

2006-6 11 Gay Pride Sermon

Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
to celebrate that we are,
that we have gifts to share,
and that we hold such promise,
and to know that though we may be wounded,
we are powerful and worthy,
blest to be different, blest to be together. So

**Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses into us, blest by the beauty of the world,
and drawn by a vision of a community known for its honesty, generosity, depth,
love, and justice-work, we focus our time together by the kindling of light.**

Sequence

What is it like to be a 22 year old woman, with African and Cherokee roots, hair braided, body athletic, to be the first from her family to graduate from medical school? What is it like to be a 19 year old man, with almost forgotten Appalachian roots, wiry body, tattooed, who broods over a Budweiser after a fight with his girlfriend? What is it like to be a 92 year old woman, with Portuguese ancestry, hair combed and perfumed, as she holds her great, great grandson for the first time? What's it like to be a 30 year old man with Chinese and Korean ancestry, body thick-muscled and pierced, who just lost his boyfriend of five years to a rare cancer that strikes only one in ten million? What's it like to be 52 year old woman with Polish ancestry, jovial in spirit, energetic, who loves nothing better than to talk of her kids and grandchildren while playing bridge at the synagogue? What's it like to be a 75 year old man of Lakota ancestry, face crinkled and golden, still playing jazz piano after all those years at that bar in Jackson, Mississippi? What's it like to be a 40 year old women, sleek and bright eyed, telling her lover of five years, Fatima Chitral, that the artificial insemination worked, and that they are pregnant? What's it like to be you? What's it like to be me? I say any answer not held in the heart of silence for a time is too soon, too soon.

silence

What's it like to be you? What's it like to be me? Who do we remember, mourn, celebrate and struggle with? Held in the safe arms of this silence, held in the heart of the world, we remember them here, aloud or hold them in the sturdy crook of our inner silence.

naming

What is it like to know peace deep within? What is it like to be strong to love? What is it like to be held in the heart of the world? What is it like to sing?

The First Reading comes from a very recent article in the journal *Seed*, which has the subtitle "Science is Culture." The article, by Johan Lehrer, is called *The Effeminate Sheep*, and it deals

with the 450 species of vertebrate and invertebrate animals in which ample same-sex behavior has been catalogued and studied. I urge you to read the whole article if you can find it at a good magazine store.

The biologist Joan Roughgarden insists that given the pervasive presence of homosexuality throughout the animal kingdom, same sex partnering must be an adaptive trait that's been carefully preserved by natural selection. So how might homosexuality be good for us as a human species?

Well any concept of sexual selection that emphasizes the selfish propagation of genes and sperm won't be able to account for the abundance of non-heterosexual sex. Members of 450 species including homo-sapiens have been well documented engaging in frequent same-sex affection. But if traditional (that is heterosexual) readings of evolutionary science are true, all those gay penguins and persons will remain inexplicable. However, if one looks at homo-sexuality from the perspective of community, one can begin to see why nature might foster a variety of sexual interactions.

According to Roughgarden, gayness is a necessary side-effect to getting along. Homosexuality evolved in tandem with vertebrate societies, in which a motley group of individuals has to either live together or die alone. Indeed, Roughgarden even argues that homosexuality is a defining feature of all advanced animal communities, which require communal bonds in order to function.

The Second Reading is from the new book by Jane Hirshfield, a poet even my favorite poet Wislawa Szymborska admires. The book is called *After*, and the poem's title is its first line: *It Was Like This: You Were Happy*

It was like this:

you were happy, then you were sad,
then happy again, then not.

It went on.

You were innocent or you were guilty.

Actions were taken, or not. At times you spoke,

at other times you were silent. Mostly, it seems you were silent -- what could you say?

Now it is almost over. Like a lover, your life bends down and kisses your life.

It does this not in forgiveness --between you, there is nothing to forgive --but with the simple nod of a baker at the moment he sees the bread is finished with transformation. Eating, too, is now a thing only for others. It doesn't matter what they will make of you or your days: they will be wrong, they will miss the wrong woman, miss the wrong man, all the stories they tell will be tales of their own invention. Your story was this: you were happy, then you were sad, you slept, you awakened. Sometimes you ate roasted chestnuts, sometimes persimmons.

Sermon:

Well, it's my turn, after eight years, to offer a sermon in June close to what's called gay pride Sunday. The lay services all these years have been terrific. But now I want to say something.

And first off, I want you to know that I know. I know something about what it might mean for you to know one of your ministers is a gay man. A member of a minority of people in this nation against whom legislatures like to pass laws. I know something about what it means when you go out into the world, only to hear strutting preachers and politicians defame who I am. I'm sure it doesn't feel any better to you than it does to me.

So yes, I know. How do I know? Many ways. Take for example a 14 year old teen in the congregation I used to serve. She didn't tell me this story herself, but her proud mother sure did. Seems this girl was at her middle school in Castro Valley, a town near the church, when a number of fellow students started to make loud, obnoxious cracks about gay and lesbian people. Apparently she walked right up to them and said "You are not telling the truth. My minister is a gay man, and I like him, and he has always been kind to me. I trust him, and he's not at all like you say." They apparently dismissed her with typical taunts, as folks who swagger tend to do, implying she was a lesbian by association, but she stood her ground. And though they taunted her, she was not taunted. Understand? And so they turned off their little cock-of-the-walk display, and went on to other things. The mother was proud of her daughter. We both wept a bit. And I was so proud and thankful.

So, yes, I do know something of what it means for me to be in this pulpit. So thanks for sticking with me as you hear mean-spirited voices out in the world offering their theories about who I am, and who you are, for electing me to do this, no matter how you or I define ourselves sexually.

But as I have said before, me telling you I'm gay gives you very little information about who I am or what I do. Almost none at all, actually. Remember, the word "gay" is a political word only. It does not tell you anything about my sexual life, my ways of affection, my style of living at all. You may think it does, but believe me, everyone in this room, including me, have had ideas put in our heads by the vast army of remarkably ignorant people who claim to run this globe of ours. Ideas that even with study, experience and reading don't entirely leave us. I assure you, these ignorant people are wrong. This is how Jane Hirshberg puts it:

It doesn't matter what they will make of you or your days: they will be wrong, they will miss the wrong woman, miss the wrong man, all the stories they tell will be tales of their own invention.

Can't be clearer than that. "They will be wrong." All of my experience from childhood on confirms that. Nothing said by any negative cleric, politico or pundit has ever had the slightest thing to do with my experience. They are inventing everything. For the words gay, lesbian, bisexual in particular are political words, not experience words. Politics is a provisional joining together of folks to interpret experience generally, but it is not in any way individual experience, which remains sacred and inviolate and entirely particular. For all that the political words gay, lesbian and bisexual *can* mean is that the genders to whom people are attracted may not always be the genders to which the majority of human beings are attracted. What people do about that attraction however, is different, or particular, for everyone. Just as with men and women together. *Everyone's* sexual expressions are different. Oh, they may overlap a lot, sure, but also, they remain clearly distinct, like our faces are distinct. And me making the assumption that my personal experience of affection is a clean match for yours makes me a fool, and you a chump, and that's no way to live life as far as I know.

Or, in the wonderful metaphor of the poet, sometimes we eat persimmons, and sometimes, chestnuts. They are similar...sort of round, sweet, nourishing. But they ARE different.

And difference *means* relationship. If we were all the same, we would not *have* relationships, just shared instincts, like bees or ants. We would relate to the world in the same way, we would have no questions for each other, and I'm not even sure love would have any power or sway, since everyone would be the same.

No, difference *is necessary*. And wonderful.

But for some reason, the whole concept of difference really upsets some human beings. People seem to feel that they have more control if they can lump everyone into some category, good or bad, self or others. So they come up with distinct categories which claim to circle human experiences. The category of "Homo-sexual" was invented by an Hungarian physician named Karoly Benkert in 1869, not a very long time ago. "Gay" dates from the 1920's we think. Lesbian goes back further, to the 1700's. There were categorical words like Urning, and Uranian and Tribadist, which once applied to sexual minorities, but which have dropped out of sight. "Sodomy" was used from the fifth century to mean both a particular kind of sexual action between any two people, and to refer to same-sex sexuality. But before the invention of these categorical words, would you have me believe that no variant sexuality existed? When Leonardo DaVinci, the great artist and scientist, for example, embraced his partner in life of thirty years, Francesco Melzi, he did not think of himself as a "gay man" or a "homosexual." Nor did Eleanor Roosevelt seem categorize herself as a Lesbian or Tribad when she wrote love letters to Lorena Hickok. All these words are relatively new to the vocabulary of difference. Oh, I am sure that Eleanor had heard demeaning words applied to women who loved women. And I am sure that Leonardo knew that some church people thought of him as a sodomite, but both of these folks knew themselves from the inside as tender, loving human beings. Nowhere in their vast collections of surviving expressions do either of them define themselves by how they are different, but rather, by *that* they loved.

And the word *sodomy*, itself, for example, has nothing at all to do with the biblical Sodom story, which had to do, as competent and unbigoted scholars have demonstrated, with the crime of inhospitality. Nor does the word *sodomy* have to do with the definition of same-sex sexual expression, since most gay people engage with each other in other ways. It's an almost useless word, actually, unless you want to authentically apply the word to Monsignor Applegate at St. Agnes Church in Roeland Park Kansas, who, according to an article in Friday's dispatch, fired his long time music director this week for continuing to sing in the local Gay Men's Chorus, and for refusing to be both celibate, and to admit he is "disordered." How inhospitable is it to fire someone for refusing to lie, for refusing to refuse to love? That's pretty darn inhospitable, it seems to me. Where is the fire & brimstone when you need it?

But still, there is this tension between difference and sameness that we all seem to wrestle with. Hirshfield, in her poem, stresses our similarities. How beautifully, how simply she states it!

*It was like this:
you were happy, then you were sad,
then happy again, then not. It went on.
You were innocent or you were guilty.
Actions were taken, or not. At times you spoke,
at other times you were silent.*

And, she adds, “its almost over.” These lives of ours are short. When I talked with Ed Slowter not long ago, he commented on how fast his life seemed to go by. This from a man born in 1912. Long life, that! But our lives *are* brief, compared to the wearing away of mountains, or the rise and fall of generations or species.

But however brief, our lives share a certain rhythm, the rhythm of life and heart and spirit which makes us all human. Whether people categorize themselves as gay or straight or bisexual, whether they categorize themselves as men or women or some other gender identity, no matter their height, weight, ability, ethnicity, or temperament, cannot we all say to some extent “we were happy, then we were not, then happy again, then not?” You, me, Leonardo, Eleanor, have we not known both?

So that’s the easy part. But what about the differences? It becomes more difficult then. That’s when you find out how lazy and merely political all these labels are, gay, straight, bisexual or even transgender. I know men who had two or three experiences with another man when they were young, and have had a happy marriage to a wife ever since. Are they gay, or bisexual or straight? I know a man who was married for 38 years, had five children with his wife, and who for the last twenty years considers himself a gay man. Is he? I know a woman who was married for a time to a man, then married for decades to a woman. What is she now? I know a woman who had a crush on her best female friend, but married a man who turned out to be gay. Who are these people? What category can we stuff them into?

It’s messy, folks, and it will stay messy. Experience is never easy or neat. In the same way, happiness will never be able to divorce itself from unhappiness. It’s all there together forever.

But the homosexual revolution of the last 30 some years, is *not* messy. It’s clear and clean. What does it proclaim? Everyone is a human being, no matter their differences. Amen. Everyone gets to come to the table, no matter who they are. Amen. Everyone has worth, dignity, and power, and the right to love whosoever they love, but with tenderness, not coercion. Amen. The rioters at the bar called Stonewall in Manhattan thirty-five years ago were saying just that. Stop harassing us. Leave us alone, law. Leave us alone, police! We are not hurting anyone. We are simply a minority. Like the Amish. Or nuns. Or left-handed folks. Or people with red-hair. Or Albanians. A minority, a small amount mixed in with a large amount. Yeast in the flour, if you will. Different, but clearly important to the whole.

Historically, the so-called gay-pride movement began at Stonewall on June 28th, 1969. I was a sophomore in college. I didn’t hear a thing about it. My folks knew I was interested in same-sex love because I told them in hysterical tears when I was 16. This was one of those days when both they and I would have quoted the poet: “We were happy, then we were not.” It was a very difficult time for them and for me. And the culture, the legislature, the church, the school, nor the psychological establishment helped me one bit in those days. Not one single bit. They all failed me utterly. I was, effectively, if not really, alone. And so for years, I was terrified when I met other gay or lesbian people, because who wants to be drawn into deeper aloneness? And I was sure that if I accepted myself, that’s what would happen. I would lose my family, my friends, my culture, and finally my life, beaten up in some Stonewall bar with a night-stick just for reaching out to others, just for breathing.

But though no one else helped me, I didn’t lose my friends. I told my friends in high school, and they didn’t think anything the less of me, even though they were just as ignorant culturally about

homosexuality as I was. But they loved me, and nothing could swerve that.

So, having heard this, do you who have known me a while wonder now why I address my prayers to Love so often on Sunday morning? I mean, Wendell Berry does that, May Sarton, & Rumi, and so many others, but do you ever wonder why *I* do it? Will you wonder anymore why I think the wisest sentence in the whole of Western Scripture is this: “God *is* Love?” Do you wonder why it is I cultivate so many friends, and adore them all, and visit them, and call them daily, and rejoice when they visit me? You’ve seen the statistics, (provided, somewhat amazingly, by our own fearful government.) Teens commit suicide in overwhelming number because they don’t want to grow up gay in a world that will do its best to punish them for that. So, yes, I had to get through my suicidal phase, like all the rest, except the few lucky ones who were supported by liberal islands in the larger culture.

But my friends...were they straight? Were they gay? Bisexual? You don’t know, do you? But they got me through. They got me to read. About Leonardo and Eleanor. About Sokrates and Sappho. I read about Stonewall. I read about others who were as alone as I was, and even more so, because they lived earlier than I.

It’s not pride marches that made me proud to be who I am. It was Love that did it. It was the welcoming of my differences. It was hospitality. It was blessing, not fear and inhospitality. It was the heart’s religion, not bigotry’s idolatrous cult.

For I assure you, those who read the Bible or other scriptures to condemn me read from the point of view of bigotry, not *literalism*. Maybe they were abused when they were kids. Horrible. By a same gender parent. Maybe they engaged in a few homosexual acts when they were young, but because they lived in an oppressive society or belonged to a cruel church, they learned to hate people like me as a way of pushing away their own memories.

All I know is that when some joker tells me that I “chose” to be gay, they are telling me something about themselves, and saying absolutely nothing about me.

But why do these differences between us exist anyway? It’s a fair question. The heterosexual Darwin didn’t know what to do with that question. So he simply left it as some sort of inexplicable human social anomaly, since he thought evolution clearly profits when there are offspring, but not so much otherwise. But we have documented things Darwin didn’t know. Like that same-sex relationships, and sexuality, and bonding, are rampant throughout the so-called animal kingdom. So we know now that same-sex relationships have evolutionary meaning. And, we can look at how we ourselves look at things. Darwin looked through the lens individuality. Today we can look through the lens of community. Doing that, the biologist Roughgarden affirms that “gayness is a necessary side-effect to getting along in community.” “Homosexuality” she writes, “evolved in tandem with vertebrate societies, in which a motley group of individuals has to either live together or die alone. Indeed, Rough-garden even argues that homosexuality is a defining feature of all advanced communities, which require communal bonds in order to function. Clergy, teachers, godparents, parents, uncles, aunts, community organizers, and so many other ways of being in the world invite the evolutionary necessity of loving same-gender experience.

And thus, on this Sunday celebrating pride, I am proud, not to be part of a culture, for there is no singular gay or lesbian culture, really. I am proud rather, to be an essential and joyful part of the

great community called the human species, which despite our brief individual lives, has shown such promise, such power and courage in the face of all the real defeats and disillusion, so many death camps and crosses, so many oppressions and lies. For love is more powerful than all of these realities, and blessing transcends aloneness. What's it like to be me? I asked in the prayer before the silence. You don't know everything, but you know a bit more now, and I hope that what you take away from this sermon is sometimes I, like you, am happy. And sometimes I am not. Again happy, again not. And that in the midst of it all, I am thankful and proud. I hope you are proud of yourselves too. Thanks for listening.

Offering: To celebrate our community, we give to each other in support of our pride, our gratitude and our joys. Different from each other yes, but if we were all the same, why would we give? The offering will be now given and received for the healthy life of this our community.

Tributes to Myra and Les