

Stand Firm

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Jill Duffield

The Presbyterian Outlook, Richmond, Virginia

"I don't do purple," she said. The lone African-American pastor on the panel in the workshop titled "Preaching and Politics" stated emphatically, "I don't do purple." Her declaration came in response to a question about how best to navigate preaching and teaching in a "purple congregation" with people on either side of the political divide. At this point in the program, I was standing at the podium, moderating the questions, almost all of which were about balancing the pastoral and prophetic, speaking truth to power without offending the powerful in the pews, and working for justice while keeping the peace.

Other panelists had responded with things I have often advised myself. Things like "Stick to the text," "Come along side the news, but don't name it directly," "Offer opportunities for conversation." In other words, surf the purple waves. Preach to the purple people. Praise the big purple tent. That was the repeated theme until we came to my colleague who said, "I don't do purple."

The room got quiet... until someone on the front row said, "What do you mean, you don't do purple?" My colleague said something like she didn't have time for purple in the current context. She didn't mention Sandra Bland or Freddie Gray, Ferguson or Charleston. She just said she couldn't afford to preach purple anymore. And her unqualified proclamation stuck with me because I am practically painted in purple, immersed in purple, so steeped in purple, stained with purple that I often fail to even notice it.

Purple, it would seem, is my favorite color. All things in moderation, I say. I am a bridge person, I say. Find the middle way, I say. The way, that if I am honest, has often been the path of least resistance and not the way of Jesus Christ.

I've prayed fervently to the patron saint of purple: Saint Civility. If we can just be civil, respectful. No need to get angry. Let's sit down and talk this out and take our time and get everyone on the same page and be reasonable and trust the process and make some compromises and remember that the arc of history bends toward justice and all will be well... eventually. I built a purple house and painted the walls lavender and planted wisteria all around it for good measure.

So that day, my friend who doesn't do purple caught me off guard because she reminded me that the way of Jesus is no purple primrose path. It is the way that leads to the cross, and there is nothing civil or measured or respectful or compromising about crucifixion.

My colleague who ruefully said "I don't do purple" brought to mind a Presbyterian pastor who was purple before purple was cool. He argued—it is documented in the minutes, during a North Carolina presbytery meeting—yes, let Martin Luther King, Jr. speak at Montreat Conference Center, so long as a segregationist got a chance to present, too. How balanced and reasonable and civil and sensible and how utterly counter to the Gospel of Jesus Christ who says to take a stand for the oppressed. Stand up for those beaten down and stood upon. Stand with those on the margins. Go stand

in front of Pharaoh and tell him to let my people go. Stand on the promises of God, stand in the breach on behalf of those too long thrown into it. That's the only middle ground faithful to the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus Christ.

Jesus did not set us free to be purple and civil and polite and unoffensive and placating and lukewarm. Those of us washed in the blood of the lamb are free from sin and freed for service to the Most High God, and that means *taking a stand*, standing up for Jesus and standing with those with whom Jesus stood: the least, the last, the abused and ostracized, those begging for mercy and weeping in lament.

The Presbyterian Outlook marks its 200th year this year, and looking back in our pages reveals how unfaithful not recognizing the color purple can be. Seeking a middle way, a reasonable compromise, a sensible solution, we spread the rhetoric of faithful paternalism. Be a benevolent slave holder, we wrote. Treat those whom you own well as that is pleasing to God, we preached. Evangelize and baptize those whom you enslave, then separate families and sell them, we justified.

Now, I know what you may be thinking. Remember the context. Put this in its time and place. Consider the alternatives. They may well have been progressive for their time. Isn't that chastening to those of us who would label ourselves such today? I know it chastens me. It is easy to be purple and civil and in the middle when the boot is not on our neck, the policies aren't truncating our futures, and the prejudices aren't rendering our children dead in the streets.

Thanks be to God, we've been given a better way. We are no longer enslaved to the flesh-devouring ways of the world because Christ has set us free. Free from sin. Free from death. Free from fear. Free from the tyranny of self and the reign of any ruler but God.

Christ has set us free for freedom's sake. We are freed to take a stand, to stand for love of neighbor, for a generosity of life-giving justice, for the peace that passes understanding, and the joy that comes in serving God and God only. We are freed for a kindness that upends cruelty and reveals the divine dignity and worth of every human being. We are freed for self-control that looks to the interest of others and refrains from vengeance even as it seeks to be patient, forgiving, compassionate, and merciful with all people. We are freed for gentleness with the weak and with one another. We are freed for faithfulness in a world overflowing with evil and idols, suffering and sorrow.

Freed to call out the purple of privilege. Freed to be immersed in the purple of penitence that not only confesses, but repents and does better. Freed to be awash in the purple of preparation that not only welcomes the baby Jesus, but reminds to be ready to face Christ when he returns to separate the sheep and the goats.

Beloved in Christ: *it is time to take a stand*. There is no middle ground when it comes to injustice and hate, oppression and white supremacy. In the wake of Charleston and Charlottesville, Pittsburgh and Christ Church, *it is time to take a stand and stand firm* in the faith of Jesus who stands with the persecuted and the demonized, the othered and scapegoated. In the wake of family separation and mass incarceration, *it is time to take a stand and stand firm* in the faith of Jesus who welcomed the children and came to set the captives free. In the wake of hate crimes and xenophobia, *it is time to take a stand and stand firm* in the faith of Jesus whose family fled persecution and sought asylum in a foreign land, a man of color beaten, spit upon, and hanged on a tree. In the wake of our salvation and sending, *it is time to take a stand and stand*

firm in the faith of Jesus who set us free to be ministers of real reconciliation, those who do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with the One who always, always, always stands against evil and stands with the suffering and the oppressed.

Yesterday, June 17, marked four years to the day when nine of our siblings in Christ were gunned down at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC. Tomorrow, Juneteenth, commemorates the day in Texas, 1865, when the abolition of slavery was announced. So I ask you, in between, on June 18, in between, *Where do we stand?*