

LESSONS FROM THE MOVEMENT
Sermon by Rev. Jude Geiger
Sunday, June 23, 2019
All Souls Church, New York City

Happy Pride Weekend all! It feels like an odd thing to say, but we say it every year.

Commemorating the 1969 weekend of riots started outside the Stonewall bar on June 27th-29th of that year, we return once more to a defiant consciousness through willful celebration in the face of oppression. We remember the drag kings and drag queens who faced brutal beatings, and much worse, by NY's finest. We remember a time when Sodomy laws were still on the books everywhere. A weekend when the heels literally came off, the windows of bars and stores shattered, and a chorus line of queerness staved the cops out. Drag Kings and Queens – the very image of the then reviled counter-cultural queerness struggling against the poster-boy for masculine authority. ...Happy Pride...

I remember a time in my early twenties, when I was serving on the board for a major suburban gay and lesbian advocacy group in NJ. The Gay Activist Alliance in Morris County or GAAMC, then at 1500 hundred members and the largest suburban group of its kind at the time, was housed in the Morristown Unitarian Fellowship. Dwarfing its host five times over in membership, it was less than a decade away from being a relic of an age of gay culture that was evaporating before the face of the tension between even more local efforts and a vastly more national organizational effort. With electronic social media drawing us out of isolation all the while stripping us from a sense of close community.

In the mid-90s we said Gay and Lesbian; occasionally we said Lesbian and Gay. So many usually forgot Bisexual. And the mainstream often didn't know what we were saying when we said Transgender... when it was said it at all. I personally recall, many a gay man lamenting all the Trans*, all the Drag Kings and Queens, who easily gained the spotlights at annual parades. "Why can't they just let people see us for how normal we are?" was sadly an all too often refrain among the shame-filled gay men desperately trying to fit in. They didn't know, or they simply forgot, their history. The moment of Pride that set us free, was the sharp rebuttal, loudly given at Stonewall by the people who have still yet to be allowed to universally fit in. The people that had nothing left to lose, taking action; and their efforts, their resistance, their struggle, mostly benefited those of us Queer folk who managed to walk the line of mainstream "normal." The gays who were straight in appearance, or slightly effeminate or moderately butch. It'll be ok for us. Ok enough to forget who got us those rights.

That's what Pride is really about. It's a celebration of remembering. For some of us, it's about coming to terms with our feelings of self-hate and shame. The mid-90s remind me of another challenge we faced as a nation and as a people. In 1993, we witnessed firsthand the political might of the "Religious Right" in all its forms and names. After losing the Supreme Court battle over women's reproductive justice, they galvanized over the issue of gays in the military. I would say, "allowing gays in the military" as most people say, but that would imply we never allowed gays in the military. In reality, the broader gay community has always been present in the military; and yet the military had always thrived. What had not happened by that time was the vocal admission of this fact. The policy that would become "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" helped our country admit the fact that gay and lesbian citizens serve their nation in this respect, even though the epitome of the masculine institution couldn't validate their identity. In other words,

despite the fact that we serve, and we serve well, we continued to pretend open homosexuality was a threat. The logic breaks down. But this great moral failure to integrate openly and affirmingly was never about logic.

When the issue first came up as a major campaign promise, many of us in the LGBT community were happy for the attention, but wondered “why this first?” AIDS was raging unfettered, proper sexuality education was invisible in most schools, marriage challenges were popping up in various states across the country, our youngest teens were facing violence and death – too often openly (which tragically continues to this day) and our Transgender community had no protections whatsoever in the work force – and still largely doesn’t. GENDA would not pass in NY State until last year.

Why aim to be openly admitted to the military when so many from our older generation were vocal advocates in the peace movement of the 60s? Many of us on the ground didn’t understand the political trades and agreements being vetted, behind the scenes; agreements that required the unknown democratic candidate from Arkansas to get his hands committed to anything regarding LGBT rights before the gay fundraising machine would start turning for him. But Clinton’s promise of “It’s done” got that machine moving, and unexpectedly woke the Religious Right up in a huge way.

On the ground we didn’t all understand how massive the cultural changes and wars would be; the Christian evangelical movement really only gaining dominance in our country with folks like Falwell – came about in the 1970s. That’s right – Christian Fundamentalism – as a political force - was comparatively non-existent at the turn of the 20th century. But by the 2000’s most Americans would mistakenly believe Fundamentalism of the Right was the bread and butter of what religion meant in the U.S. since its inception. If we looked closely, we’d remember than many of our founding fathers and several of our early presidents were in fact Unitarians. The women in the late 1800’s (like Clara Barton and Dorethea Dix) that transformed the hospital and mental health systems in our country for the better, were Unitarian. The Social Gospel movement of the early 1900’s, the hallmark of Christian liberalism applied to societal change, now gets derided by Conservatives as Communism (at best) and a work of the Devil by some talking heads. The cultural changes were so dramatic that 200 years of Christian Liberalism would seem to evaporate overnight.

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” would come to draw the line in our cultural sandbox. “We know you’re out there, but not in my backyard.” This implicit message was what got many of the anti-establishment, feminist, peace advocates eager to get acknowledged by the greatest, most visible sign of the establishment. When “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” finally came to pass, rather than a program which demanded integration, we were shocked. The arguments that won out were lies that connected AIDS to Gays in such a way that suggested they were the same word; ignoring the fact that military screening for AIDS was widely touted as a complete success. The “selflessness” of military dedication was raised up and contrasted with a trumped up image of gays as the incarnation of narcissism. The line of reasoning that won out stated, that military cohesion would be threatened because gay men and women can’t think of anything beyond themselves. “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” signified that the country believed that the Queer community was a disease that thought only for itself.

Can you imagine that? Can you imagine being told that by your people and your government? Do you already hear that in some way? Many of us do who aren’t LGBT. Poor Americans are told that every day. They’re lied to when we say they’re that way because they don’t work hard enough and they’re too lazy to care about making society better. Black folks are lied in a

thousand ways, telling them their lives don't matter. Our country believes immigrants are such a threat that we need to build walls along our borders (well, those borders that connect us to a country where the folks are not white, the other border apparently isn't as dangerous.) We even rename immigrants as illegal and as alien. Imagine having your identity be known as Illegal. I do not mean to truncate all these issues, or suggest they're all the same. But I sure do hear the same rhetoric levied against us all, and am only left to wonder what more do we all have in common? Our faith asks us to wonder that, and to live into those answers.

Our uniqueness, our rich diversity of experience and expression are killed by these words. Our souls are left for dead, and stowed away out of sight in our closets and our prisons. In the Christian scripture, I remember a story that may be of use here in understanding what we're doing to ourselves as a people. The Book of John gives us the story of Lazarus, the brother to one of the Mary's in scripture (not the same as Jesus' mother.) She would initially despair that Jesus was not there in time to save her brother. Jesus goes to the tomb, asks the gathering to roll away the stone. The gathered are incredulous because they presume there will be a stench, but they do so anyway. And now I'll quote the closing lines of this story, because the exact words are important. "Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'"

... "Unbind him and let him go." The story amazes me. I was raised always to hear it talked about as evidence of Jesus raising someone from the dead. But what's the message? It talks about a man, Lazarus, who's lying locked away in a cave with a rock blocking his escape. It talks about a man closeted away, with society having given up on him; all except his sister. Jesus had to come forth and tell Martha to take away the stone that made this cave this man's prison. Jesus doesn't say that he heals this man. Every other parable relates how he heals those who are ill. This one simply has Jesus say, "Lazarus, come out!" "Unbind him, and let him go."

What queer words to use. His death isn't of some ailment that needs to be cured. What's killed Lazarus is the same thing that begs to keep him locked and closeted away in a cave of their own design. The disease is his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth... The disease is his face wrapped with cloth. The illness is with the people who can't face to see Lazarus as he is. For me, Lazarus is the embodiment of every Queer person trapped alone in the darkness with few left to weep for them. Lazarus is anyone imprisoned by a society that prefers not to face who they are or what they embody. And weeping, Jesus stands on Lazarus' side. "Come out! Unbind him and let him go." ...

In unwrapping the ties that bind, in dissolving those societal constraints that make us dead, we come out of the closet; we come out of the cave. Once dead to the world, we are alive with the faith that knows our purpose here is not to shudder in some corner lamenting what the worldly powers think or fear of us. Our purpose on this earth is to live the life we are given and to do so unbound; to do so with the strips and ties shredding to pieces in our wake. The cry of Jesus is a voice that demands we live in community with one another, not regardless of our differences – but because of them. The Christian Right's desire to equate Queerness with disease is tragically misguided. This story tells me that the *illness* lies in *our desire* to foment separation; it's in the proclivity to create caves, to create closets, to seek to imprison the body or the soul.

So I say LGBT Pride is your holiday too. The struggle for LGBT equality involves lifting up people of color, and immigrants, and women – for LGBT communities are all these people. Lift up people being themselves; being who they are. Celebrate in our connections, and our wholeness, and our honesty. Help dismantle the caves and the closets, and the prisons, and the

walls that divide nations. Know that each of our struggles are connected, and we are stronger when we share in our trials and our successes.

For further research, I recommend these two resources that influenced this sermon.

1) "Unfriendly Fire: How the Gay Ban Undermines the Military and Weakens America" by Nathaniel Frank and

2) "Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation" by Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman."