

Words of Welcome

This is one of those Sundays that Preachers dread. Well, I shouldn't speak for all preachers. I dread Sundays like this - the Sunday after a national tragedy like the shooting in Orlando. Especially when just last Sunday the service commemorated the one-year anniversary of the taking of nine lives at Mother Emanuel AME church in Charleston. I worry about church being too depressing and how to bring a relevant message that is also age appropriate for everyone in the room. And on top of it all, today is Father's Day. It is tempting to relegate the references to Orlando to our prayer time and focus the rest of the worship on something else. But my faith and my theology call me to bear witness to the pain and suffering of other children of God, and to listen for how the Holy Spirit may be calling our community to respond. Whatever temptation I may have had to minimize references to Orlando in worship today were squelched when I read the following Facebook post from a self-identified queer pastor friend of mine the Rev. Heidi Carrington-Heath. Heidi uses the word Latinx which may not be familiar to most of you as it is a term that is just recently gaining attention in light of the shooting. Instead of using Latino and Latina which designate gender in a male & female binary, the term Latinx still honors the cultural identity of Latin-American people but does so in a gender-neutral way. This respects people who do not identify as either male or female. Here is Heidi's statement:

Here's why it matters that we read the names of the beloved dead from Orlando aloud in worship tomorrow: Because some of their families are not claiming their bodies upon finding out their children were LGBTQ+.

Here's why it matters that we pronounce their names correctly: Because this disproportionately affected the LatinX community, and it is both violence and erasure not to represent them correctly.

Here's why it matters that my heterosexual colleagues speak about this in church tomorrow: our churches are full of LGBTQ+ youth who need to know there is an adult outside of our community willing to have their back.

Here's why it matters that we continue to do intersectional justice work: because members of the LatinX community who were present at Pulse and undocumented were interviewed by law enforcement and then turned over to immigration.

Here's why it matters that we continue to shine God's light and love into the world: because LGBQ youth are 4 times more likely, and questioning youth are 3 times more likely, to attempt suicide as their straight peers. Nearly half of young transgender people have seriously thought about taking their lives, and one quarter report having made a suicide attempt.

Here's why I keep talking about this: Because I believe that love has the power to change the world, and start a revolution. And that revolution starts with our commitment to use our public voices in positive ways.

-- Rev. Heidi Carrington-Heath

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Sermon

The story of Jesus healing the demon-possessed man is the Gospel selection for the lectionary this week. I didn't seek it out. It is the assigned Gospel text for the sixth Sunday after Pentecost this year. As I prepared for worship this week and considered the scripture, I almost considered selecting a different text. Maybe something from Lamentations or Job. Or the text from Jeremiah about Rachel weeping for her children. But I was reminded by a queer pastor friend named Eliza Buchakjian–Tweedy that this scripture from Luke has been used as a weapon against the LGBTQ community¹. Still today people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer are told that their sexual orientation and/or gender identity is a mental illness. Some preachers will get up in their pulpit this morning, with this text and proclaim that the victims at the Pulse nightclub were possessed by demons like the Gerasene man and that they can be “healed” of their possession through prayer. A dear seminary friend of mine grew up in such a church. Her well-meaning parents sought out the help of their pastor when they discovered that my female friend was attracted to women. As a young teenager, she went through not one but two violent exorcisms in the church's attempt to “heal” her. Needless to say, she is still attracted to women. Amazingly, she has reconciled with her parents who have come to understand that her sexual orientation is a gift from God, not an illness or a result of demon possession. She even found her way back to church in

¹ <https://sermonizing.wordpress.com/2016/06/15/an-open-letter-to-preachers/>

faith communities that affirmed her and loved her as she is without feeling the need to fix any part of her.

I am not going to spend a lot of time examining the scripture with you this morning. But there are a few things that need to be said in this space. First, many scholars believe that this story is likely about someone suffering from some sort of mental illness. What ancient peoples believed to be demon possession may have actually been a wide variety of mental health issues that were misunderstood. This does not mean that mental illness is some sort of curse from God, but simply that the people of the time didn't understand the complexities of mental health and using the framework of their time, assumed that the symptoms they witness were caused by some evil force. Secondly, I want to say unequivocally that being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and otherwise non-heterosexual or holding non-binary gender identity is in no way a mental illness.

I know I am preaching to the choir here, but this message does not get spoken enough from the pulpit and it is important for us in this time and place to be explicit and vocal about this. I fully believe that our God is creative in ways beyond our imagination and in God's ultimate wisdom, created human beings in diverse and beautiful ways. That diversity shows up in the hue of our skin, the height of our bodies, the gifts and talents that we are given, the ways in which we are attracted to other human beings, the ways our gender identities are expressed and lived out. All of these and more are not only examples of the beautiful creativity of God, but they give us just a glimpse of the nature of God. The very first chapter of the Bible tells us that God made humankind in

the likeness of God. Every human being every single one is an expression of that divine source.

Naming these things in worship, from the pulpit is important. For many people who are bisexual, lesbian, transgender, gay, queer, and questioning, church is a place where they are rejected and attacked. The church sanctuary, a place that should provide safety and protection, becomes a place of trauma and abuse. When sanctuaries are not safe, places like Pulse, nightclubs and bars where you are welcomed and affirmed just as you are, become a sanctuary. I want to share with you an excerpt from the June 14th UCC Daily Devotional written by the Rev. Quinn Caldwell²:

For me it was The Common Ground in Ithaca, NY, a magnificently seedy roadhouse several miles outside of town. It had a gravel and grass parking lot, a perpetual haze of cigarette smoke, and an all-age cast of regulars you could easily have built a sitcom around. My husband will tell you about The Park in Roanoke, VA, which he and his college friends would drive 45 minutes to get to every weekend, and which they talk about today like it's a homeland from which they're in unwilling diaspora.

Ask any queer person you know, and chances are they'll have a story to tell you about a place like this. They will tell you about how they found a family there, how they found themselves there, how they felt safe for the first time on the dance floor there, how much they learned there, how they found love there, how they learned to be bold there, how they dressed like themselves for the very first time there, showing off their glitter, or butch haircut, or size 13 high heels without fear. That note you hear in their voice as they tell you about it? That's gratitude, and reverence.

50 dead and more than 50 wounded hits hard anytime and anywhere. But for many queer people, what happened at Pulse hits as hard as shootings in churches hit for Christians, as hard as shootings in black churches hit for black Christians. It's not just the death toll. It's not just that it was a hate crime. It's that it happened in a sanctuary.

² http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_sanctuary

When this church became Open and Affirming or ONA, we made a public declaration more than 15 years ago that stated “We celebrate the diversity of human nature and human relationships. We recognize sexuality and sexual orientation as gifts of God.” The statement also reads “We acknowledge that in history the Christian Church has often condemned or excluded gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender individuals. We commit ourselves to oppose discrimination and prejudice in our attitudes, our personal relationships and our congregation. We will seek justice and advocate redress of the wrongs committed against sexual minorities in our local community and in society at large.”

Our ONA declaration is beautiful and powerful. And yet there are still many, many people in the Brainerd Lakes area that still have no idea that there is a church that affirms them. There are families and friends of LGBTQ people who have given up on church because while they themselves may be heterosexual and cisgender, they cannot be part of a church that does not lift up all people as equal in the eyes of God. Friends, we are an oasis in the desert. But many people fear that we may be a mirage. For some people, it just sounds too good to be true. People in the LGBTQ community have walked into churches that declare “All are welcome” only to be told abusive statements like “we love the sinner but hate the sin.” I think many of us assume that because we are the only ONA church in the area that people will seek us out. And yet for the last two years, I have met people at the Brainerd Pride Picnic who had no idea a church like this existed here.

Just yesterday, I officiated the second same-gender wedding in two months. Both couples asked me to marry them because we were the only place in the area that would allow them to be married in the church. In fact, one of the couples worried until they saw my face that I would not show up.

Church, we have a duty and a call to shout it from the mountain top that our welcome is genuine and comes with no strings attached. So wear your rainbow comma pin and don't be afraid to tell people what it means. If you don't have one, Bobbie just ordered more and you will be able to buy one soon. Carry my business card with you and don't be afraid to hand it out. While it would be wonderful if people responded to these things by coming to church, that is not the point. My hope is that the message of affirmation and love will wash over this area like a flood. That no one will ever have to feel alone. May it be so. Amen.