

Monday, April 30, 2018

Dear FPC Family:

The elders and leadership staff of FPC met for our semiannual retreat on April 21 from 9:00-3:00 at St. James Presbyterian Church. This day allows a time of reflection, prayer and discussion on topics that are vital in the life of the church but go beyond what is possible to do well in a monthly meeting. As we gathered last week, our focus was on coming together in prayer, repentance and love as we considered ways in which the human sexuality statement from the Session in 2014 (attached at the end) continued to affect our church as well as to represent God's intention for his kingdom in this time and place.

To begin with the end, the day was one of the richest, holiest and kindest days we have spent together as a group. To begin with the beginning, we started with lament, remembering that we have first to remove the plank in our own eye before taking the speck from our neighbor's. Judgment is quick to come to the foreground in any discussion on this topic, and starting with a reading of Matthew 7, followed by corporate confession, set our tone for the day. We exchanged peace with each other and then prayed for our church, both local and universal, as we lamented the disruption and lack of peace that exists in Christ's body here on earth. We prayed for unity and for that unity to flourish in diversity, as all members are called to belong and to be given care.

The Session members are as diverse as the church. Each is passionately following Christ to the best of our ability and we reviewed our ordination vows with seriousness and conviction. We also took note that our Presbyterian Constitution commands us to mutual forbearance: "there are truths and forms with respect to which people of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it is the duty of both private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other." (PCUSA Book of Order, F-3.0105)

All present shared how this subject has personally affected them and their life in Christ before also speaking to any particular stance based on Scripture, tradition or the larger church. This time was a powerful testimony to the embodied aspect of this issue--it isn't like choosing whether or not to put in carpet, it is choosing how we treat God's image bearers among us, both those inside and outside our

doors. The Word has always been a testimony and we all respectfully listened to each other.

At the end of the day, we recognized that we had, in good conscience, varying viewpoints on the topics previously addressed in 2014 and currently guiding our church polity. We will not be individually announcing our viewpoints on human sexuality, as we found our own unity as a Session to be a gift we treasure and choose to honor. Instead, we would like to expand our daylong experience into a congregational one, and invite the congregation into a time of examining this together in a way that invites dialogue, true listening, a refusal to walk away and above all, a submission to the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of our church.

We have a number of ideas for such a congregational experience, and those details will come later. For now, our biggest concern is that our church fellowship not be marked by fear or distrust. We have lost people on both sides of this issue. We believe if there were more experiences like we had together, we could learn how incredibly joyful it is to sit beside someone in peace and love while learning to understand their point of view. Perhaps all of us will be changed as a result. We are grateful for all who have gone before us in struggling to lead the church in this time. The FPC Session calls all in the church to continued prayer as we go forward in unity as the body of Christ.

In His Unity,

The FPC Session

FPC Session 2014 Statement-

We will lead and encourage our whole church to love and welcome all people regardless of sexual ethic or practice. This is not an affirmation of any alternative sexual lifestyle, but an affirmation of the love that Christ bears for the broken sinners for whom He died (all of us).

We will continue to uphold the long-standing stance of Session not to ordain individuals unwilling to live in fidelity in traditional marriage (between a man and a woman) and chastity in singleness nor to officiate same sex weddings within the church building. This is Session's unanimous stance as we willingly put aside individual positions for the unity and health of the whole body.

We are committed to remaining in covenant with others of different positions.