusion comes in

- the argument for same-sex relations among committed loving partners has to be a theological one
- and when we engage in theological diversity
- well we have a tough time coming to a united understanding, a united voice.

So, how do we go about relying on God as our hope in the midst of this?

How do we engage one another for the sake of the Gospel

- the Gospel of God’s reign
- wherein, we desire for God’s will to be done everywhere on earth, as it is in the realm where God is present, where God is King and Lord?

We might begin with discussing the theology of how we view God’s presence and God’s purpose in relation to our being created in God’s image

- and whether our sexuality is an essential aspect of the divine image or not.

On the one hand, we may regard, as some theologians do, that human sexual differentiation (male and female) is not an aspect of divine image in us

- because God is genderless, yet still in relationship with humanity
- so, then, the image of God in us has to do more with how we relate to God and being in relationship with God
- its about the personal connection with God

In this understanding, then, “the sexual identity of persons created in the image of God does not include [biological] sexual differentiation as determinative of human sexual relations.

Same-sex relations are considered to be natural and normal in the same way that heterosexual relations are” (Anderson, 272).

“The biological and the personal [connection with God] do not overlap” (Anderson, 272).

This theological understanding has deep ramifications.

“When human sexuality is considered as primarily biological and in the same category as race and ethnic origin, issues of discrimination, equal rights and justice become the criteria for deciding the question.

There is ample biblical witness in support of full rights and equal justice if homosexual orientation and practice are considered solely from the grounds of human relationships” (Anderson, 273).

On the other hand, we may regard , as theologians do as well, that sexual differential (male and female) is an essential aspect of the divine image
– though God is genderless, God is a diverse Trinitarian community
– of Father, Son and Spirit
– then human sexuality is not merely biological concern, but a manifestation of the image of God in being in relation with one another as God is in relation with Trinitarian Self.

Our sexual differentiation, then, as human beings reveals the diversity not only of human relationships, but the relationships within Trinitarian community and the relationship between God and humanity.

– there is the need for another human being to be sexually differentiated for us to express the image of God in our humanity.

Adam, in Genesis 2 (*ha-adama* = the earth creature) was not identified sexually (*ish* = male) until the image of God was made complete through the creation of (*isha* = female)

In this view, sexual differentiation (male and female), then, is an essential aspect of our being created in God's image, while skin color and ethnic distinctives are related solely to the biological and cultural. (cf. Anderson, 274).

Therefore, same-sex genital relationships do not fully express humanness in God's image, just as broken heterosexual genital relationships cannot also.

Thankfully, by God's grace there is a ministry response to the brokenness of the human sexual experience in all the ways it is broken.

It's easy to see how our theological diversity is more complicated than biblical diversity.

Theological diversity represents different starting points, different perspectives on what it means to be human beings created in the image of God.

So, where do we find hope in all this?

Not in ourselves

– we have been wrestling in this debate for about 40 years.

I am weary of the fight (no matter how civil we try to make it).

Perhaps, I am more weary of the disagreements around what we mean by Christ-centeredness
– because it makes Jesus into a weapon

I do not want to wield Jesus as a weapon

– I am called to worship him, adore him, follow him, be radically attached to him, to confess him as Lord of Lords, as the Savior of the world.

And we too, we are called to worship him, not wield him.

I am weary of the fight.
And, yet, I find hope in Paul's words
- doing all for the sake of the Gospel

I saw this exemplified when I was a teenager in my home church in St. Catharines.

We were deadlocked as a congregation over two pastoral candidates we were considering simultaneously (huge mistake, but that's what we were trying to discern).

The congregation was almost divided in half, and congregational meetings were heated – with articulate voices on each side.

Mr. Muench – a strong, opinionated, emotion filled man, was a strong vocal supporter of one of the candidates.

Yet, at one of our business meetings he came forward, visibly shaking.

He recounted a dream he had the night before
– in which Jesus was telling him to cast his vote for the other candidate.

Well, many of us missed what God was saying to us
– “we thought God was rolling the dice and this was the candidate we were to vote for
– afterall, this is what Jesus said to Mr. Muench.”

What we missed, was that Mr. Muench was doing this for the sake of the Gospel
– the Gospel of God's reign.

He still wanted the other candidate
– but he was willing for God to have his way with him
– and he was willing to sacrifice his will, his rights
– for the sake of the Gospel being lived out in our community
– for God's purposes to be manifest
– for God to lead in this situation.

We missed all that
– we were too hard-hearted; we did not see God, we saw only our view, our perspective justified.”

Are we missing anything in our conversation with one another?
Are we biased? Of course we are
But do we miss what God is doing in us and among us by holding onto our biases?

However, we engage this conversation, whatever we believe about it
– the good news of the Gospel of God's reign is that,
– our hope is not in ourselves!

Isaiah 40: 29ff

- we are reminded that we become weary in wrestling with our weaknesses, our brokenness
- and rather than being overcome by them, those who put their hope in the LORD, will be renewed in their strength, will experience grace in their brokenness
- and they will thrive!!

Psalms 147: 1-11, 20c

- LORD delights in those who fear him and put their hope in his unfailing love.

The Courageous Conversations Team has put a process in place for our ongoing dialogue
– which we started at Retreat.

But no matter how adept we are at working the process, we won't get anywhere with it, unless we are willing, each of us, you and me, are willing to talk, to engage one another

- wherever we are on the spectrum
- **for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.**

For, the Gospel of Jesus is not a weapon,
Jesus is not a weapon.

The Gospel is something that heals us,
Jesus heals us,
Jesus saves us,
Jesus reconciles us,
Jesus brings us together by his Spirit
– as we submit ourselves to be held together by him

Jesus is the author and completer of
– not only our faith
– not only our community
– not only our humanity
– but, Jesus is the author and fulfiller
– **of our sexuality.**

May he reign in our lives!
Amen.