

Walking the Road Less Traveled  
Hebrews 11: 29 – 12:2  
September 26, 2010

Last Wednesday evening, as I drove out of the church parking lot after Bible study, there it was way, way up high. It was surrounded by gentle gray clouds and by storm clouds black as night and by patches of sunlit blue sky: a beautiful rainbow. The rainbow: an ancient storyteller set the crown of hope upon it, <sup>the</sup> to rainbow forever to symbolize hope, hope that's pregnant and singing of new life soon to be born, a new morning already breaking, already dawning. These days, a rainbow-festooned flag is the banner of the GLBT community, the rainbow's colors singing into their hearts, singing "Hang onto hope, children of God! Look up; it's coming, the new morning when the many-colored splendor of diversity will be seen as beautiful, diversity a wonder to be welcomed and cherished and celebrated, as God meant it to be all along!" So, seeing that rainbow last Wednesday, I saw the beautiful faces of gay and lesbian and bisexual and trans-gendered people, that wonderful group of God's children who show us what true faith looks like, how it hangs onto hope and sings of God's grace while yet battered and oppressed by bigoted bullies, that amazing group of people who show us what true and truly sacred love looks like, how even as it is hit with hatred, it goes on loving.

In the awesome rainbow which appeared last Wednesday, I saw that awesome group of people who dared to love me, one of those heterosexual Christian clergypersons and therefore probably someone they feared. Yet they welcomed me and adopted me into the family and loved me oh so well and allowed me to experience the sheer joy of loving them right back.

Turning the car to enter the freeway, I couldn't see the rainbow, till the freeway curved around, and there it was again, but different now. It had created a cottony cloud of its own, a puffy cloud painted in all the rainbow's colors. In that marvelous sight, I saw all of you together, gay and straight, Madison Square Presbyterian Church, a marvelous cloud of witnesses colored in all the rainbow colors of hope. That's how I'll always remember you because that's who you are.

You are a hope-filled church full of the love of Jesus Christ, truly fulfilling your calling to lift people who've been walking in the darkness of oppression, to lift them into the light of Christ-lit hope and bless them into the new life of liberating love. While others may continue to walk the more traveled road that's safer and more comfortable, you place your feet in the footprints left by Jesus. You stand up for the oppressed and against oppression; you walk the road less traveled, the gospel way of justice and compassion. And, you know, there are so many people who are counting on you to keep walking that walk.

One of them is a very, very special woman, a child of God who's a Presbyterian minister: the Rev. Dr. Jane Spahr, known to many of us as our precious friend Janie. She's a tiny person, but with the biggest warm smile, born of the biggest warm heart. And, tiny as she is, she's a huge powerhouse presence. When Janie Spahr enters a room, you may not be able to see her over the heads of the crowd, but instantly you sense her presence, feel her energy, that feeding and lifting up energy which we need. But, see, Janie needs you and me.

A few weeks ago she was put on trial, not in a secular court, but before the Permanent Judicial Commission of Redlands Presbytery in California where she lives. She was charged with violating her ordination vows by violating the rule in our Book of Order which prohibits Presbyterian ministers from performing same-sex marriages, even in states and countries where same-sex marriages are legal. She was found guilty and was sentenced to be rebuked, this woman who has so long been walking that less traveled road of justice and compassion, has for so many long years been battling the forces which oppress the GLBT family.

But, make no mistake: her battle has not been only against the people and institutions which oppress the GLBT community. She has been standing up for all of us, against anything that oppresses any of us.

And so, that day in the courtroom a few weeks ago, as Janie stood up for the GLBT community, she was also standing up for the members of the Judicial Commission, battling what was oppressing them, that very same rule in The Book of Order. You can hear it in the decision the Commission wrote, that they themselves were being oppressed, were being forced to do what they didn't want to do. They didn't want to sentence Janie to anything except admiration and commendation. You can hear it in the opening part of their written decision, which includes these statements: "She performed these marriages in faithful compassion, in accord with other parts of The Book of Order...we commend Dr. Spahr and give thanks for her prophetic ministry...we call upon the Church to re-examine our fear and ignorance that continues to reject the inclusiveness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ...we commend Dr. Spahr for helping us to realize that peace without justice is not peace..." You can hear the Commission's longing to walk along with Janie. But, they wrote, "We are constrained to accept [what's in The Book of Order], that it's authoritative and should be followed until and unless modified." And then, they rebuked Janie and warned her to cease her disobedience. Jim Rigby, pastor of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Round Rock, Texas, was there in the courtroom to support her. He says that when the decision was read, a great groan of angst traveled throughout the room.

That groan, I think it originated beyond that room. I think it was the groan of all the heavenly host, seeing a rule allowed to suppress the gospel and thereby to oppress God's beloved children.

A few days later on Sunday as Jim preached he did something few if any have ever seen him do. We've seen this gentle man get angry about oppression, but that Sunday, as he preached, he wept.

In response to the Commission, which first expressed love and admiration of Janie, then condemned her to be rebuked, Jim wept as he said this, speaking to the whole Presbyterian denomination he loves: "So once again the Gospel of love is betrayed with a kiss...[there are Presbyterians] who consider themselves to be advocates for gay and lesbian persons and yet they will not risk their relationship to the oppressing culture...[they call us to unity, to just get along, but] they will not face that it is not unity, it is not peace if there is not justice. If you force the lamb to lie down with the lion, and you do not address the discrepancy of power, you have not brought peace; you have fed the lamb to the lion."

And speaking with difficulty around his tears, Jim said this: "If you will not disobey an unjust law, you are not [doing what you insist you are doing, just] working within the system to dismantle oppression. You are the oppression."

So, our calling, yours and mine, is to walk the road less traveled, to walk the gospel way of justice and compassion, never to walk the way of oppression. You and I are called to walk this walk that's never easy, never safe, never comfortable because it's a battle journey, constantly battling oppression and the prejudice which fuels it, prejudice an evil that's more powerful than anything in Stephen King's wildest imagining. So, it's a scary road. How do we get what we need to walk the walk, never content to just talk the talk?

Friends, we get what we need by walking together. The food we need for this journey, the powerful feeding of God we need, comes to and through our togetherness, because, you see, this is not a road ever to be attempted alone. It's not a road any of us can walk alone, not even a powerhouse like Janie Spahr. Janie was warned never to do what she did again, but you know she will – praise God! - and so, she needs us, just like we need her, and all of us need each other. We need each others' faith to inspire ours; we need each others' courage to bring forth ours; we need each others' sacred energy to spark ours into a beautifully flaming passion for the Gospel, into a passion willing to risk loving all of God's children. And, by the grace of God, Madison Square Presbyterian Church is well along the way of that journey on the road less traveled.

Thank you so much for letting me walk a leg of that journey with you. In your company I've been given what I need to walk the walk, just like others who, in your company, also have received what they need to keep on walking the way of the Gospel. And, as you go on walking the road less traveled together, be assured: you'll have in abundance what you need, and, no doubt about it, our paths will crisscross many times along the road ahead because that road you're walking, I'm going to be walking that very same road, too.

We may not yet see it clearly, where this journey will take us, you here and I in a place where people really live their motto: "Keep Austin weird." We may get discouraged sometimes, may be able to see only the bulb, not the flower, may have to struggle in faith to see in the bulb a future flower being born, may have to work to sing in faith of what we cannot yet see. But, it's there, the rainbow's song of hope, and this church is called to sing it, ever inviting everybody else to sing along. You are an awesomely beautiful rainbow colored cloud of witnesses, coloring this world with hope, coloring this world with God's own promise of a new morning breaking to break open the fullness of love and joy. Don't ever, ever forget that that's who you are. Remember! Remember your baptism and be glad, in the name of the Creator and the Christ and the Holy Spirit. Amen!