

A Place of Refuge?

by

Donna Fisher

On my father's knee, I learned to love my God, to visit Him constantly, and to follow His Son in my daily life. As my knowledge of Him expanded, my questions became more complex. When I became confused about conflicting messages in our Bible, I asked my father/ preacher how I was supposed to know what was right. He answered that we simply look to what Jesus said and did. All you have to ask is which one shows His love. Micah 6:8 has since guided my spiritual path: "Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." As our country and our church struggle over divisive issues, these principles continue to light my path.

Watching the latest General Conference vote on LGBTQ inclusion in our church, I was heartbroken, seeing some delegates dancing, celebrating decisions ensuring continuing pain on our Christian siblings. Thinking of 35 years of teaching, I can still see pain etched on the faces of a number of former students. I see one clearly who confessed when asked about a missing assignment that she had been kicked out of her house by her preacher father and mother, having slept two nights on a bench in Lilburn Park.

My most recent lesson in the pain that our church has created for our LGBTQ siblings came closer to home. My niece Hannah and her wife Liz had recently married in New York, unable to have a ceremony in the faith of her grandfather. They had recently moved to Marietta, desperately seeking a home UMC, one that would welcome them as any other couple with a newborn son. Liz had researched endlessly churches that might be a good fit. After visiting for almost a year, frustration set in. Some were far away; some, openly unaccepting; in some, their very otherness defined their presence. Liz was determined her family would not meet rejection. Hannah and Liz conveyed their quest in a letter to NCUMC delegates to General Conference: "The last thing we want is to make others uncomfortable. We don't want to be the token gay couple; we don't want to be identified just by a label. We don't want to drive miles from home to worship at another church or another denomination. We want to find a church home where we can grow closer to God and to other families in our community."

But Liz and Hannah were losing faith, ready to give up. One church, right down the street, had everything they sought, but they were afraid to try. They had heard this was a "traditional" church, but traditional worship was what they sought. Did "traditional" mean they weren't welcome? They had been in churches that had supportive ministers but openly unwelcoming congregations.

Our Holy Spirit does work miracles, using fellow travelers “to open hearts, minds, and doors.” Hannah’s grandmother, unwilling to give up the search for a welcoming church for her only granddaughter, awoke in the middle of the night, knowing what to do. The next morning, she called a friend, a retired bishop from NGUMC who knew the pastor. Things there had changed drastically recently, and the pastor had just welcomed a gay couple with a new-born son. He soon visited, inviting them to worship. Hannah, Liz and Graham had found their new church home. Welcomed, comfortable, they were now ready to thrive in the UMC nearest their home. As they joined the church, they celebrated Graham’s baptism, surrounded by those who promised to nurture him spiritually in his new home. The message was clear. At FUMC, Marietta, all God’s children are welcome. My prayer is that at Mountain Park UMC, we are ready to proclaim the same.

John Wesley leaves us with a challenge: “Do no harm, Do good, Stay in love with God.” I know many deeply spiritual members of Mountain Park who disagree on various interpretations of scripture. I pray that we can all give each other the Grace that God provides to move forward in worship and mission to a more perfect love. We still have much work to do.