

October 22, 2009

The Eve of the Feast of St. James of Jerusalem, Year B

Acts 15:12-22a; I Corinthians 15:1-11; Matthew 13:54-58

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Dr. Elizabeth Kaeton, preacher

Grace and peace to you from the Diocese of Newark in the Garden State of North Jersey, Exit 13 off the NJTP (Exit 11 off the GSPW) where we had our first snow fall last week. This mild Georgia weather is a bit of a shock to my system – as is seeing so many people in church! I mean, y'all know it's Thursday, right? Between the weather and your wonderful Southern Hospitality and cooking, I just may not go back home.

When Bruce Gardner, my good friend and brother in Christ, asked me to preach for you today, he explained that Gay Pride is held in October in Atlanta because you couldn't really march in the heat in June, which is typically Gay Pride Month in the North. He was telling me about the march and how you will take over the local park and he said something . . . he sort of mumbled it as an aside . . . that tickled my ears, caught me up a bit short and made me giggle.

He said, "Well, there will be thousands of people there, but we'll clean it all up and. . . (here it comes – wait for it) . . . **leave it better than it was when we found it.**" I confess that I didn't hear too much after that because I chuckled to myself and I thought, ". . . 'leave it better than it was when we found it'. Gosh! That's so gay!"

I know. I know. We're not used to hearing that in a positive way. "That's so gay!" has become the last socially acceptable minority slur. All the cool kids say it. Indeed, GLSEN has a series of fabulous ad spots to raise awareness about how un-cool it is to say, "That's so gay!" Have you seen them? My favorite is one featuring Ms. Wanda 'I'ma-Be-Me' Sykes. When **she** says, "Knock it off!" you know she ain't messin'.

You know what? I want to take that back. I want to take "That's so gay!" back from the lips of adolescent-at-any-age bigots and turn it into a positive. Because, it is, you know. It is a very positive thing to be 'so gay'.

Let me start with St. James. It's his feast day tomorrow, and all the lessons appointed for this evening give us a little window into the man. We aren't really sure of his lineage – some church historians dispute whether he is the brother or half-brother or cousin of Jesus – but we sure can be glad that the 'birthers' haven't started a search for HIS real birth certificate (Give them time. They will. They are already re-doing scripture.)

History does name James as the first Bishop of Jerusalem and the passage from the Book of ACTS which was read tonight records one of the first major decisions

of his episcopacy. There was a great controversy among the early Christians (I know. Imagine! Controversy in Christian Community! How could THAT be?), and guess what it was about? You'll never imagine. Not in a million, trillion years!

Okay, I'll tell you. The controversy was about who could be a REAL Christian! I know, right? Glad they got that settled way back then so we don't have to rerun that argument! Some were saying that only Jews could become Christians – certainly not Gentiles. I mean, not only did Gentiles not keep strict dietary laws, but they weren't even circumcised, and everybody then knew that there's no salvation outside of circumcision.

You may go to church and give honor and glory to God, and then perform signs and wonders in the name of Jesus, and be led by the Spirit to bring more souls to God through the power of the Resurrection, but if you had an extra piece of skin on a certain part of your body, well, everything was null and void. In those days, the only response an uncircumcised male got was the ancient version of "That's so gay!"

So, Paul and Barnabas were sent out on a mission trip to Phoenicia and Samaria (of all places!) and when they came back to Jerusalem they told all the brethren (and probably a few sistren who were no doubt chuckling up their sleeves about this whole circumcision controversy anyway) about the conversion of the Gentiles and all about "what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles."

Now, when they heard this, there was great joy among the brethren, but some who belonged to the party of the Pharisees (they call themselves 'orthodox' today) rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to change them to keep the law of Moses."

Well, James, being a good bishop, listened very carefully to both sides of the story – especially when Peter got up and said that God knows the human heart and makes no distinction based on external matters. Indeed, said Peter to his brethren, "we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, just as they will."

After a silence fell on the crowd, James stood up and declared, "Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God." And that, as they say, was that.

It's been a long time since we've had a bishop like James – able to make a decisive, albeit unpopular decision, like that for inclusion. No surprise. Every bishop since then knows how it ended for Bishop James. His reward was to be thrown from the top of the Temple and cudgeled to death. "No good deed goes unpunished." The cudgeleding of bishops is a strong incentive NOT to make decisive, albeit unpopular decisions.

No matter. The Gentiles were in. They were accepted in the community – just as they were, without one plea and with everything intact, thank you very much.

Now, THAT'S. So. Gay.

Hear me clearly: I'm not preaching that James was gay. I don't know about that and frankly, I don't care. I don't think God does either. I'm saying that what he DID was so gay. In the best possible meaning of that phrase. Let me explain.

Eleven years after the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, I've been reflecting on issues of repentance and forgiveness, confession and restitution. And, a little thing called 'metanoia' which I'll explain to you in just a few minutes.

I'm coming to believe that the death of Matthew Shepard is one of three major acts of sin, three ways in which the LGBT community have been the objects of hate and evil, three seminal events in the LGBT community which have broken open the prevailing cultural norm so that we may find healing from the sin and psychosis of the social disease known as homophobia.

Like any movement, there are small but none-the-less significant fires that spark the movement. One was lit in November 1950 when Robert Hull, Charles Dennison Rowland, Dale Jennings, Rudi Gernreich, and Harry Hay formed the Mattachine Society, which was successful in securing a deadlocked jury and dismissal of the case against Dale Jennings for "lewd and dissolute conduct."

That may not seem like a significant victory, but it was the first of its kind AND, it was the first to break the public silence about homosexuality. It did not launch a movement, per se. That would come later. It did inspire the launch the lesbian organization Daughters of Bilitis founded by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon in San Francisco in 1955.

Both organizations had national newsletters / magazines. The Mattachine Society had ONE. The DOB had THE LADDER. We now had a voice. Separate and not exactly equal (it WAS the '50's!), but a voice. We were talking to each other in our own limited circles of gender, but at least we were talking.

In my mind and in my lifetime, there have been three major events which happened in the LGBT community, but there are other - unfortunately many, many other - smaller acts of sin and evil and psychosis which add fuel to the Hell Fire of homophobia.

This is just my perspective. You may have another. I'm not saying I'm right and you're wrong. I'm not even saying I've covered it all. This is a sermon, not a book or exhaustive history. I'm just saying this is how it looks from where I sit, 33 years after my own coming out.

These are the Three Turning Points – Three Moments of Metanoia of the LGBT Movement: The first, of course, was the Stonewall Riot in June of 1969. The Stonewall Bar was raided by the New York City Police Department because . . . well, because that's what cops did back then. And, in some parts of the country and the world, even now.

Routinely. Just for fun, I suppose. Round up the fagots and the dykes the Drag Queens. Load them up in the Paddy Wagon. Make it a Very Big Show. Assure the citizenry that all is well. No vice or weirdness in this community. Nosireebob.

Except, this time, the Drag Queens stomped their pointy stiletto heels, held onto their fabulous wigs, allowed their mascara to smudge, and refused to be harassed. Gay historians report this as the turning point - the metanoia - which gave birth to the Gay Rights Movement.

The second event came in a far less dramatic way. On June 1, 1981, buried in a single paragraph on page five, the MMWR¹ (*Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*) reported the incidence of what was later called acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) in the United States.

1981. These were the Regan Years. We didn't say words like 'homosexual' publicly - rarely in political circles – and never in polite company. Even if you, yourself, were 'homosexual'. Don't want to scare the horses. We would soon discover that our invisibility and our silence were complicit with an administration that chose to ignore what was originally known as GRID = Gay Related Infectious Disease.

I mean, if the disease was gay-related, why bother? And so, no one did. No one in the government, that is.

And so, GRID became AIDS.

And AIDS became AFRAIDS (A fear of AIDS).

And the stage was set for AIDS to become an epidemic.

And, children, this is how an epidemic became a worldwide pandemic.

The LGBT community learned some very important lessons.

Ignorance = Fear.

Silence = Death.

¹ *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* - which contains data on specific diseases as reported by state and territorial health departments and reports on infectious and chronic diseases, environmental hazards, natural or human-generated disasters, occupational diseases and injuries, and intentional and unintentional injuries.

And so, we, like the Mattachine Society, the DOB, and the Stonewall Drag Queens before us, learned to find our voices. This time, however, we weren't just talking to each other or at the NYPD.

We learned to "just say no" to government apathy and institutionalized homophobia.

We learned to ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and organized protest marches, die-ins in front of the White House and State Houses and Governor's Mansions all around the country. It was "street theater" at its best - and, most effective.

We learned how to work with scientists and to 'fast track' the research on certain potentially life-saving drugs. We actually changed the traditional scientific method in the research process to suspend the two-track placebo vs. actual drug study on potentially life-saving drugs in the midst of an epidemic. And, we vowed that we would no longer die silent, private, convenient, polite deaths - actual or societal or spiritual.

If the Stonewall Riots launched a political movement, AIDS helped us to find our voice - and our minds - our spirits - and, our souls.

We began to understand something about 'community' and 'collaboration' which some of us had learned from our work in the Civil Rights Movement.

We understood the value of "Each One Teach One."

We began to organize our communities, collaborating with other justice communities and organizations to bring about change. Life-giving, mind-altering change. We had experienced our second metanoia.

We made great strides in the next decade. Realizing that Audre Lorde was right, that our silence would not - could not protect us - more and more of us 'came out' publicly in the late '80s and early '90's. For many of us, that was at great personal cost. I know my dues are marked "paid". We came to believe, however, that personal sacrifice was worth it, leading not only to our personal benefit, but that of the entire community - gay and straight. It was a revolution in our community and in this country.

And then, there was Matthew. Matthew Shepard. A young gay man. A college student. An Episcopalian, for God's sake! Battered and beaten to death by two young men who had sunk to the psychotic, deep dark depths of homophobia. His senseless, brutal death was a serious wake-up call to the LGBT community, to this nation and to the world.

The death of Matthew Shepard galvanized and mobilized the Gay Rights Movement, which led us, a few months short of one year after Matthew's death, to witness the equivalent of the tearing down of the Berlin Wall for LGBT people.

Brick by bloody brick. Inch by bloody, lavender inch.

In 1999, California became the first state to adopt a statewide domestic partnership ordinance, which established a statewide domestic partnerships registry available to same-sex couples. The original policy granted hospital visitation rights and nothing else, but over time a number of benefits--added incrementally from 2001 to 2007--have strengthened the policy to the point where it offers most of the same state benefits available to married couples. Not exactly out of the Woods of Homophobia but on the path to Marriage Equality. And, make no mistake: we WILL overturn Proposition 8.

In the year 2000 Vermont became the first state in the country to legally recognize civil unions between gay or lesbian couples. The law states that these "couples would be entitled to the same benefits, privileges, and responsibilities as spouses." It stops short of referring to same-sex unions as marriage, which the state defines as heterosexual.

V. Gene Robinson, once called 'the most dangerous man in the Anglican Communion', was elected Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire on June 7, 2003.

In November of 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that barring gays and lesbians from marrying violates the state constitution. The Massachusetts Chief Justice concluded that to "deny the protections, benefits, and obligations conferred by civil marriage" to gay couples was unconstitutional because it denied "the dignity and equality of all individuals" and made them "second-class citizens." Strong opposition followed the ruling.

On June 26, 2003, the Supreme Court ruled on two cases, seventeen years apart² that all sodomy laws are unconstitutional. Listen to that: All sodomy laws everywhere were struck down. That was five years after Matthew Shepard's brutal murder.

At that time, Supreme Court Justice Kennedy wrote in the Majority Opinion: *"Times can blind us to certain truths and later generations can see that laws once thought necessary and proper in fact serve to oppress. As the constitution endures, persons in every generation can invoke its principles in their own search for greater freedom."* I would note that the same is true about church laws, as well.

² *Bowers v. Hardwick - 1986, and Lawrence v. Texas - 2003*

I am convinced that these events - Stonewall, AIDS and Matthew - are not unconnected. I have come to know them as three major events of psychological and spiritual metanoia in our community. In theological terms, this Greek word is often translated "repent" - to 'turn around,' - to change a thought or action to correct a wrong and gain forgiveness from a person who is wronged.

Carl Jung, the preeminent psychologist, used the term 'metanoia' in a different way. In Jungian psychology, metanoia denotes a process of reforming the psyche as a form of self healing, a proposed explanation for the phenomenon of psychotic breakdown.

I think we – the LGBT community, The Episcopal Church and our culture – are in this moment of 'metanoia.' We are reforming our individual, communal and corporate psyches as a form of self-healing. We are refusing to participate in our own – or anyone else's – oppression. We are taking back the language which has been used to shame and scapegoat and blame us for society's ills.

We are emerging from the cultural and religious psychosis of homophobia and becoming more and more authentic as individuals and a community. If the church is in turmoil about this, I want to claim it and name it as a process of institutional "coming out": The initially disorienting truth-telling, family-disturbing, identity-claiming process that leads one into the woods of terror and shame and out into open meadow of the full acceptance of who we are – and WHOSE we are – just as we are, without one plea.

There is a reason, when we get to the other side of the process, that we call that "Gay Pride" and celebrate it. We turn heart-breaking pain and debilitating shame into a moment of joy and celebration. That's soooooOOOOoooo gay!

We, as a community and a church, are living into that great prayer we pray at the Great Vigil of Easter, as well as at services of ordination: ". . . *things that had been cast down are being raised up, the old is being made new, and all things are being brought to their perfection through Christ Jesus.*"

Being saved and transformed by the grace of God is so Christian – and, so Gay. It's so gay to be like Morty Manford, one of the Stonewall Drag Queens, and stand up for yourself and claim the right to bear arms. . . or legs . . . and wear makeup, wig and stilettos – because, as St. Peter taught, God isn't concerned with external things. Rather, God knows the human heart and loves us just the way we are.

It's so gay to be like Dale Jennings who took on the homophobia of the court system and secured for us the first victory over oppressive, unjust laws.

It's so gay to be like Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, who broke through the double barriers of homophobia and sexism – in the gay community as well as in our

culture – to establish safe harbors of community and education and hope against a violent, misogynist culture.

It's so gay to be like Louie Crew, Gene Robinson, Michael Hopkins, Tracy Lind, Susan Russell, Mary Glasspool, and a whole host of other LGBT Leaders and straight allies like Ed Bacon, Sam Chandler – and bishops like Jon Bruno, Jack Spong, Walter Righter, Tom Ely, Mark Beckwith, and Steve Lane – who are willing to put the truth of their lives – their careers – on the line for their sisters and brothers of God's Amazing Rainbow Tribe.

Yes, let's take back the words that are meant to hurt and silence and shame us and turn them into vehicles of healing and love and pride. Let's take back the dark night of the soul we've been through in the AIDS Crisis and the brutality of Hate Crimes and walk boldly forward into the Light of Day – on the Peachtree Streets and Ways and Lanes and the Main Streets and Avenues and Broadways all over this country.

Let us resolve to be part of the 'church militant here on earth' and leave it a better place than when we found it. Because . . .well. . . that's just so Gay!

Amen.