

On the Passage of 14F and “Artistic”

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church
March 22, 2015
On the passage of 14F...

This past Tuesday, in a flurry of presbytery votes, what was known as Amendment 14F passed. That amendment, which our presbytery passed yesterday to add to the positive vote total, does two basic things. It revises our understanding of marriage, from “between a man and a woman” to “between two people, traditionally a man and a woman.” This revision in fact paves the way for ministers to consider marrying same gender couples, as long as their civil jurisdictions permit it. The second thing the amendment does is remind us that ministers or sessions are not compelled to marry anyone, or approve weddings – as has always been the case.

From my perspective, the adoption of 14F is good news. Coupled with the adoption of new ordination measures, it establishes as much as we can full equality for gay and lesbian Presbyterians. I have preached about this several times and won’t now, but I do want to say that marriage equality in the Presbyterian Church is right theologically and it is right pastorally. I am grateful to have played some very small role in this process, and I am even more grateful for the role that Third Church – and especially Betty Iwan and Ralph Carter – have played in this journey across the years.

I also know that not all Presbyterians are in agreement with this, and I pray for forbearance and the strength of our ongoing relationships. Though there remains a marriage conscience clause, the truth is that we have articulated a new understanding of marriage which is causing some to be very concerned. I disagree with that perspective, but I am in relationship with those who hold it. So as we pray let us pray both for justice and unity in our Presbyterian family, as we seek to witness together to the God who loves us and calls us to love.

On “Artistic” – A brief word on word 5

I understand the impulse of our Protestant and Reformed forbears, who, at the time of the Reformation and following removed statues and stained glass from sanctuaries and insisted, for several centuries, that the only kind of congregational singing would be psalms, and unaccompanied ones at that. I understand the impulse – not wanting to equate in any way human creativity with divine creativity, not worshipping false idols as the Bible would have us understand it.

But as we consider our fifth word – “artistic” – I also want to question that impulse. Art offered in devotion is just that, an act of praise that acknowledges the creator and uses God-given gifts to draw humans closer to God and the ways God reveals God’s beauty in all of creation. Because of our understandings of things, that needn’t happen only in church, but can happen on the page or canvas or stage or the score wherever and however we express ourselves. But it can happen in church as well, and it does.

This congregation has always been committed to this. We think first of art around here in terms of music – the music that is sung, that is rung, that is played. And that is a unique thing for us, for which I am grateful. But art also happens every time we look up, and around, to see the striking colors of stained glass window, or the elegant curve of wood and stone. It happens as prayers are prayed or our children or youth act out a biblical story. It happens as we read a literary work, or check out a book from the library, and somehow gain a deeper understanding of faith in those pages. It happens as we discuss a film or TV show during coffee hour.

Philip Zaleski writes that “art has transported many an artist (and those who love and value the creations of artists) closer to God...it is art in the service of eternity, an art completely worthy of the name, an art that glorifies God while humbling the artist, a contemplative and moral enterprise whose aim – no matter how abstract its manner, harsh its voice, bitter its vision – is (as Dante wrote) ‘to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and to lead them to the state of bliss.’” Zaleski writes that “to engage with this art, as creator or connoisseur, calls up the best in us. Here,” Zaleski says, “the artist is a servant, not a master...Writers or readers, painters or viewers, composers or listeners...will never reach the bright precincts of eternity...if we do not see all art...as a mundane, valuable means toward a transcendent, valuable goal.”

In that sense, we are all – all of us – including but not only Bach, including but not only Bernstein, all of us -- artist and connoisseurs of art, here, in this place, and in all the places where our creator God, our creating God, our creative God, places us.

Our task is both to create beauty and to discern beauty, to make – through our art and our appreciation of it – to make the world a lovelier place. That is why word #5 is artistic, as we connect our calling as artists with the beauty God invites us to discover, and it’s why, every so often, we pause even a bit longer to make a joyful noise, to gather around a beautiful table, to get lost in wonder, awe, and praise.