

Life Beyond the Comma

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March 15, 2007

Texts: Isaiah 56:1-8
“What is Real?” Excerpt from *The Velveteen Rabbit*, by Margery Williams

Thank you so very much for inviting me to come to St. Petersburg, lovely suburb of Largo, Florida, to be with you in this troubling and momentous time. I believe that I speak for most of us when I am compelled to add thanks to Equality Florida, the Human Rights Campaign, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the National Center for Transgender Equality, and our local clergy for making this occasion come about. And I we must all be thankful to Steve Stanton and his family and supporters for their courage in forging our way to these days.

[Use cell phone as prop]

It was one of those phone calls you dread to make. You know the ones I mean, where you are pressing in the numbers not believing that you are really doing it, and hoping upon hope for a busy signal on the other end...

“Hello?”

“Hi, Lloyd. This is Eric Swenson. You probably don’t know me, but I am a minister member of the Presbytery, a pastoral counselor. I’m calling to inquire how one goes about changing their name on the roll of Presbytery.”

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“Sure I know you,” came the reply. “Well, it’s really not too hard. You just need to send a letter to the committee stating the name you want changed, and we take it from there.”

“I see.”

“By the way, what are you wanting to change your name to?”

“Uhh... Erin Katrina Swenson.”

“Why would you want to change your name to that?”

“I am actually changing my gender expression to female, and thought that this would be a better name.”

Silence.

After an awkward pause he responded, “I see... I’m going to have to get back to you on that...”

This happened in 1995, as I was in the midst of rearranging my life from one lived in the masculine key to one lived in the feminine, and the “church piece” was the one I had dreaded the most because I had been ordained as a Presbyterian minister for 23 years. The phone call led to a letter in which I was required to outline just exactly what this process was, and what I intended regarding my ordination. I am sure they were not comforted by my request that my ordination be continued; yet that was what I wanted. The Committee on Ministry, the Presbyterian version of the personnel committee, was up to the task, and gathered a list of reading materials, listened to experts, and finally interviewed me before recommending to the Presbytery in June 1995 that my name be changed without changing my status as an ordained minister in good standing.

The Presbytery , a group of about 350 ministers and lay leaders, wasn't buying it, however. As the motion came to the floor of the meeting, one of my colleagues rose to make a substitute motion. He wanted the request sent back to the committee for further study... this is the Presbyterian version of the "deep six." He went on to explain that there had been no other Presbyterian minister that had made such a change, and that this move would set a precedent for the entire denomination, perhaps for all of Protestantism. He argued that the church's acceptance of people who had changed gender had never been established.

I didn't know it at the time, but it HAD been done before. When the bible study for the 215th General Assembly arrived in my mailbox several years ago, I dutifully read the assigned passages. The theme of the G.A. was "A house of prayer for all peoples" and the study was of Isaiah 56. This is the passage that was so aptly read just a few minutes ago. I apologize for the bit of drama in the reading, but there is a purpose that will require a bit of explanation.

There is a small book used by many Christian worship planners called the "lectionary." It's simply a book of references from the Christian scriptures suggested in a three-year rotating calendar. These readings find their way to preaching and worship[around the world, and it is why if you read the Saturday paper religion section lots of the preachers seem to be using the same texts. No conspiracy, just a little lectionary book with passages suggested for each Sunday. The Isaiah passage read today happens to appear in this list for August 2008... just in time for the heat of the Presidential campaign. The passage in the lectionary is written like this, Isaiah 56:1-2, (COMMA) 6-8. That's verse one and two, and then jumping to verse 6. Now commas are often used in lectionary readings to skip parts of a passage that add little to the meaning, or to pull logical units out from their background, so

the comma isn't unusual at all. But there are also times when the comma is used in other ways, and it so happens that this comma bears fully on the perspective of my colleague who believed that our predicament in the church over my gender transition is novel.

These words of the prophet are powerful indeed. They come at a place and time in the life of Israel when the question of membership in the church is foremost. The Jews had been scattered for a generation throughout the ancient world in what we know as the Babylonian Exile. The Temple, the church, had been demolished in 587, bringing despair among the people. Now, however, the people were returning to Jerusalem, and the temple was being rebuilt.

But there was a problem because so many of the Jews had been scattered for so long. While they had maintained their worship of Yahweh and kept the law, they had also been absorbed into the cultures in which they lived. They had become foreigners with different dress, language, and custom... strangers among their own people. The Deuteronomic Law was clear that foreigners were not to be allowed into the holiest places in the temple where the sacrifices were offered. They were allowed only in the outer courtyard where the women and children gathered. So when God declared through the prophet that these foreigners would be allowed in, and that their sacrifices would be accepted, it was radical indeed. One could imagine Jesus himself nodding in pleasure that those who had been cast out were now embraced fully with full membership in the church.

So the lectionary uses its comma to emphasize this wonderful reading to us... the part that Rev. Hammock read facing us. Even those who think they know what Jesus would want can agree.

Funny thing about commas, though... pesky little things that can change the whole meaning of a statement. A book on punctuation by Lynne Truss² was published a couple of years ago that made the best seller list on the strength of a comma. In fact the title of the book was from a now famous joke:

A panda walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots in the air.

“Why?” asks the confused waiter, as the Panda makes towards the exit. The Panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder.

“I’m a Panda,” he says, at the door. “Look it up.”

The waiter turns to the relevant entry and, sure enough, finds an explanation.

“Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves.”

[Truss, Lynne. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. 2003, Gotham Books. The quote can be found on the outside back dust jacket.]

By adding one little comma to this simple statement about a Panda’s eating habits, our cute bear is turned into a hungry and impatient potential executioner. It might be argued that our comma, the one in the Revised Common Lectionary, doesn’t really change the meaning of the prophecy. But pay close attention to the part hidden behind the comma, the part read to away from us by Rev. Wynn:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the

² Truss, L. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, Gotham, 2006.

LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. (Is. 56: 2-5)

For us... ones so clearly left out, removed from the places of worship and community, these are not just extraneous thoughts. These words are life-giving. Every TG gathering I have read this to has been filled with amazement and tears of joy. How has this community, the community of Largo, Florida, where these people, so honored by God that they would have a place and name better than sons and daughters, are stuffed behind a damned comma? As Isaiah brings this to us Divine intention is anything but to hide us, but to make sure that we are honored and remembered. So why are we hidden in the comma? Why are we put away in the minutes of a city council meeting of a town we have served with passion, or banished from the college campus where we have carefully nurtured the education of our children?

Could it be fear?

That's what it was for me. I was certain, at the age of 10 when I first knew I was different from other little boys, that I would never fully belong to the human race. Terrified by this truth, I endeavored for the next three and a half decades to hide... not behind commas, but behind the appearance of being normal.

In my fear I constructed myth to explain my quirk. I developed the idea that all boys wanted to grow up to be girls... it was just a secret. The trick was that when you grew up and fell in love with a woman that all the desire to BE a woman was refashioned into the

love bond between you. (Remember that this was the 1950s, and same-sex attraction was also still well hidden behind commas and everything else it could hide behind.)

This is the old idea of completion in heterosexual bonding taken to new depths... and I know that now, but it comforted me. So that when I fell in love with Sigrid at the age of twenty I was cured instantly. She was (and still is) a wonderfully strong and handsome woman, and it worked. I was cured, at least for awhile and until about three months after our wedding, when I found myself standing alone in our bedroom dressed in Sigrid's clothes devastated that I was not only NOT cured, but I had entangled my beloved in my web of fear-laden deceit.

It took 25 years for me to finally get honest with her... time to have children and build as normal an appearing life as I could. I was, in fact, quite successful. As a middle-class white male I found admittance to just about all of the "holy places" of life. I was a successful psychotherapist, honored by my peers and blessed by a robust and growing practice. I was a vital part of a number of ministries that spanned denominations and churches in Atlanta, developing the first successful premarital workshop in the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta and spearheading an equally successful movement in the state legislature to reform professional licensing in our state. I was flying high, well hidden behind the very large "comma" of my normalcy.

But those closest to me knew otherwise. While my public life seemed to soar, my private life descended into inevitable depression. Twenty years of my own therapy, the best antidepressants, and endless hours of solitude and prayer could not stave off the advancing darkness. Sigrid, my beloved, finally had her fill and through painful tears told me that she would be leaving me... that she loved me and always would, but could not let my depression

destroy her spirit. Darkness set on my life with no apparent hope for a new dawn...
depression moved to despair as I began to consider suicide.

And then an unexpected thing happened. Despair became the harbinger of hope for me as I had to accept that I could hide no longer. My life slid from behind my own personal “comma” as I came out to family, colleagues and friends, discovering in each new encounter that truth, like birth, is messy, life-giving, and often painful.

I decided that a gender transition was necessary to my continued health and well-being, and began the process that eventually led to that Presbytery meeting where I was sent back to the committee. Sixteen months later the church voted for the second time on my continued ordination, and this time the “comma” fell from the page as the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta approved my request, 186 to 161.

So we are here tonight to envision life beyond these commas of exclusion. We have been endowed with the vision of life lived with authenticity, power, and courage beyond these commas of fear and ignorance.

Commas begin to fall from the page when college professors like Dr. Julie Nemecek, a Baptist minister, finds the courage of authenticity and confronts the administration.

Commas begin to fall from the page when the tragic murder of transgender teen, Gwen Araujo, inspires her mother, Sylvia Guerrero, to become a prophet for the transgender community.

Commas begin to fall from pages all over the country as people discover their transgender voices and speak their truth to power through the many advocacy organizations that have formed in the recent decade.

Commas begin to fall from the page as the US Congress for the first time faces the real possibility of passing hate crimes and employment non-discrimination legislation that unequivocally include gender identity and expression in its language.

Commas begin to fall from the page when devoted spouses and partners discover that nurturing relationships are not contingent upon gender identity, and find ways to build new kinds of loving families.

Commas begin to fall from the page when progressive faith communities create positions of leadership for people like David Wynn, Malcolm Himschoot, Bran Scott, Cameron Partridge, Meghan Rohrer, and ... I am delighted to say... *many* others.

And commas fall from the page when good communities like Largo, Florida confront the self-assured voices of fear and speak with a clear voice that ignorance should not deprive them of the passionate leadership of people like Steve Stanton.

But wait, there's more. This vision of life beyond the comma is not simply for people with gender variations. The fact is that gender is something all of us must contend with in our daily lives, and few of us get through life without feeling at some time or another in a bind related to our gender. In fact the vision is not just about gender, but about all who would at one time or another be experienced as The Stranger. Here is a word not only of welcome, but of celebration for all who enter the holy places of life, no matter be they male, female or something else altogether; no matter be they young or old, tall or short, thin or fat, able bodied or not able bodied, rich or poor, American or Iraqi, City Council or City Manager. Every life is celebrated when we as a community begin to live life beyond the comma.

Thank you very much.

