

Sermon for NATIONAL COMING OUT DAY
Pentecost 19 C [Proper 23]
Bible Texts: 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15; Luke 17:11-19

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God always goes beyond the limits of what we think is possible. God always opens the doors or knocks down walls, in order to redeem— in order to re-make the world with love and truth.

This weekend is being observed again nationwide as National Coming Out Day, based on the date October 11, 1987 when hundreds of thousands of gay and lesbian citizens of the United States came to Washington, D.C. to hold a national march calling for their civil rights.

In the seventeen years since, America has been in tumult over gay and lesbian issues. It is sad to say that it is also a flash point in this year's presidential election, as some strategists enjoy using differences of opinion as a wedge, and bigotry as a political tool.

Both church and society are in a period of discernment about the real issues, the rights, responsibilities, and even the basic facts about sexual minorities. We know that our own ELCA is doing a delicate dance, to keep from stepping on the toes of people on either the conservative side or the liberal side. The Episcopal church is even more severely challenged. Every denomination is struggling with the implications of gay and lesbian people and relationships and issues.

But the nation itself, where the rule of law is supposed to prevail—not of emotions, nor prejudices or the preferences of one group over another—is in turmoil. Worst of all, we are losing the clear lines of separation of church and state which have been a hallmark of freedom in America since the founding fathers.

This congregation has taken some courageous steps in recent months, and certainly more courage will be required of it in order to defend the conviction and faith of the congregation against an institutional system more worried about rules being broken than mission and ministry moving forward.

I am moved to realize that 82% of the people of this congregation decided it was worth the risk and voted to call me, and get on with its mission with great conviction. But I think, that for many people in this congregation, including those that voted positively, might still wish that this whole subject could somehow just “go away.”

I want to say why I think this is important, in terms

of the Gospel. As Christians, we believe that the Gospel is God's ultimate truth for mankind. There is so much quarreling, even terrorism in our world today which is grounded in religion, that there are many voices who wish that *RELIGION* would just go away, too. Yet Christians are dedicated to being “out” about their faith, and their trust in God, their belief that God is working not only through the Cross of Jesus Christ, but through the lives of ordinary people whom God brings together in Christ.

And the truth of the Gospel, the ultimate word of God for mankind, is love.

Now, what do truth and love have to do with gay and lesbian people coming out?

To those who *disapprove*, the fact that so many more people—from the rich and famous to the “girls” next door—are coming out as gay or lesbian, must seem like the failure of traditional standards and values. They must think that gay and lesbian people are *recruiting others* to their so-called lifestyle, because there seem to be so many more of them. Thirty years ago you never heard any of this stuff! “Why do they have to come out, anyway?”

A little *more* than thirty years ago, the day came when I had to have that kind of conversation with my own mother and father. These were the kinds of painful, resentful questions that poured out—especially out of my mother—who was a lot more verbal than my Dad about everything.

But thirty years ago I was not yet well-prepared, by life's experiences, to be able to answer their painful questions. Why did I have to tell them? Why couldn't I just keep it to myself?

What I have learned in these 30-some years are things about truth and love. The reason why our lives and our stories are open today is because they are honest stories. The reason why people need to share the honest stuff of their lives with one another is explained most completely by the word love. If I really loved my parents, I had to stop being dishonest with them!

Relationships are never whole—whether they

be friendships or within family life—without honesty. Living every day with profound dishonesty is like trying to breathe fresh air inside a closet! People who try to hide deep secrets and to pretend there is nothing behind their smiling facade, are people who cannot *live*, will not *trust*, become *crippled* in their ability to give or even receive love. No matter what it is, truth is the greatest gift any of us can give to one another, as families, as friends, as partners or spouses, parents and children, neighbors, citizens, fellow believers in the grace of God.

Perhaps I can frame examples from other aspects of life. A generation ago, people also kept secrets about many other things in life. Talk shows hadn't come around. Oprah wasn't on the air. Ann Landers was about all there was! And for generations, the things that caused people pain, sorrow, shame or despair were expected to be kept bottled up:

- If a wife was beaten by her husband, she hid it with make-up and didn't tell a soul.
- If a daughter was pregnant out of wedlock, if a parent was alcoholic, if someone had cancer or another serious illness, it could only be whispered about, never spoken about openly—and certainly never in a support group.
- If there was child abuse, or severe money problems, or even *varicose veins*, people were expected to hide *everything*.

But the world itself *changed*.

It seemed that overnight the truth began to explode everywhere. And what we have in our world today is a tension, to be sure, between the social desire to return to those days when people's differences and people's pain could be ignored or concealed, and the personal need of individuals to be honest, to tell their stories, to live the truth of their lives, and to ask for the respect, the help and the support of others.

While this is mostly a social phenomenon, it has played out in the Christian Church, too. The Church, thirty years ago, carried the torch for concealment, and for “wholesome appearances”—even if they were dishonest. Churches liked the appearance of respectability and morality. But at the same time, the façade it presented was a strong message to the people outside: if *your* life does *not* fit the picture on the

postcard, if *your* story is *not* the story of Ozzie and Harriet Nelson, you really won't feel welcome here.

Is it any wonder that many churches have emptied out in the last thirty years, but the few which have grown and flourished have been the ones that dropped the pretenses and opened their doors to welcome all people? The churches which have been successful in facing these changing times are the ones who put one thing right up front: we are all sinners, we are all loved by God because of his amazing grace, and our life together is the life to which Christ calls us—a life of mutual love, a life of bearing one another's burdens, and loving the unlovable and caring for those who have no one else to care.

And the more this has come to light, the more aware we are that the Bible is not filled with pious pictures of perfect family units like Ozzie and Harriet, but filled with the stories of ordinary people, poor people, troubled, abandoned, despised, who turned their lives *around* by *turning* to the grace of God and *finding* that grace in the love and acceptance of other people.

This is what redemption means! This is what salvation means! When fear of disapproval, dishonest appearances, despair about life's challenges and hard knocks, and—worst of all—self-hatred are *given up, surrendered* to God's all embracing forgiveness and love, everything about life changes! Honesty with others, truth and integrity, love and respect, all finally become possible, become beautiful, become deeply satisfying and healing.

And, as the Bible makes so clear, in story after story, is that these things become possible for EVERYONE, not just for a few chosen people but for the world's people; not just for the righteous but for the sinner; not just for the respectable, but for the human.

In two of the passages read this morning, the story of Naaman from 2 Kings, and the one about the ten lepers who came near to Jesus asking for mercy, there are few things in common between the stories. Naaman at first was cynical, not believing in the possibility of a miracle from the man of God, Elisha. Naaman became angry at the idea that he

should humble himself to receive healing. In the Gospel reading, the ten lepers were healed as they walked away from Jesus, to show themselves to the priest—as was required by religious law to prove that they were no longer ritually unclean. But only one of the ten stopped in his tracks, turned, and fell on his face to thank Jesus for his healing. The others, it is implied, were not grateful.

But the sermon herein is not about cynicism, or anger, or ingratitude. It is not even about miraculous healing. The message here, my friends, is in the one thing that the two stories have in common. Naaman, and the Samaritan who was healed, were *foreigners*. They were *outsiders*.

Naaman eventually came around. In what must have been an embarrassing moment, Naaman came and stood before Elisha to admit that he had been wrong about Elisha and about the God of Israel. “Now I know,” he admitted publicly, “that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.” And the Samaritan man who turned back, came before Jesus, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself on the ground in front of Jesus, to thank him.

Naaman was not Jewish, not a son of Israel, but an Aramean, an outsider. Samaritans were not Jewish, either, not considered to be pure enough to have a place among the Chosen People, *outsiders*. In fact, it is painfully obvious that in those days Israel *hated* outsiders, *especially* Samaritans. But what is preserved in these stories is that outcasts, outsiders, foreigners *recognized the power and love of God, and praised God for what they received*.

It must have angered the faithful Jews to hear a story that the foreigner received God’s grace. And repeatedly, in the Gospels, Jesus is astonished that he found outsiders who came to faith, who “got it,” and understood the power and presence of God in their lives, when the Chosen People did not.

Sometimes we miss this, don’t we?—mostly because we are not really interested, thousands of years later, in the geography of the Holy Land. We don’t know where Aramea *is*, or Samaria, and we don’t read the Bible thoroughly, do we? If the preachers didn’t bring up the subject of ancient racism and ethnic animosity, most Christians would not even realize it was going on in the Bible, or how Jesus repeatedly stepped over the lines of

what was “socially acceptable”, to preach the Gospel to outsiders.

The truth of the Gospel, my friends, is that God always goes to the limits, indeed, beyond the limits of what we think is possible. God always opens the doors or knocks down walls, in order to redeem, in order to re-make the world with love and truth.

And if this Gospel is still relevant in every generation—still living and active today— there is one important question that springs from these two Bible texts: *Who are the outsiders today? Who are despised? Who are alienated by the misunderstanding or animosity of others? Who are looking for the grace and power of God in their lives?*

The Christian faith always come down on the side of truth and honesty. The Christian faith always encourages us to do away with shame and fear and self-hatred. The Christian Gospel is the good news that God’s love is offered to all people, especially to those who are outsiders, those who are rejected or despised by others.

I am trying to come full-circle to the subject with which I began. What is so important about gay and lesbian people telling their secrets, being open, coming out of their closets? Why couldn’t they just have kept it to themselves?

The year was 1969. You might remember that this all began as a civil rights struggle. It was a hot June night in New York City. And it was a well-known routine, in which homosexual men, who gathered more or less secretly in bars and taverns in Greenwich Village, were suddenly raided by a contingent of police with flashlights and clubs. They would be arrested simply for associating with one another, and booked for solicitation of lewd acts, simply for enjoying a beer in an establishment that catered to them.

But on this particular night, something snapped. The customers didn’t go quietly into a paddy wagon. They fought back. As it has happened in civil wars, between different races, or

when an oppressed people rose up against their oppressors, the brawl inside the Stonewall Inn erupted into a riot, which lasted for days in New York City. It made the news, it caught the attention of tens of thousands of fearful, duplicitous homosexual people, who had always kept their own secrets by living two lives—one public, one private.

The Stonewall riots changed America. And the *first thing* to change was that a generation of people began to get rid of shame, and fear, and self-hatred for being who they are.

I was 22 years old. It changed me.

Within a year, gay pride marches began to happen in other cities, including Los Angeles. Within *five* years, an organization called Lutherans Concerned for Gay People held its first meeting in Minneapolis, Minnesota—three men and two women, with a mixture of fear and courage, who sat up talking late into the night about how to form a support organization for gay and lesbian Lutherans. One of those five was Howard Erickson, a member of this congregation.

Why did a civil rights movement also spill into the Christian Church? How did a week of riots in 1969 manage to ignite something which is still smouldering in the churches 35 years later?

The only answer I have to offer is that the Christian faith always come down on the side of truth and honesty. The Christian faith always encourages us to do away with shame and fear and self-hatred. The Christian Gospel is the good news that God's love is offered to all people, especially to those who are outsiders, those who are rejected or despised by others.

But there is also an element of the miraculous here, as well, alongside the stories of Naaman and the ten lepers. Gay and lesbian people, too, have come through a *healing* experience, simply by bringing the truth of their lives out into the open. Did it change them into heterosexuals? No. One's sexual orientation in itself is not something that needs healing, any more than you can *heal* blue eyes, *left-handedness*, *curly* hair, or *brown* skin, or

being 6'-7" tall. One's orientation is simply part of who we are.

But what has been healed is the terrible pain and suffering of shame, fear and self-hatred. Lives have been saved because more people realize it is better to live one's life rather than take one's life, for being who we are.

And yes, sadly, nine out of ten who experience this healing, or wholeness, probably aren't going to come back to Jesus to thank him. Spiritual healing takes a long time. It has taken me thirty years to come to a level of emotional health and spiritual wholeness, to be able to say "Thank God" for whom I am, for the grace and redemption I have been given, and for the support, love and respect of others. I am glad this church was here for me. And I pray that this church will always be there for the people who come after us, out of their closets, able to hold their heads up, hungry for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and able to hear his truth and his love. Amen.



For further reflection:

"Coming Out" means self-disclosure, sharing honestly something which completely changes the nature of the friendship or relationship. For example:

- Joseph comes out to his brothers, Genesis 45:1-15
- Ruth comes out to Naomi, Ruth 1:11-18
- Jonathan comes out to David, 1 Samuel 20:1-17
- Jesus comes out to Phillip, John 14:8-14

Are any of these characters gay or lesbian? Explain why you came to your conclusion.

How important is honesty? Cf. Job 6:24-30; 1 John 1:5-10; 1 John 2:22-25.