

Ophelia Hu Kinney
2019 New England Annual Conference Laity Address

Between my mother and me, there's a sliver of language in the middle where we understand each other. We each speak the different languages in which we were brought up along with a little of the other's. But between us, and in my family in general, food is our common tongue. It's how we *do* relationship best.

A meal is worth a thousand words to my mother - it's a declaration of love, a passing down of culture, and sometimes, an act of reconciliation.

I grew up in a world of words, but neither my mother nor I learned to speak the other's language with fluency. Apologies aren't easy when the only way I know how to say "I'm sorry" in her language loosely translates to, "It's a wrong that can't be righted."

Once, as a child, I apologized for something I'd done wrong. My mother continued to ignore me for hours until I asked what more she wanted; I'd already apologized.

"I never asked you to apologize," she replied. It didn't make sense to me until much later that she wasn't asking me to refrain from saying that I was sorry. She wanted me to start making things right, and she wanted us to be in relationship again after I'd done her wrong.

Food will always mean reconciliation between us. My mother cooked heritage and story and deep love into every meal. If there were three mushrooms left at the table, she'd put two on my plate and one on hers. If there are two mushrooms left, she'll put two on my plate... even - or rather, especially - when our relationship was breaking.

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A thousand times our relationship broke when I was younger: when we misunderstood each other, when I didn't want to bring her food for lunch anymore, when I became a Christian in my agnostic household, when I came out to her, when I married my wife.

My mother never did apologize for forgoing my wedding. But I never asked her to. Half a year after the wedding, she invited my wife and me to Thanksgiving dinner. And since then, we've broken bread together time and again.

Whenever she was ready to repair this relationship once more, it was food that said what words could not. She measured, folded, steamed, and plated the work of reparation and set it before me and said, "Come, eat."

I'm learning from my mother's example that **being in relationship requires something of us - something more than just a proclamation**. And while I don't always know the recipe for a relationship rooted in love, I know it looks like reconciliation. It means that we cleave to each other, are grafted to one another, and that takes work.

I don't have a queer-affirming mother, but I have a mother who is doing the work, who is on the journey, reaching for love even when she does not understand it, because we are in relationship.

In the book of Micah, the namesake prophet weaves for us an imagined conversation between God and Israel. Micah calls out tyrannical rule, and he gives Israel a vision of justice. In the verses just before his famed prescription, Micah puts Israel in the stand for the people's transgressions and their misrepresentation of their relationship with God.

So what, asks Micah, does the Lord require of you? His question addresses those who profess to already be in relationship with God. To already have committed to a life of personal and communal holiness.

Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Friends, we who call ourselves followers of the God of reconciliation, the God of reparations, are called - required - to do justice. We are not called only to profess, because **being in relationship requires something of us**. Expressing relationship takes our whole being, not just our words or beliefs.

And *justice* takes our whole being, not just our words or beliefs. Words and beliefs - these form the basis of our justice-doing, but they cannot be the whole of the edifice in which we house the kin-dom of God.

The kin-dom of God is here, spoken into existence, yes; but until our declarations are matched by courageous action, the kin-dom remains far. We will save no lives by just believing the right beliefs. We will heal no souls with a bumper sticker faith.

Because around the United States, lesbian, gay, and bisexual children seriously contemplate suicide at almost three times the rate of heterosexual youth and attempt suicide at five times the rate of their heterosexual peers. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth who come from highly rejecting families are over eight times as likely to have attempted suicide as lesbian, gay, and bisexual peers who reported no or low levels of family rejection. Forty percent of transgender adults have made a suicide attempt, and 92% of these individuals attempted suicide before the age of 25.

LGBTQ young adults have a 120% higher risk of reporting homelessness compared to cisgender, heterosexual youth. Almost 80% of LGBTQ adults see the Catholic Church as unfriendly, and over 70% said the same of evangelical churches.

In the aftermath of General Conference 2019, LGBTQ persons found themselves in the epicenter of the Church's pain and exclusion. In my role at Reconciling Ministries Network, we were particularly aware of the fear and betrayal experienced by LGBTQ youth in non-affirming local churches, unsure what their future could look like, unsure whether their homes and communities still had a place for them, whether their gifts or personhood would be accepted - if a creative and loving God really created and loved them.

We were told to leave information for suicide hotlines everywhere and all the time. And, knowing the statistics, you'll understand that we weren't overreacting.

In truth, it took some time for me to come around and feel what I felt: the memory of rejection by my own Christian community and my own family. The awkward weight of an uncertain future, and the worry that what *is* might never end.

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But in my own story, I have a mother who did not understand but who agreed to be in relationship with me, and who therefore put in the work to *do* justice: to reconcile, to listen, to put down one's presuppositions in the face of sure and ripening fruit.

And let me just say that what I love about what the prophet Micah has to say here - *do* justice, *love* mercy, and *walk* humbly with God - is that each phrase informs the others. *How* do we go about doing justice? By loving mercy and walking humbly with God. And *how* do we show that we love mercy? By doing justice and walking humbly with God. And *how* do we know we are walking humbly with God? By whether we are doing justice and loving mercy. So we are not without a guide.

And in our denomination's story, I've seen examples of people around the connection - and outside of it, too - *doing* justice in the aftermath. Giving their time and resources. Offering free pastoral counseling from ecumenical and interfaith leaders who knew that United Methodist leadership in the crosshairs was drained of its capacity to shepherd its own people. Marrying LGBTQ couples in nations where it is even more dangerous to be LGBTQ, to *be* your very soul. Raising thousands of dollars at a one-night church-hosted drag show to support an LGBTQ youth group. Showing up for immigrants detained at the U.S. southern border. Empowering youth to organize their own affirming Methodist gatherings. Collecting formal-wear at a local church so LGBTQ youth experiencing housing insecurity can go to a prom where they feel safe. Demonstrating outside of annual conference offices in places where the tide has not yet turned toward justice - where the waters are still low, still rising, and stretched thin.

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We in New England are not people of a low tide. We are not a people stretched too thin. By nature of who we are, by nature of where we've been, what we *do* sends a strong message to the connection: what we *do*, even more than what we *say*.

To my allies, my cisgender, straight advocates for justice and inclusion of LGBTQ people in the full life and ministry of God's Church: what *you do now* sends a strong message even more than what *you say*.

We are, after all, bound in relationship, and **being in relationship requires something of us**. And I don't always know the next steps for a relationship rooted in love, but I know it looks like reconciliation. It looks like movement in the direction in which our courage leads us. Like a banquet over a set table where each of us has a place, where we make room for those who've been outcasted, saying, "Come, eat."

Lest we forget, for many LGBTQ persons in The United Methodist Church, and especially for young LGBTQ folks without strong forces for affirmation in their lives, the pain of General Conference 2019 remains. And the harm that our Church has already done cannot be undone. Nor will it cease to be done if we do not instead change course from a status quo of dehumanization and choose instead to *do* justice.

In the coming months, before May of 2020, we have the opportunity in our midst to do justice: to put our whole backs against this stone and roll it away from the tomb.

I don't know if that means that we must remain in the mire to fight for justice within this current structure, or if that means we are to birth something new - but what we cannot do is sit on the sidelines

and let our words be the end of our co-conspiracy with the Holy Spirit. What we cannot do is abdicate this rich, deep history of justice-doing, mercy-loving, and walking humbly with God.

And so, as we pray into the steps before us, let's keep the eyes of our hearts open, scanning the horizon for resurrection. Let's move in the direction that our courage takes us. Move against the sealing stone, united in our strength and resolve.

Let this be a reminder: the lives of LGBTQ persons in The United Methodist Church and in our world will not be saved by our believing the right thing. And, let this be a point of relief and liberation: neither will the Church! We cannot be the Church by parsing who is or is not a Christian, who belongs to which movement, whether our ideologies are pure enough, whether we have crafted the perfect vision or cultivated the right credentials - because justice still remains to be *done*.

And I say this as someone whose livelihood is language but also as someone who remembers what it's like to wait on the other side of the stone, unsure if it will ever be rolled away. To profess to love means nothing if we aren't to follow our words and *do* justice fueled by those beliefs.

Our relationship with a living, dynamic God - our relationships with one another, require us to live an active love. By the power of the Spirit dwelling in us and the charge of our baptism, what choice do we have if we want to remain in relationship with God and with the marginalized but to go forward guided by signs of resurrection?

In our Church, the fields of justice lie fallow, but here in New England, our wells aren't shallow. Whatever comes next, for the sake of the Church, for the sake of Christian witness, for the sake of the lives and safety and sanctity of LGBTQ persons: let us move in the direction that our courage leads us. Speak boldly. And then *do* justice. Set the table. Call in the others. And look along the way for signs of resurrection.