

Our sisters and brothers in the United Methodist Church have just given the rest of us an reminder of what it looks like for the church to be in process. Karen Oliveto, bishop of the United Methodist Church's Mountain Sky Area, is openly married to a woman. She was consecrated as bishop last July, and shortly thereafter another United Methodist filed some kind of motion to invalidate the consecration [too technical for me, sry]. The Council of Bishops announced their decision on May 1, saying both that the consecration of an openly gay pastor as bishop is against church law *and* that Rev. Oliveto remains in good standing, that she met all the requirements to become bishop and that the South Central Jurisdiction had no standing to challenge her election. There have been the requisite re-statements of position from United Methodists on both sides, treating the general public to a taste of the classic church fight, good people against good people, all with lots of feelings about each other. It is not a happy moment for anybody.

But the Methodists should feel good, because they're just doing what Christians have always done, as we can see from the story in Acts today. "Certain individuals" were teaching the brothers that you couldn't be saved unless you also observed Jewish law. Paul and Barnabas "had no small dissension and debate with them," Luke says in what is probably a masterpiece of understatement. At some point, neither side yielding, they decided to send Paul and Barnabas and a few others to Jerusalem to discuss the question with the apostles and elders. Along the way, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria where "they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers." That's Luke-speak for "they stirred up the base." You *know* they rehashed the whole argument

with the church members in Phoenicia and Samaria; I would've. I would have been very cutting about those "certain individuals." Bless their hearts. When they got to Jerusalem they laid out the argument, and the Jerusalem church picked it up.

The weight of tradition was on the side of Paul's opponents. For hundreds of years the Jewish people had maintained their identity as people of this particular God precisely by observing kosher laws, circumcision, and the Sabbath. You drop those, and you pretty much stop being Jews. And yet tradition can testify against itself too. As they begin to discuss the matter, Peter reminds them that God had selected Abraham and Sarah from their Gentile origins to make of them the great nation that became Israel. And James the brother of Jesus adds to this a quotation from the prophet Amos, who heard God promising to rebuild the dwelling of King David **so that** "all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called." James argues that tradition itself calls them to move beyond what they had always seen themselves to be. Tradition calls them to overturn tradition. The argument is not that God is doing a new thing but rather that **God is doing what God has always done**: showing mercy, and creating a people for God's self where no people existed before.

I don't envy the United Methodists. Their fight is so visible simply because they're so big. Part of their problem is that they are truly a worldwide church, and Christians in the southern hemisphere, where Christianity is growing, are far more conservative about sexual identity. If they are to walk the walk of listening to Africans who have traditionally been marginalized, they have to give weight and attention to those voices that we would call homophobic. It's not an easy position to

be in.

And we're not immune to church conflict; if we were, we wouldn't be a church. We're always working through something. When your tradition is to upset tradition, you're always on shifting ground. The book of Acts compresses the story of this particular church fight, but we know from Paul's letters that it was not settled once and for all even in the Jerusalem church. The good news is that people who don't want to be enemies don't have to be. There was a sweet story in the DM Register a few weeks ago about a meeting of some environmental marchers and a guy with a Confederate flag near Montezuma. The guy, Darrin Ehret, heard around town that some group of environmentalists were going to march through and camp and burn American flags. He strapped a Confederate flag and several American flags to his jeep and went to see about that. Here's part of the article:

Members of the environmental group, marching across the state as part of an eight-day [Climate Justice Unity March](#), were offended by the Dixie flag. A documentary crew following the march came up to Ehret's house and told him as much. And after hearing what some feared were gun shots, the police were called to Ehret's home.

The police found no crime in the flag, Ehret said. While tensions were high, by the next morning, things had calmed. He drove his golf cart down to the campers' tent to smooth things over.

"I said, 'If the Confederate flag offended you, I apologize for that,'" Ehret told the Register. "It wasn't a race issue; it was a freedom issue. We are not racists. We are God-fearing, God-loving people."

And he explained that the loud booms they heard the night before were not from guns, but from nearby kids shooting off M-80 firecrackers. Quickly, his perceptions about the group began to fade.

"You couldn't ask for a more peaceful, pleasant bunch up there," he said. "They never gave anybody any problems at all."

On Sunday evening, he and his wife even met up with the marchers at their next stop at Diamond Lake Park in Montezuma. He had fry bread, and she had vegetable soup — both prepared by the campers.

I wish that the article had detailed the conversation. I'd love to know how exactly it went, because Ehret does not believe that human activity is causing climate change.

But talking with Ed Fallon, the leader of this march,

the two found common ground. Ehret said he's behind wind and solar generation. And they agreed that water quality is a huge issue facing all of Iowa. By the end of the conversation, both had come around. Ehret even continued the discussion with locals later in the week. They, too, weren't fans of the march at first. But they agreed that the water quality crisis is worsening and that something has to change.

"It's interesting how quick attitudes change," he texted Fallon. "... I just wanted you to know that your march is bringing awareness."

There's so much more to this than the article says, you just know it. "Both had come around"? How did the environmentalists come around? And of course I want to find out Ed Fallon's dialogical technique and bottle it so that I have it with me at all times. But neither the Des Moines Register nor the book of Acts tells us exactly how these conversations went, only *that* they went. We are left simply to know that it can happen that good people who disagree can come to peace with each other, most likely by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The church is constantly called to move beyond what it understood itself to be. It's in our DNA to keep moving beyond what we thought were the boundaries; it's the way the Holy Spirit acts, always calling us ahead, farther than we thought we'd have to go. The good news is that discomfort is not a bug, but a feature. As Anne Lamott recalls in *Bird by Bird*, "E. L. Doctorow once said that 'writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.'" That's how it is with being the church, too.

Lord of all,

In Jesus you have made us all sisters and brothers in Christ. There is no distinction between Gentile and Jew. There is no separation that can remove any from fellowship in Christ's community. Blind us to our differences so that in unity we may proclaim your truth to all, for the sake of Jesus Christ in whom there is harmony and peace. Amen.