

## **“The Heart of the Matter by Rev. Karen Booth**

*“Words,” said the Mad Hatter to Alice, “mean exactly what I want them to mean.”*

Several years ago, when Woody Allen left his wife Mia Farrow for her adopted daughter Soon-Yi, he delivered a line that has since become a classic. When asked to explain why he had betrayed his wife for a relationship with this much younger woman, he simply replied, “the heart wants what the heart wants.”

I thought about Woody’s answer last week as I observed the Beth Stroud trial. For in many respects, Beth’s self-justification reminded me of his: I want to be an ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church, and I also want to live in an open, lesbian relationship. It doesn’t matter that the Church has consistently decided that the two are mutually exclusive. It doesn’t matter that there are several other viable options open to me. It doesn’t matter that the denomination I claim to love is dragged through the media mud and falsely maligned in the process. The heart wants what the heart wants, and no one has the right to tell me “no.”

Throughout the trial, Beth’s defense team, media consultants and supporters claimed that the heart of the matter was integrity. And though the Church’s counsel refrained from questioning that claim, folk in the “observers” section didn’t. Someone asked how could they talk about integrity when Beth had lied-by-omission for almost three years to her congregation, Annual Conference colleagues, and denomination about her relationship with her partner? Where was her integrity while waiting (and perhaps wanting) to be exposed during her candidacy/ordination process? Didn’t she have an obligation to reveal her sexual orientation, especially if she knew it could prevent her from keeping her ordination vows? Wasn’t it hypocritical to subsequently imply that she was victimized by the Church’s so-called “don’t ask/don’t tell” policy?

How could they talk about integrity when they compromised the trial process, subtly introducing the constitutional arguments they were banned from using - and with tacit approval of the Presiding Bishop? Or when her character witnesses acknowledged they had colluded in her duplicity all along the way? Or when one of them reasoned that it’s OK to violate the Book of Discipline at will if you disagree with it.

How could they talk about integrity when Beth helped to create a local congregation that believes it can collectively “thumb iits nose” at our connectional covenant? Or when that congregation is determined to find a big enough legalistic loophole so that she can continue in ministry much as before, doing everything but serving communion and baptizing? Or when some of them have so much hubris they can compare Beth’s self-inflicted difficulties to Joan of Arc?

And how in the world could they talk about integrity when the whole event was orchestrated by media professionals from beginning to end? Shouldn’t the trial court have been told that Beth’s “coming out” sermon was filmed for a PBS documentary that hs been several years in the making? Was it just coincidence that the “no cameras” ban was broken so that the trial verdict could be taped? That the “no demonstration” rule was broken so her supporters could stand in solidarity at the penalty verdict? Guess we’ll all just have to watch and see.

Only in the surreal world of pro-gay apologetics can any of the above be construed as “integrity.”

The real heart of the matter is not integrity, it’s idolatry - the brazen, unyielding human pride that exalts itself above the authority of Scripture, above the legitimate will of the Church, and even above God. It’s the pride evident whan a Soulforce staffer - her personal theology admittedly non-Christian - told a lunch time crowd that her divinity was comparable to that of Jesus and the only person who had to forgive her was herself. It’s the pride that motivates and energizes so many within the pro-gay movement. It’s the pride, that if left unchecked, will continually strive to make over The United Methodist Church into its own image.

Yes, the heart wants what the heart wants. And the idolatrous, unrepentant heart is deceitful above all things.