

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS A SERMON ON 2 TIMOTHY 3:10-17

by Rev. Russell B. Smith

Many of you saw the front page of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* this Friday. It carried a story about two Presbyterian congregations: Mount Auburn Presbyterian, which is openly defying the constitution of the Presbyterian Church, and Madiera-Silverwood Presbyterian, which has just filed an overture with the presbytery to discipline Mount Auburn church. Last Sunday, our elders here at Covenant-First Presbyterian met and voted to endorse Madiera-Silverwood's overture. Given the highly public nature of what is going on, I felt it best to break away from our series on worship so I could share with you some of the history leading up to this time, and how we came to this decision.

This is widely being portrayed as an issue about homosexuality. In simplistic terms, the debate seems to be over the issue of whether or not to allow practicing gays and lesbians to be ordained as officers. In 1996, after decades of debate, the Presbyterian Church added this paragraph to the constitution of the church:

“Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live in either fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of Word and Sacrament.”

Notice a few things about this paragraph. First, it does not focus on a particular sin. While it does articulate that a commitment to the biblical view of marriage is an important requirement, the breadth of the regulation is to say that officers are to live a life of obedience and repentance – obedience to the historic standards of the church, and repentance when we fall short of those standards. This rule recognizes that God sets the standards for us, that we do not set them ourselves. It recognizes that we cannot fully attain the standards, and that we are called to live a life of repentance for *all* that does not meet up to God's standards. While the rule was adopted to clarify the confusion around homosexuality, it also broadly applies to many other moral issues that we face in contemporary culture.

It is important to realize that this rule had to be approved not only by our General Assembly, but also by a majority referendum across the entire denomination – every pastor and elders from every congregation in the church had their vote on this issue. And it was approved by the denomination as a whole.

Since this rule passed, overtures asking for it to be removed have come before the General Assembly every year. Only twice has the General Assembly approved the hearing of these overtures: in 1997 and again in 2001. Both of these overtures were sent to the general referendum, and were soundly defeated by increasing margins. The church as a whole has twice validated the decision that it made in 1996.

Mount Auburn has adopted a policy that states they will publicly and willfully defy this constitutional requirement. They believe it to be unjust and wrong, and they refuse to comply with the larger voice of the church. They have already received a letter from Clifton Kirkpatrick, the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church, USA, telling them to rescind the policy of defiance and to comply with the constitution. That letter stated that refusal to do so might put Mount Auburn in jeopardy of church discipline.

Madiera-Silverwood's overture is the expression of church discipline. The overture simply states that the presbytery shall require Mount Auburn to rescind their policy within 30 days. If they fail to do so, the presbytery will consider them as having renounced the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church. In other words, Mount Auburn has 30 days to comply or they will be out of the denomination.

I realize that some of you right now are thinking, "Well, it's about time," and that others of you are quite disturbed. To help us understand these difficult issues, I think it's important for you to know what came up in our session deliberations as we discussed whether or not to endorse Madiera-Silverwood's overture.

First, this constitutional requirement is scriptural. I don't have the time to go in to all the Scriptures that bear upon the sanctity of marriage. I don't have time to go in to all the Scriptures that bear upon the issue of homosexuality. You'll have to trust me that I've studied these Scriptures and wrestled with them. I've wrestled with commentators from all different viewpoints on these issues. I've not done this in isolation, but within the context of the church, challenging and being challenged by my pastoral colleagues, seminary scholars, and our own elders. I am convinced that the Presbyterian Church, USA, has gotten it right. The paragraph as it stands in our constitution is an accurate summary of the teaching of scripture: leaders should lead lives of obedience and repentance, and the biblical expression of sexuality is between one man and one woman in the covenant of marriage. Further, the constitution holds pastors accountable to this teaching of Scripture. As 2 Timothy 3:16-17 teaches, "All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in all righteousness, so that the man of God may be equipped for every good work." In other words, we must be accountable to Scripture in all that we do. It is not enough simply to affirm that the Scriptures teach these doctrines – we must actually obey the Scriptures' commands. The constitution echoes this idea.

Second, there will be a cost. Verse 12 teaches us this. When I read the article in the newspaper, I sensed the bias of the author. The beatific photo of the pastor of Mount Auburn, the weighting of quotes toward Mount Auburn and their supporters, even the

concluding sentence all seemed framed to favor Mount Auburn and put to Madiera-Silverwood in a bad light. Is this not the trend of the culture? Ever since the 1960's cultural trends have veered more towards and openness and unabashedness about sexuality. Boundaries continue to drop. In fact, in Friday's paper there was also an editorial about the Man Boy Love Association, which wants to drop the legal age of sexual consent to twelve. This is an organization that claims that pedophilia, rather than being a crime, is healthy. Their very existence is an outrage now, but what will it be in ten years? As the boundaries continue to drop, the rage against those who stand for morality and absolute truth will increase. It will begin as indignation and develop into scorn and derision. As we take this stand, it will arouse the ire of some. There will be a cost.

Third, this stance demands integrity. Verse 10 connects the teaching with the way of life. As a session, we do our best to make sure that we are in compliance with these same regulations. Remember, though, what our message is – it is the message of radical grace. It is the message that you cannot earn your salvation through being perfect, for you can never be perfect. It is the message of Ephesians 2:4-10. I dwell on this because integrity demands that we remain aware of our own sinfulness, that we never put anything in our life ahead of God.

Now, what does it mean that we've endorsed this overture? Simply this: When the overture is introduced on the floor of presbytery for debate, the stated clerk will read off all the congregations that have endorsed the overture. By endorsing it, we are coming alongside our brothers and sisters at Madiera-Silverwood and saying, "We believe that what you are doing is right! We are expressing our solidarity with you." I spoke with Rev. Tom Sweets of Madiera-Silverwood this Friday, and he expressed his appreciation and thanks to our session for taking this action.

Ours is an age of confusion, an age when we are bombarded with alternatives that are presented to us as value-neutral. But we know that there are absolute truths. We know that we were made in God's image, and that our sexuality is an expression of God's design. Where our culture swims in a moral chaos that sinks ever into decadence and degeneration, we claim that we have truth. This action is the right action, an action based on Scripture, an action that expresses our confidence in and commitment to God's word, an action for such a time as this.