



Metropolitan Community Churches

FELLOWSHIP SUNDAY SERMON:

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"Pressing On In Faith: To 40 and Beyond!"

by The Reverend Nancy L. Wilson

INTRODUCTION by Rev. Wilson: This month, MCC congregations around the world are observing Fellowship Sunday, marking the 39th anniversary of the founding of Metropolitan Community Churches.

On October 6, 1968, 12 worshipers gathered in Troy Perry's living room in the Los Angeles suburb of Huntington Park, California, to worship God.

The world took little notice that day.

In fact, the local neighborhood in Huntington Park hardly noticed!

But the ancient Hebrew prophet Zechariah was on to something when he advised, "Do not despise the day of small things." That October Sunday in 1968 -- a day of "small things" by all outward appearances -- would grow into the international movement of Metropolitan Community Churches over the next four decades and challenge the Church Universal with Jesus' Gospel of radical inclusion.

Anniversaries by their very nature offer us opportunities to honor our *history*, to look at the *present* with fresh eyes, and to consider our *future*. In the sermon below, originally delivered at MCC's General Conference in Scottsdale, Arizona, earlier this year, I invite us to see where God has brought MCC today and to consider the opportunities God has yet ahead of us.

But first, let me take just a moment to look back and remember...

1968 was the year I graduated from high school. It was the year that both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated in the U.S. Russia invaded Czechoslovakia to crush the reform government there. John Lennon sang *Revolution* and student protest movements broke out across Europe, Japan, and the United States. Melissa Etheridge was born; Helen Keller and Karl Barth died. I was on my way to college, not having any idea that I was a lesbian, or that the church movement founded by Troy Perry -- a movement that would change and consume my

adult life -- was about to be born. I was passionate then about peace, ending the Vietnam War, about overcoming racism. The word "feminist" was not yet in vogue, and it still seemed to be impossible for me to become ordained as a minister. I tried to think about being something else, and ended up becoming a religion major anyway.

In 1968, Stonewall had not yet happened. The phrase "Marriage Equality" didn't exist. We didn't protest "hate crimes"(though they happened all the time). HIV/AIDS was still far off. The *Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name* was still in the closet, both politically and spiritually, 39 years ago. We didn't "we couldn't!" - imagine that something such as Metropolitan Community Churches would be blossoming in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, after having taken root in North America, Europe and Australia and New Zealand for decades.

We never dreamed that there were so many who were hungry for a Jesus and a faith that were so radically inclusive.

Though... actually... *Someone* did dream it.

And here we are.

Happy 39th Anniversary, MCC! May God bless each of you as we enter into this new, 40th year for MCC. May the fruit of 40 years of love, work, preaching, healing, changing laws and changing lives be evident and obvious in us today!

Rev. Nancy L. Wilson

Moderator

Metropolitan Community Churches

SERMON:

Pressing On In Faith: To 40 and Beyond!

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Hebrews 11:1 - "Now, faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

Sermon originally delivered at MCC General Conference, Scottsdale, Arizona . July 2, 2007

The Book of Hebrews in the Bible, especially the famous 11th chapter, reminds of us of the stories and people of faith. It teaches us that faith is about vision and spiritual imagination; it is more than what we can see in the present moment.

MCC is on the brink of our 40th year and we have our own stories, don't we? We have our heroes and our "cloud of witnesses!" -- Joseph Gilbert, Ivor Holmans, Evelyn Kinser, Bobbi Powell, Jackson Hall, JoNee Shelton, Jimmi Irving, and so many

more.

Here at this General Conference, here in this room tonight, there are so many stories. You don't get into a room like this without a story! There are over 1200 stories right here! (If you haven't told *your* story to MCC's Oral History Project, we need to hear from you! Write to AngelCollie@MCCchurch.net to learn how you can participate.)

What Rev. Elder Don Eastman calls MCC's "Founding Narrative" is the story of a young man, still in his 20's, who could not wait for the Church to get over its homophobia, who dared to preach and celebrate the Eucharist in his home, at a coffee table, with 12 friends -- and who dared to call it church. No one gave him permission. No one gave him a map or an insurance policy; he had no guarantees. No one told him it would be easy. But he did it anyway, the way young people just do it. Troy Perry had faith and he practiced faith. And for these 39 years, he's inspired faith!

Today, young LGBT people in Jamaica, some in their teens, many in their twenties, are risking their lives for justice and freedom and dignity. Most of you have read the recent stories of homophobic violence there. I met a young Jamaican man, Gareth, nearly two years ago. At age 27, all he was trying to do was go to social work school. He had not aspired to be a gay leader, nor an AIDS activist. But destiny caught him in its sights and he could not say no to the needs of his own people. Gareth told me that what they needed most of all is spiritual community. It is spiritual community that can fuel and inspire a movement for human rights. It is spiritual community that MCC is uniquely gifted to offer.

Sunshine Cathedral MCC has partnered with MCC's Global Justice Team and Regions 3 and 7 to hold worship services and training events in Jamaica -- they have seen firsthand the suffering, the fear and the despair. The young man who led the choir during the very first MCC service Jamaica in December of 2006, was murdered in early 2007. Every time we go there -- *every time!* -- there are those who have been killed, or who are missing, or who have been beaten just for being gay or lesbian, bisexual or transgender. We struggle to find allies on the ground and we work to confront the familiar patterns of police brutality. We partner with Human Rights Watch to bring this to the attention of the world. ***Their story is our story -- their desperate need, their great faith -- it is our story, too.***

In Pakistan, an underground church of 200 men and women shelter LGBT teens who are threatened with death by their families. ***In our hearts, we know they are MCC; their story is our story, too.***

Today, ***in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, our church partners with the Rainbow Railroad,*** helping refugees from virulently homophobic countries find asylum in the country that was the first to permit gay marriage. Over 50 people gather for a support

group at MCC Toronto. ***Their story is our story, too.***

Young people from ***the SoulForce Equality Ride, including our own Angel Collie***, walk by faith right onto the campuses of conservative Christian colleges to talk about the spiritual violence done against God's LGBT children. They walked right into the office of Albert Mohler, the president of the Southern Baptist Seminary of Louisville, Kentucky, demanding a conversation about his idea to eliminate gay babies in the womb by tampering with their DNA. They are filled with a God-given passion for justice. ***Their faith, their story, is our story, too.***

Mother of Peace Orphanage in Africa shelters children whose lives have been challenged by HIV/AIDS, is a place of hope and healing whose partnership has enriched MCC these past two years. ***Their stories are our stories, too.***

Teenagers gather this year in Abilene Texas, to pilot ***a new MCC curriculum for teens***, authored by Beth Stroud, a defrocked lesbian Methodist minister. ***Their story is our story, too.***

Homeless queer youth who find shelter at MCC New York are putting their lives back together. ***Their stories of faith are our stories, too!***

Tom Hanks, a gay man, a Bible scholar and a friend of MCC, wrote the commentary on the Book of Hebrews in the new Queer Commentary. How great to be able to go the Queer Commentary for this sermon! He quotes the late John Boswell, professor of history at Yale University, who said that ***homophobia and religious intolerance always go together.*** It was the Southern Baptist Convention (which, by the way, only recently apologized for slavery), said 20 years ago that "God does not hear the prayers of a Jew," and that now proposes a 21st century version of a Final Solution for LGBT people by altering our genes in-utero. Rev. Dee Dale, who also lives in Louisville where Dr. Mohler lives, said she is grateful that she knows the "God who made all my genes, including the gay ones!" And I loved the comment from Rev. Chip Carson, who said, ***"I wish they would spend more time looking for the hypocrisy gene!"*** What would we do without humor? If there is a "gay" gene, it and the humor gene must be connected somehow!

Young people see hypocrisy with a kind of sharp radar that sometimes still surprises and embarrasses those of us who are older and who grew up in a culture more used to living with hypocrisy. Sometimes things just wear us down after a while, and we resign ourselves until some young voice asks, "Why?" Or, "Why Not?"

The Book of Hebrews says that God's Word is a sword. It is "not a club to bash the weak," says Tom Hanks, "but a 'sword' to pierce the conscience of the oppressors and call them to repentance, As a sword, God's Word does not load us with false guilt, but unmask real guilt of the oppressor as well as the failures of the

oppressed..."

What Tom calls the "inquisitional violence" of the church has to stop! It is killing people, it is killing the church, and it is killing Jesus, I am sure! The voices that want to put down LGBT people in the church are the same voices that reject women's call to ministry, and that fail to acknowledge diversity as an inherent, intricate, beautiful part of God's pattern of creation. When we see vestiges of inquisitional violence that we inherited from our churches of origin, we must heal it; we must overcome it in ourselves. We must allow truth and freedom to breathe in us. We must find the ways to live as Christians in a religiously pluralistic world, and to live in peace and mutual respect.

Hanks continues: "Jesus freed us from the fear of death --and from all lesser fears as well..." For those of us within Metropolitan Community Churches, that means a range of fears about the future: of turning 40, fear of failure, fear of coming out of the closet again and again, fears of what others may think about what I believe.

He notes that the root sin, according to Hebrews, is not listening to the liberating voice of God and not having faith in that voice and in God's power to liberate: "At the age of 40, Moses finally decided to be true to himself, and to the God who created him: he refused to be called 'the son of Pharaoh's daughter' -- his safe, comfortable closet was shattered! He opted to share the lot of oppressed slaves, God's chosen people, and lead them to freedom."

Hanks says that **faith operates in making visible our faith in the future:** MCC has mostly been below the radar, doing our work and building our communities for these past 39 years. While HIV/AIDS threatened to destroy us, at the same time, the Internet has made communication of our message possible as never before; and it has enabled emerging LGBT communities all over the world to be connected into a global community. **Our future is about serving those young, emerging communities with all the passion of the early church, with all the passion of a Moses finding himself at 40!** Life begins at 40, the old adage says, and there is so much life in us, and so much liberating work to be done!

There are LGBT people with HIV/AIDS who won't live to be 40 unless we step up to the plate and reach out. The work we do in partnership around the world can only strengthen us locally, at home. Those of you who know that, must testify to the others who think we cannot do both.

Our calling is to "Make visible the values" that Jesus preached and lived and died and rose for so long ago: Justice, love, freedom and truth! We must be the face, and hands and feet of a Jesus who cares about justice, who risks for inclusion, who still dares to say "You will know

the truth and the truth will set you free." The world is hungry for that Jesus.

While we are gathered here this week, I urge us to do several things about our faith:

Allow yourself to experience the "Great Cloud of Witnesses" that surrounds us every time we are together like this at an MCC General Conference. ***When we are gathered, they gather too --those who died too young, those who longed to see what we see, those who could never have imagined MCC in Romania or Eureka Springs, Arkansas; or a conference on fighting homophobia in Turkey. Those who could not have imagined legal marriage being achieved, or a virtual church. These witnesses are part of our gatherings; they pray for us, they inspire us -- sometimes they haunt us. Always they remind us to remember who we are and to have faith in the God who created and called each one of us.*** They are that great communion of saints: Jim Sandmire! Edith Perry! Michael Mank! Call out their names!

Hebrews 12 urges us to "Lay aside every weight and sin that clings so close." This week, here in this place, ***let us have the faith to get rid of burdens and fears and to let go once more; let us have faith to put our ministries, our churches, our people, our future, our values into God's hands.*** Let us allow the Holy Spirit to cleanse and heal and renew us for the years ahead, so that whatever might be holding us back gets identified and offered up.

Sometimes ministry gets to us. Sometimes we end up carrying in our hearts and bodies and minds more than our share of pain, or despair, more than we can reasonably bear. You know, it's really not our church, it's God's. ***Let something go: some burden, some pain, something that has overwhelmed you, something that is so big you have stopped praying about it. This is a Holy Place, it is Holy Ground; it is big enough and near enough to the heart of God to handle anything! Jesus is here, even when he makes us uncomfortable! Get something done inside of you, that will open up the future for you, that will give you space and peace and hope in a new way.*** It takes faith to do that and we can do it together! We must be open to all that the Holy Spirit wants to do in us and through us.

Finally, Hebrews admonishes us to "run the race with patience, looking to Jesus." Hebrews doesn't say this, but I think of it as a relay race. And at nearly 40, MCC, it is time for some of us to be passing the baton. Time for others of us to be sprinting to the finish line. Time for still others of us to be taking up a new baton in new ways. ***We do what we do not only for those who are in our churches now, but for those who are waiting -- waiting to hear we exist, waiting to hear MCC's message and ministry, waiting to find the door, or waiting for us to make the door wider and more visible and accessible.***

MCC's Executive Director, Rev. Dr. Cindi Love, taught me a phrase this year -- "leveraging our assets." Well, faith is an asset, and our young people are our assets! Let's find the ways to leverage that faith and the energy of those young activists!

It takes faith to run this race. The author of Hebrews' called Jesus a pioneer, a leader of that faith. ***That same Jesus is here today among the thousands and ten of thousands and millions, especially young people, who need to know us and who need to find us, on the margins, in the shadows, keeping faith that we will have the courage to reach them with the radically inclusive love of God. I know we will.***

Amen and amen.

+ *Nancy*

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