



The EPISCOPAL DIOCESE of ATLANTA

SERVING MIDDLE GEORGIA & NORTH GEORGIA

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“What were you thinking?”

(A response to those wondering how I can welcome and affirm LGBTQ persons and recommend a book coauthored by Pastor Rick Warren.)

“What were you thinking?” is a question that was put to me by a member of one of our congregations when she learned that I had recommended The Daniel Plan for reading during the season of Lent. The question and the concern it voices at my recommendation are fair. And, I am thankful for an opportunity to share my thinking on the matter.

The Daniel Plan is a book about faith, focus, fitness, friends and food, born out of Pastor Rick Warren’s repentance of being overweight and not setting a good example for his congregation. In collaboration with physicians Dr. Amen, Dr. Hyman and Dr. Oz, The Daniel Plan was born: a six week plan to live healthier and to recognize our bodies as the divine gift they are. The problem for some of us is that Pastor Warren has been an outspoken advocate of traditional marriage and has made remarks that I and others find objectionable about gay and lesbian persons. For some, this is an open and shut case. Their argument being, “I take offense with Warren’s views on the subject of human sexuality and therefore other contributions he may make about Christian discipleship should be rendered invalid”.

While I understand the temptation to make this argument, it seems to miss the mark of Christian fellowship as exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth. Is it our contention that by dining at the home of a tax collector, Jesus is endorsing the man’s financial malfeasance, collusion with Rome and abuses of the poor? And do we understand Jesus’ lengthy interaction with a Samaritan woman as an endorsement of her religious practices and promiscuity? Remember also Jacob was a liar, Moses a murderer and Peter and Paul struggled with cowardice and arrogance to say nothing of misogyny. Are they also unable to positively contribute to our faith journey? Or, is there something more we are supposed to learn about learning from one another?

By recommending The Daniel Plan I am in no way endorsing Pastor Warren’s views on human sexuality. Having read the book, there is nothing in its content that is inconsistent with our baptismal promises. I therefore am certain his invitation to thoughtfulness about health and spiritual wholeness has merit, is commendable and is useful.

Not long ago, other members of the Diocese of Atlanta were asking me “What was I thinking,” when I made provision for the blessing of monogamous life-long, same-sex relationships. Prior to that as a Rector, my congregation asked me “What was I thinking” when I hired a partnered gay white man as the organist and choir director of a historically black church. Further back, I had to answer that question by my then bishop in New York, as I planned to bless the relationship of two of my parishioners more than a decade before it was permissible.

No doubt more people will ask that question when I produce a video encouraging teens struggling with questions of sexuality not to consider suicide because God loves them and they are welcome in the Episcopal Church.

I confess to you, I struggle with this , single issue-based fellowship that gets passed off as Christian fellowship. On both sides of the issue. I deeply believe that human beings are too complex and valuable to write off even when their understandings are deemed deplorable. I am afraid that I have preached and taught about a God of limitless grace, love and mercy too long to banish people to a garbage pile of contempt. Or, to teach polite indifference as an acceptable substitute for Christian fellowship.

For decades in the Episcopal Church we have debated and dialogued about the full inclusion of people. And I am proud of the gains we have made. But full inclusion must mean full inclusion even of those we vehemently disagree with, even those who cannot at present celebrate our humanity or dignity, or it is a hollow sentiment. When we say in our churches on Sunday morning, "Wherever you are on your journey you are welcome here," do we really mean "wherever you are" or something much smaller?

As an African-American, I am well practiced at embracing those who cannot fully embrace me. I have had too many experiences of being slighted based on race and the injury to dignity that that causes. So I have great empathy with those who have these same kinds of scars and who are asked to love those who hate them. But I am sure that retreating into hermetically sealed conversations and communities is not the way forward for followers of Jesus. Fellowship that has Christ as its center is more durable and life giving than single issue-based fellowship. And, I am sure that people who we differ with on issues and biblical interpretation, still have something to teach us.

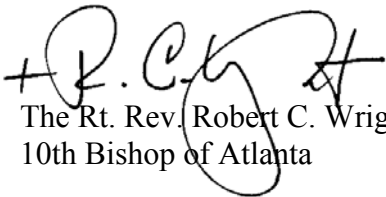
By some cosmic alignment, I would have you notice that as I write this response, the gospel lesson for the Church this coming Sunday is Jesus' mandate for us to "*Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.*" Matthew 5:38-48

While my positions on issues in the past and no doubt in the years to come may cause some people consternation, perhaps even grief, you have my promise that, "what I am thinking about," constantly, is Jesus' invitation to the church to partner with Him in the work of reconciliation.

I am thankful for this opportunity to share my heart with you. I offer this response in all humility. If I have offended you, I sincerely ask for your forgiveness. If you are unable to join me on The Daniel Plan for Lent, I invite you to read The Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster. Please always know, my intention is simply to call myself and those souls in my care to Christian maturity.

With gratitude to God for our life together,

Grace and Peace,



The Rt. Rev. Robert C. Wright
10th Bishop of Atlanta