

Are All Bodies Welcome?

Good morning.

I've told my story several times to you all, most recently in the monthly newsletter so I am not going down that road again. Instead I hope to use snapshots of events in LGBTQ history and how they influenced me to set a backdrop for our first exploration of diversity and how I see myself fitting into the church and also touching on how we are gifts from God to others and to God. First the background story.

It was a hot, sultry night in New York City. The temperature was still in the low 70's. The Stonewall Inn was crowded when the police showed up. This was an event that happened on a regular basis in gay and lesbian bars across the nation. In New York, ostensibly checking on liquor law violations, the raids usually resulted in arrests due to laws against homosexuality in general and cross-dressing in particular. If you had on more than three articles of clothing usually worn by the opposite sex, you could be arrested. That night the cross-dressers, both men and women, were arrested and loaded into the paddy wagon. Nothing unusual, it was just another Saturday night.

If you were not alive during the 1960's you probably can't imagine what the world was like. It was a volatile time in our country's history. For several years, black people and anti-war protesters moved from non-violent protests into the realm of violence in reaction to violence perpetrated against them in past protests and to the death of MLK Jr. So when objects started flying toward the police officers, it was unexpected from this usually scared, submissive crowd, but was not unprecedented given the climate in the country. The raid began on June 27 and the rioting began after midnight into the early hours of June 28, 1969. The continued hot weather the evening of June 28 saw more rioting. This continued for several more nights. Thus was the extra catalyst needed for the intensification of LGBTQ rights movement. I was almost 12 years old and have no recollection of this. It was the summer of the moon landing which was much in the news and exciting for my pre-teen self.

18 years later in 1987, as a very out lesbian, I moved to New York City. I spent many Saturdays walking the streets of Greenwich Village just high on the vibes. It was like coming home. Seeing the Stonewall Inn made real the history I had read. New York City had been a hot bed of the gay and women's rights movements for a long time. I joined a gay and lesbian running club and

made friends that summer. I was caught up in work and running for those 6 ½ years in New York.

In the fall, on October 11, 1987, we marched in the large Gay rights March on Washington. Ronald Reagan was President and people were still angry after many years of fighting for full rights in the U.S and for a newer issue, the lack of significant research on AIDS. Though there was anger, there was also elation at the numbers of people and the audacity that so many of us were visible with over 200,000 people. It was a non-violent show of force, which ACT UP (a relatively new AIDS action group) used to demand that the Reagan administration fight the spread of HIV/AIDS. It was and is still hard to know that so many people have died from diseases related to AIDS.

The LGBTQ community still meets in bars to dance and have a good time. Bars have been a sanctuary for the LGBTQ community even when they were run by the Mob and raided on a regular basis. The Pulse nightclub was one of the highest rated clubs in Orlando and drew a wide range of people, both racially and sexually. On June 12, 2016 in the LGBTQ celebratory month, there was a Latin-themed event and more than 300 people were in the club when at 2 am Omar Mateen opened fire with semi-automatic rifle and a handgun. He killed 49 people and injured 53 before being killed. The people of Orlando responded with help and kindness in the aftermath of this atrocity.

This year the city of Orlando had a day of remembrance on the 12th called Orlando United Day – A Day of Love and Kindness. because as one writer says “We...rose united as a city, spreading love, kindness, and acceptance.” This day was full of events of all kinds in order to include as many parts of the community as possible. The outpouring of love and support last year and the incredible day of events this year is such a 180 from those nights in New York City 48 years ago, however, we still face hatred and discrimination at all levels. I'd like to remember one young man whose father would not accept his body for burial because he was gay. (minute of silence)

So you are wondering, how does this relate to the topic at hand?

In our readings today we heard about the one body with many parts and how each person as a part of the body has their own gifts. This is part of what defines a community. To deny entry of

any one group to the church community deprives the church of the gifts that live in those people and the gifts that are those people. God loves us all and wants us to embrace all people in love as well. In fact we must love all in order to love God.

¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. John 4

I have been reading Henri Nouwen so have some thoughts of his on community that I'd like to share today. He reminds us that community is full of diversity.

“Community has little to do with mutual compatibility. Similarities in educational background, psychological make-up, or social status can bring us together, but they can never be the basis for community. Community is grounded in God, who calls us together, and not in the attractiveness of people to each other...The mystery of community is precisely that it embraces all people, whatever their individual differences may be, and allows them to live together as brothers and sisters of Christ and sons and daughters of his heavenly Father.” [Making All Things New](#)

Elsewhere he says

‘My own growing awareness is that spiritual needs and desires are present and common to all, that we share a universal quest for deeper meaning and purpose, and that we are all beloved children of God.’ Page 167

I had no Christian context for my life until 10 years ago when I started coming to Faith. As a person of faith, it is still hard at times for me to remember that God is there, especially when I read about, or encounter first-hand, the horrible actions people commit against others, themselves, the environment, and animals. Whether it is organized oppression or a random act of violence, I wonder where God is and why she is letting this happen. I pray for an intervention; I pray that it will never happen again. Perhaps this is true for you, too.

If we look deeper into each specific event, we can observe God at work in the actions of other people who step in when help is needed. These are not extraordinary people but people placed in extraordinary situations. Whether they believe in God or not is not the question to ask. The

question is do we believe that God is working through these people? I believe so. The next question I ask is am I one of those people and if not, can I be? I believe this level of selflessness can be achieved by any of us.

But what about our lives at a daily level; can we be the servants of God in this human-made, imperfect world? Just as Paul writes in the Ephesians reading today “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work”, we, in all our diversity, have unique gifts given to us by God. The many gifts and talents when pooled are greater than the sum of the individual parts. Even when we give of ourselves on an individual basis, if we do so with honesty and openness, we spread the love that Jesus talked about and become part of the one body. I see LGBTQ people as part of the whole body of Christ with each person bringing their own gifts.

Two weeks ago soon after Ry asked us to do this Sunday’s service, Barb and I for several hours discussed the topic for this week. In that brew of thoughts, Barb pondered **what if Christians shared our faith stories with every new Christian we met in a similar way to the LGBTQ community sharing coming out stories? We would thus be sharing the commonality of our experiences with God and be reminded more often of how God is working among us and in the world.** What a wonderful way to build community. Telling our stories is a way to connect with others and to strengthen the presence of the living Jesus amongst us. This is one of the ways to actively create community.

In my reading of Henri Nouwen, I’ve learned that he was passionate about how we all have gifts to share. Nouwen was a priest and a psychologist who wrote for both lay people and clergy. I am currently reading a book called Discernment put together after his death, part of a trilogy of his writings. In it he talks about how to discern our gifts.

“Our first and most important spiritual task is to claim God’s unconditional love for ourselves. Whether we feel it or not, whether we comprehend it or not, we can have spiritual knowledge in the heart—deep assurance that passes understanding—that we are God’s beloved.

This is not an easy identity to claim because to deserve being loved our society requires us to be successful, popular, or powerful. But God does not require our success,

popularity or power in order to love us. Once we discern our identity and accept God's unconditional love, we are free to live in the world without being owned by the world. We can forgive those who hurt or disappoint us without letting bitterness, jealousy, or resentment enter our hearts. The most beautiful fruit of claiming your belovedness is a joy that allows us to share God's unconditional love with others. Strange as it may sound, we can become like God for others.

When Peter simply states "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms," I think to myself, "easier said than done". Some of us know what we want to do and go out and do it. For example Donna Minter has built an organization from scratch, the Minnesota Peacebuilding Leadership Institute, because of her belief in restorative justice and the Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience, the STAR training as ways to help individuals and communities. What about those of us who do not have a known passion or gift? This is where prayer and discernment are helpful.

"Our true challenge is to return to the center, to the heart, and to find there the gentle voice that speaks to us and affirms us in a way no human voice ever could. To experience God's unlimited and unlimiting acceptance of us as beloved children, an acceptance so full, so total, and all-embracing, that it sets us free from our compulsion to be seen, praised, and admired and frees us for Christ, who leads on the road of service.
— The Selfless Way of Christ

This year at MC USA convention, we will be discussing how the church can survive going forward at the Future Church Summit. This survival is dependent on introducing changes to how the denomination creates a sense of community. Glen Guyton in writing about the current church situation expressed hope for the future.

"It is safe to say that after 13 years we have moved beyond any illusion that bringing together the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church would cure all of our ills, but I still believe there is great value when the people of God come together. Article 24 of our Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective says, "We believe that the church is called to live now according to the model of the future reign of God. Thus, we are given a foretaste of the kingdom that God will one day establish in full. The church is to be a spiritual, social and economic reality, demonstrating now the justice, righteousness, love and peace of the age to

come.” As we try to live out our theme of “Love is a Verb,” I am beyond any illusion that our church is perfect. I am beyond any illusion that we have all the answers or that we are fully living out who our confessions claim we are. Yet I have hope that as we struggle together, we can do many great things.”

Ry and I will be part of the process at the Future Church Summit and I have hope that MC USA will decide to embrace all of God’s community.

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Ephesians 11-16

11So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, **12**to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up **13**until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. **15**Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. **16**From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

1 Peter 10-11

10Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. **11**If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.