

TAPPING OUT OF FAKE FIGHTS By Nancy McDonald Ladd

This reading is an excerpt of the sermon delivered by Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd on Sunday morning at General Assembly 2016 entitled “In All Thy Getting, Get Understanding”

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For as long as two or more have gathered in the name of the spirit, those two or more have fought some fake fights.

You remember, perhaps, the classic wedding reading from Corinthians, which says, If I speak in the tongues of mortals or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal... if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

That letter from the Apostle Paul to the early Christian community in Corinth has nothing whatsoever to do with weddings.

That’s a letter from an overextended pastor with occasionally dubious judgment to a congregation whose leaders are in a constant state of fierce and unremitting conflict. The early Christians in the Corinth congregation were literally shouting their prayers like clanging cymbals overtop of one another to try and prove who was better at praying. They were making faith into a contest, and whether he was Saintly or not, Paul was having none of it.

The collective wisdom of the ages reminds us that the stakes are high and the ultimate prize we must reach out for in community is greater than the imagined divisions and trumped-up arguments that pull us apart.

Here’s a segue way you won’t see coming: you know in Wrestlemania, when professional wrestlers have those fake fights? Sometimes they really are at risk of getting hurt. And do you know what they do, before the muscle snaps or the bones break in that fake fight? They tap out. They bang the mat. When the fake fight gets close to having real consequences, they tap out.

I tell you what, I’m tapping out—right now—and I invite you to join me. I’m tapping out of every fake fight in our congregations and our movement about getting what I want or what you want or what we think we want, because the stakes are too high and we don’t have time for fake fights anymore.

A fake fight about the bylaws in the annual meeting is most often a carefully concealed real fight about the values that undergird our history coming into relationship with the values that may undergird our future. If we can get past duking it out over the paint color in the church bathroom, we may encounter a pastoral window into the inner life of one whose voice in the world seems increasingly powerless. And All Lives Matter—yes, that one, chief among the fake fights and cover conversations that distract from the work at hand—is not about the slogan. More often than not, it's about our deep and abiding resistance to actually taking on the systemic white supremacy that eats at the heart of us and of our culture.

I know, for a fact, that the real conversations are waiting. Just beneath the surface of the fake fight is the the actual encounter: soul to soul and hand to hand, in which change is possible.

So let's have that conversation—the real one, the hard one, the one that requires us to keep showing up—and let 's do it with edge and forgiveness, calling out and calling in, calling forth a new kind of community both in our congregations and in the world.

The real fight beckons—the real conversation about our history, our identity, our relevance, our resistance. The world does not need another place for like-minded liberal leaning people to hang out together and fight about who's in charge. The world does not need a place where you or I or any of us is going to get what we want.

What the world needs is a movement like ours to step more fully into our higher calling; to serve as an instrument for encounter with one another, with the holy, and with the world, so that we might love more fully, and speak more truly and serve with greater efficacy.