

Final Argument Penalty Phase
The Rev. Scott Campbell, DeLong Counsel

Friends, I would like to share just a few reflections with you before you retire to complete the work of this trial a few moments from now. There has been a passage of scripture that has sustained our trial team as we have journeyed together over these months and I would like to share it with you. It has helped us through some difficult and discouraging times and kept us focused on the main thing. It comes out of the 10th chapter of Matthew and is quoted from Eugene Peterson's version, *The Message*.

“Don't be naive. Some people will impugn your motives, others will smear your reputation—just because you believe in me. Don't be upset when they haul you before the (civil) authorities. Without knowing it, they've done you—and me—a favor, given you a platform for preaching the kingdom news! And don't worry about what you'll say or how you'll say it. The right words will be there; the Spirit of your (God) will supply the words.

21-23 “When people realize it is the living God you are presenting and not some idol that makes them feel good, they are going to turn on you, even people in your own family. There is a great irony here: proclaiming so much love, experiencing so much hate! But don't quit. Don't cave in. It is all well worth it in the end. It is not success you are after in such times but survival. Be survivors! Before you've run out of options, the Christ will have arrived.

Don't be bluffed into silence by the threats of bullies. There is nothing they can do to your soul, your core being. Save your fear for God, who holds your entire life—body and soul—in (holy) hands.

This scripture has been a great comfort and a great inspiration to us in these in-between times in which we live. Change is coming in the church and in the world. Signs are all around us in the church and in the world. In 1998 the Rev. Jimmy Creech lost his orders for responding in love to the request of a same gender couple to bless their relationship. Jimmy is sitting in this hall this morning, and most who know him would tell you that this was a great tragedy for not only Jimmy, but for the United Methodist Church. Jimmy was ahead of his time. He saw what was coming in the church and the world and he acted upon it. The Bible calls such people prophets and Jesus reminds us that we have always stoned the prophets. He says that not to encourage us to continue that tradition, but to repent of it and to yield our hearts and minds to the One who is doing a new thing.

This is not to say that there is not much of worth that we bring forth from our past, including, you may be surprised to hear me say, the Chargeable Offenses in our Discipline. There was a time when these words were intended to protect the church from those who sought to do it harm. They were a good and necessary inclusion in the Discipline. They grew out of a time when we understood the term “discipline” to be a description of the way we lived out our covenant together. But something insidious has begun to happen in the church in recent years. We have been gripped by a spirit of fear at the new things God is doing. We have resisted mightily. Out of fear we have imagined that we can punish and intimidate others into seeing the world in the same

frightened way we do. We have latched on to the chargeable offenses as an instrument for intimidation. And now, instead of protecting the church from those who seek to do it harm, we use these chargeable offenses as a club to coerce our clergy into violating their own consciences. We seek to terrorize compassionate pastors into withholding blessing from those whom they have been called to serve, even within the Discipline itself. This is not right, dear friends.

To our shame, this technique of intimidation has largely worked since Jimmy's trial and the trial of Greg Dell in the same time period. This is first trial that has occurred in the last thirteen years because someone has had the courage to stand before the church and declare that we have missed what God is doing and she will no longer live in fear. The Pentecost wind that we celebrated in our churches two weeks ago has continued to blow, not only here in the wonderful state of Wisconsin, but across our church and across our nation. Hundreds of pastors throughout the denomination have declared in the last month that they will no longer be frightened into doing what they know to be wrong in their hearts. Forty United Methodist bishops have called for the church to change its laws in this area. Don't ask don't tell has collapsed in the military. The Defense of Marriage Act is no longer being enforced. The United Nations last week called for full human rights for Gay and Lesbian people. Fear is being eradicated everywhere we look.

Brothers and sisters of the trial court, this is not a violation of covenant, but rather a vindication of conscience. These are not the seeds of schism, but the sowing of our salvation. We are not engaged in the abrogation of accountability, but in the creation of community. God is bringing forth something new in our midst.

I have a hope for us. I hope this is that last trial for this purpose that ever takes place in the United Methodist Church. I hope that bishops across our great church will lead us into new pastures and that this distortion of our highest aspirations will soon disappear. I hope that the General Conference will come to its senses next year before it squanders the great heritage of Methodism in defense of the ultimately indefensible. The question before this trial court will be whether it wants to be a part of the final crucifixion of the church that was for a time, or whether it will be a midwife to the first fruits of a resurrected church.

What should be the penalty for an act of pastoral conscience? In the days of the civil rights movement, those who broke laws for conscience sake were sometimes arrested briefly. Even in the most resistant parts of the country they were never given the death penalty for what they had done. The Northern Illinois conference a few weeks ago recommended a one day suspension for this offense. Janet Wolf challenged us yesterday to be even more creative than that. She asked us how this can be an occasion for healing? We trust this trial court, which has already demonstrated its trustworthiness, to do what is right. What should be the penalty for the offense of love? Let the penalty fit the crime.

The grace and peace of Christ be with you.