

Are You Scandalized? -- Rev. Troy Plummer

Ruth 3:1–5, 4:13–17, Galatians 2:11–14

My favorite holiday is just around the corner. You know—the gay national celebration-- Halloween is just around the corner. Some of you may know it better as All Hallows Eve and may give more attention to the next morning All Saints Day—when we remember those faithful who we have lost, who have inspired us, those upon whose shoulders we stand today to advance their work for justice. As one who celebrates fully both his gay and Christian identity, I do both --All Saints Day and our contemporary Halloween—which happens to have the added blessing of be my partner Walter’s birthday.

This year we have the plan. Our godson Sam and his two moms will come to Chicago from DC. Walter has already sent Sam his two-year old size Scooby Doo costume. Walter, of course, will be Shaggy. The two moms are delighted to be Velma and Daphne. Now for some reason I do not see myself as the big, blond athletic Fred, but I’m happy to be the Mystery Machine—the van Shaggy drove and lived in. I’ve picked out the cardboard box to paint in those psychedelic colors—We will be our own Scooby gang.

I love the creative, clever costumes with a bit of whimsy or satire and especially those that are group efforts. Every now and then, and I’ve been to a lot of Halloween parties, So many I can tell whether or not the leather is a costume or way of life. But still, I can be surprised, even a bit scandalized. Did I really want to see that much of that person? Are you sure you are straight? Isn’t that really pretty gruesome and violent for a four-year old? I love this gay holiday and the willingness for to both scandalize and be a bit scandalized just makes it better. You see our little Scooby gang may scandalize our neighborhood where we are the only identifiable gay family among many, many Roman Catholic families of Chicago firefighters and police officers.

When was the last time you were scandalized? Now some of you may wonder if you even can be scandalized anymore. It is easy to think we have seen it all, done it all, are ready for anything, and to not expect much to surprise us or to change.

A few years ago when I went to my first Creating Change conference in Detroit, some of the participants were at first surprised to see me. I showed up as I was asked to in my pastor drag, in my suit coat with the clergy collar. At first the persons I engaged were curious and perhaps a bit suspicious, and then a bit scandalized. Reality would start to sink in, that it was more than just a costume that, for me, it was a way of life. Scandal. And for good reason, many trans-gay-queer folk have experienced people of faith as less than trustworthy and downright harmful.

Now, when I really, really want to be scandalized, I don’t have to go any further than the Bible. The Hebrew Scripture reading today from Ruth was and still is for some—a scandal. From a feminist perspective you may be offended by the necessity to bear children for women to be of value, from a heterosexist perspective you may be offended by the clear primary bond of love and choice of family that is between two persons of the same gender, from a morality perspective you may be offended by the licentiousness of the threshing floor with the

euphemistic reference to Boaz's genitalia, from a justice perspective you may be offended by the risky vulnerability of the "have nots", from an ethnic purity perspective you would possibly be offended by this interracial or intertribal encounter with a Moabite woman—after all they are scripturally proscribed against until the tenth generation—to be excluded from the family.

The book of Ruth means to scandalize, to offend. Ruth is in response to injustice. Ruth is political. Ruth stands in scripture against the rigid response to the exile of the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah—who tried to purify the people's blood lines thinking they could earn God's grace and protection by being "better" by being "pure". Instead the writers of Ruth follow the path of an inclusive God which celebrates the addition of Ruth's Moabite blood into the ancestry of the Great King David. So some of the first to be offended by Ruth would be the purists who felt we had to somehow be better so God would not send us into exile again, thereby earning safety and favor. This group, with others, would be further offended that not just a Moabite, but a Moabite woman was proclaimed better, better than not just the two sons Naomi lost, but seven, seven sons. The patriarchy must have been rocked. One Moabite woman is more valued than seven of our pure blood boys?

The next group to find offense or scandal might be the proper who would think Ruth's behavior indecent and Naomi's command crude. The Interpreter's Bible states, "harvest end the world over has been celebrated with the rites of fertility cults, so that license allowed at no other time could be practiced then. Halloween is a modern survival of the archaic customs." Halloween, way back when... But still, did they have to use a direct reference to Boaz's private parts? You know that "uncover his feet" stuff was about his stuff. So Naomi, told Ruth, to go uncover and lie down beside Boaz's genitalia and do what he tells you to do? It must be Halloween on the threshing floor.

Now, indulge my imagination for a moment, to hear this as a campfire story from the side of those who in that time had been cast out of their homes and families for not being the right kind of families. While the faithful remnant was taken into exile, the faithful remaining settled the land, and created families among those who were left behind. These families were adversely affected by the returning exiles. Ezra and Nehemiah were preaching purity resulting in the wrenching apart of these families.

So I want you to imagine a campfire somewhere on the outskirts of town. Around the campfire you see the faces. Faces of mothers and children representing a variety of tribes, a variety of ethnicities, a variety of ways of being mixed together into a new creation a new wholeness, yet it has been cast out. There may have been more than a few husbands too who were choosing their family over this legalistic teaching. And as they gather together in this nearby yet separate exile, they find their voice. They voice the pain. They voice the injustice. They voice righteous indignation. Then, then, they join together in creating their story as faithful people who chose once and still choose to proclaim "where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May GOD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you! (Ruth 1:16-17)" Haven't some of us made a similar covenant with our home denomination with a vow to make it better while living in a nearby yet separate exile? And, isn't it just a bit scandalous how straight folk love to use this woman to woman promise for their own

wedding vows? Now who wants to be Naomi, Ruth?

At the campfire, these preached-against faithful remember and lift the covenant that not only Ruth made but that they each had made for their families. At the campfire they write Ruth into our faith story as they tell and retell how they are part of this faithful family, this people of God. At the campfire they create scripture. They create a movement. They create the story that will carry them forward. In the story, they confront the purity minded with their violation of their own traditions and the responsibility of hospitality. It is often received as scandal--when justice and equality are expected, and demanded, and organized for and grounded in faith, and prepared for with endurance and a vision to win by living out the Gospel.

We all have campfires we belong too. And because we are full human beings our identities cannot be flattened or simplified, we belong to more than one campfire. Sometimes we may be torn between two or more and long to integrate our being and help our campfires join together to create wholeness for us and for all. Yesterday as we began to meet in caucuses, Derrick as a United Methodist person of color, shared that he and a few others were traumatized over being forced to choose between campfires—between meeting and networking with other progressive persons of color nationally and ecumenically, AND the launching of our United Methodist Believe Out Loud Together organizing campaign. I heard this and thought, “oh no, we did it again.” So we repent, and we work harder to prevent this in the future.

This power summit is a campfire put together in hope that the varying protestant gay affirming groups can join together and that that fire can join with secular advocates for equality and that together we will create a wildfire changing the world. For some this is scandalous. For some others is frightening.

The three-way merger of the Shower of Stoles Project, with all these protestant advocacy groups of the Institute of Welcoming Resources, and then the Institute with The Task Force caused a few eyebrows to be raised. Some queer folk were scandalized that The Task Force chose this path. Some people of faith were scandalized by words like political, power, organizing, strategy, concrete goals, deadlines. Some purists on either side were scandalized that the secular and spiritual would cooperate and work together for good. Some would consider us unlikely bedfellows, but with a common cause of justice and equality here we are today.

Our hope and vision and mission are too clear and too strong and too urgent to let any sense of scandal derail us. The longing for the day when all of God’s kids and families find equality in our churches and society and we lose fear of the different--all the different kinds of different—this longing lures us to pray, work, plan, organize and overcome any wedges that have been used to separate us from one another and from God.

My most recent being scandalized: The same week I was in contentious discussion with a clergyman from an Indiana United Methodist megachurch who considers calls himself an ally (*And, in fact, in the past he has put his neck out there but not so far....*). Our conversation is contentious because he has posted an article on the denominational website recommending a truce where we stop voting and talking about this until AIDS and poverty are no more. Or as one reader responded wrote “till hell freezes over”. That same week, I get the news, that a 15-year

old, 15-year old Billy Lukas from Indiana has committed suicide. He has hanged himself after enduring anti-gay bullying in his school. And my heart aches. The Indiana pastor is playing Peter from our reading today, sometimes with us, sometimes thinking he is with us when in reality he is against us. We need a few more Paul's to hold Peter to account. Paul the uber-ally for the Christian Gentiles takes on Peter--Christian Jew to Christian Jew and then tells the world how wrong Peter was. Our uber-allies warm my heart. Gil Caldwell, long-time civil rights activists alongside King and Rustin, invites me to be his uber-ally. He says, "Troy, we need some white on white talking," and then after pause adds, "and I'll handle some straight on straight talking." We need to be uber-allies at our own campfire creating justice for all eliminated wedges between us, being bridge builders.

These suicides are preventable. And here I am trying to get an "ally" to get it, to realize the importance of talking...of doing anti bullying work...of preaching the inclusive church, a Gospel when preached and lived calls us together and is suicide prevention.

On June 11 this year, I was sitting at a pizza restaurant with a United Methodist pastor in Lakeland, Florida somewhere between Tampa and Orlando. This pastor had been profoundly touched by the actions and witness that over a 1000 equality minded United Methodist participated in at the worldwide legislative assembly in May of 2008 in Fort Worth, Texas that we call General Conference. Inspired, he came back to Florida showed a video of our faithful protest proclamation to his congregation during worship on a Sunday morning.

Over the next year, we kept in contact as he was knocked back and forth between unhappy congregants who tried to get him removed for showing this "official" United Methodist video and some he knew were more quietly supportive. Exactly one year from viewing that video, one of the congregation's kids returning from freshman year sat in the pastor's office and told the pastor: "I am alive today because you showed that video at church, and because you did not waver and stood by your action. I am alive today."

He could have said, because you believed out loud, acted out loud, and stood firm. I met this young man that day. He shared that things have never been as low as they were before that moment in time in church, no more gun, no more aloneness, no more closet. He continues to integrate the campfires of his life, family, faith, sexual orientation and more. And this additional conversation scandalized his pastor who was unaware of the gun and the depths of despair experienced.

Whatever you are scandalized by in this moment at this time: an ally's disappearance, by a surprising supporter, by the hope of an intersectional, interdependent, interconnectional frame, by the connecting of campfires while celebrating particularities, by the increased violence which may even get worse as the tipping point power for LGBT equality is more clearly here, let us be more scandalized by the Gospel.

I am still most scandalized, most scandalized...by the love of God shown us in the life and action of Jesus Christ. Jesus showed us so clearly God's love in actions of mercy and healing, in actions of protest and justice; so clearly a love that grows above, beyond, below us to remove any illusions of separateness, any illusions that we are able to earn that love, with the

clarity that that love is freely given, that that grace is a gift. To accept it deeply enough, to trust it deeply enough is to truly be scandalized. If we get to choose how we are scandalized, I say let it be by hope that empowers us to be the loving inclusive Body of Christ we are called to be—
Believing Out Loud.