

2009June14OpenDoor.doc mlb

Opening Words

We are here

as the days of summer approach

to celebrate our power and struggles

in the light of our visions of liberty and joy,

and to strengthen our lives with praise.

And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.

Sequence

Cockscomb in the sun, momentarily redefining color.
Evening primroses mirroring the mid-month's moon.
Sheets of clouds turning blue skies to slate for a day.
Starlight already centuries old piercing the night.
Two-month year olds discovering their fingers.
Ten-year olds shooting baskets in empty school lots.
Seventeen-year olds painfully dating, or not dating.
Twenty-five year olds in therapy to disempower wound
& memory left them by elders without boundaries.
Thirty-eight year olds looking for a second job.
Forty-six year olds perplexed that they could have
so quickly misplaced half of their dreams.
Fifty-two year olds wondering if the deep love they felt
long ago for a same gender friend makes them gay.
Sixty year olds pretending to smile every time someone comes
up to them and says: "60 is the new 40."
Seventy-five year olds shuffling their memories like
decks of cards, wondering how to play them.
Ninety year olds tearing up at the sight of great-grand children
talking face to face to children in Paris on SKYPE. Everything,

flowers and stars and clouds and all the ages, touched now and then by the blessing of silence.
Blest be the silence.

silence

Women and men joyful and suffering, near and far,
strong and struggling, blossoming as they can whether by night or by day. Remembering their faces in our hearts,
we reach out to those whom we love and miss and suffer with and praise. This we do by naming them in our quiet hearts or whispering their names into the common air.
Blest be love.

naming

Choir members practicing on Thursdays, poets shaping their lives into language, composers translating the mysteries of their heart into the mysteries of great music.
Blest be the moment that is upon us now.

Readings

The First Reading comes from the pen of Rev. Carter Heyward, one of the greatest theologians of the Twentieth Century. She is a priest in the Episcopal Church, a lesbian woman, a feminist, womanist and a professor of theology at Harvard Divinity School. These lines are taken from what I consider her central book, Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God.

Theology is about making connections, erotic as well as conceptual. Relationships can empower us, and be creative, liberating, sensual and sacred. But our relational vision remains unfulfilled. The erotic continues to be distorted, wreaking abuse and confusion among us. But we are drawn nevertheless toward the possibility of living more fully together as friends and lovers. We believe this possibility is in our reach, and our faith is not mere speculation. We are not deluded. We move toward that which, through intimations and glimpses, intuitions and relationships, we already know to be real.

And so, steeped in the sacred relational spirit that has moved and

empowered friends and lovers from the beginning, we yearn to be true to ourselves in relation, touched by, and touching one another in each of our deepest places.

But tradition denies the sacred power of our embodied yearnings, which pulls us away from one another and hence, ourselves. We are trivialized, demeaned and alienated from our erotic desires.

Where then do we turn for help in healing our broken bonds and wounded lives? To whom do we look for images of sacred power, mutuality, and friendship?

Who are they, these friends to whom we are accountable in our theologies, ethics and daily lives?

I am accountable to those who are committed to justice for all. That does not mean I live this value very evenly or very well. Most of us do not. But the commitment is honest and strong. I see the value of right mutual relation borne out in the lives of those with whom I choose to stand, those whose lives bear concrete witness: for example, the efforts of anti-racist workers, the struggles of battered women who have had enough, lesbians and gay men who are coming out; an old man who cares for his dogs and is grateful for what they give him, a heterosexual friend's refusal to say she is not a lesbian when asked by her bishop. I hear mutuality in musicians celebrating the earth. I look to such women and men, of whatever color, origin, religion, class, sexual orientation, to confirm in me a joyful commitment to live responsibly in this world.

With these people I envision a world of healing and forgiveness, where pleasure, celebration and justice will be far more available than any of these relational blessings are among us today. My sisters and brothers, known and unknown, are the wellsprings of all of our sexualities: our yearnings to embody mutually empowering relations, our desire to live into YES.

The Second Reading *comes from what is called the Gospel of Matthew, written by an anonymous author sometime around the year 85 or so, probably in Syria.*

It contains the author's reflections on the Gospel of Mark,

as well as references to some of the teachings of the Galilean which were preserved in a different document, usually called The Source, or Q (from the German Quelle=Source)

If you call a member of your family, “Raqa!” you might as well present yourself to the Supreme Court, for your crime is great. And if you insult another as “damn fool” your words should serve as tinder for the fires down at the city garbage dump. So, if you happen to be attending worship, and you are ready to bring your gift at the altar, and there suddenly remember that your neighbor holds some claim against you, leave your gift right there at the altar, and first, go and be changed completely in your attitude toward your neighbor, and then come back and finish your act of worship.

Sermon

The point of my sermon this morning is actually pretty simple. I say that it’s our personal stories are always more important than any categories we claim, or claim us, or are denied to us by others.

I say our actual relationships, human being to human being, are always more important, than the cultural assumptions we make or do not make about them. I say our vision of the good-that-can-be is far more important than our knee-jerk skepticism about all humanity is going to hell in a handbasket, or our “realistic” attachments to unwritten but very real creeds which proclaim that humanity is hopeless. Hopeless? Like our Unitarian Universalist ancestor Pelagius over fifteen hundred years ago, I gave up the idea of hopelessness... or in traditional theological language, original sin, long ago. Why? Because I have encountered too many people throughout my life who glowed with hope, who visibly lived out their hope, and who refused to be defined or deterred by their very real experiences of disappointment, derision or doubt.

Myrtle the Mouse, in our story this morning, could have given up hope with all the derision she received from her neighbor. But her aunt teaches her another way. Her aunt had learned to live out her hope while in Africa by translating her hope into courage. She refused to be afraid even of the lions, fearsome as they actually are.

So Myrtle, inspired by her aunt, learns to roar back at her neighbor; and she leaves her own house, where she has retreated and hidden, for the wide outdoors. She recognizes that the names her neighbor called her cannot define who she is. *She* gets to define who she is, no one else. She gets to live out her own story freely. No one else has the right to curtail who she is.

Myrtle found her courage when she heard her aunt's personal story. And theologian Carter Heyward also claims the power in stories: she gains her courage to live her life from the stories of courage she hears, witnesses, discovers, reads, sees all around her. She mentions a few...battered women who have had enough, gay men and women coming out even when it is costly; even an older man who appreciates his dogs, and is thankful for them...

She says these stories inform her own story. These stories relate to her own life. She describes these story relationships as central to her theology, which avoids the outworn debate as to whether this or that transcendent object exists. She focuses on relationships because they are alive...not dead. Unlike many traditional secular and religious cultures, she does not exclude the erotic from her theology. She doesn't even place it at the edge of things. She puts it squarely in the center of her vision for how to live out our earthly life with strength, hope and joy. But she is clear that there is much in the cultures in which we live and breathe which mitigate against us using our erotic lives, whatever form they may take, as authoritative and central to our decision making.

Let me be clear about this: an erotic life is not reducible to certain sexual acts, especially ones involving copulation. Thinking that way has caused many of the very real problems in our society, ranging from young people educated by the culture around them to think they are not engaged in an erotic life if they actually avoid intercourse but try everything else; to the sad distortion of a much older man, and a national president, who used that same distorted understanding of sexuality to help him pretend he "did not have sex" with that intern. That sad understanding hurt our national spirit.

No, the erotic life is all around us, and is hardly confined to genitalia. The erotic life has to do with our attractions to each other in every way, and ninety-nine percent of our erotic life does not have an “outcome.” It simply is the energy of our desires, the expressiveness of our spirits, the touching of our skins, (as in a simple handshake) and yes, it can include actual interpenetrating bodies, but that is just a small portion of what both Dr. Heyward and I regard as the erotic. I wanted to be clear about that before I went further.

Heyward says we are not living in a culture that supports the erotic unless it’s cheesy and pornographic. I agree. The *Our Whole Lives* sexuality curriculum taught here at this congregation is a notable exception, but it is notable not just because it’s a great program, but because it stands in such contrast with the culture around it. One of the things it treats with great respect and honesty is same gender relationships, the relationships of people who, in order to be fully healthy, have to “come out,” and claim who they are.

Now the phrase “to come out” in this culture refers to many things, not all of them erotic or sexual. Linguistically, we are not sure which of these other meaning may have seeded the modern gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender usage of “coming out.” For example, Fareed Zakaria in Newsweek magazine last week spoke of India’s recent election, calling it a “coming out” among the nations because of its wonderfully honorable and elegant course. And of course, mostly upper-class white folks have long held “coming out” parties for their high school daughters, sometimes called Cotillions. They are “introduced” to society in these elaborate events, which resemble a wedding more than anything else. In Texan Latino culture, the Quincini era is a parallel for girls, although there is nothing quite comparable for boys. And there is the phrase in English, “skeletons in the closet” which some think of as the source of the phrase “coming out” since many often modify the verb by adding “out of the closet.” But frankly, we don’t really know.

But coming out isn’t as simple as coming out of the closet door and slamming it shut behind you. Ask any “out” teacher in a public school in our fair city if they don’t risk trouble by simply

saying something like “my partner and I are going out to supper tonight for his birthday.” Or, say your name is Susan, and you teach English at a local high school. You miss a few days of school and one of your students ask you why. You might find it hard to tell the truth, which is “My spouse Mary’s mother died this week, and so I went with her to North Carolina to attend the funeral, of course.” That ordinary sentence which might be freely spoken by anyone else is not entirely freely spoken yet by many gay and lesbian folks, even though, yes, yes, I know, we have made lots of progress. But not as much as you might think.

I myself came out many times. The first time was tough. I was 16. My father and I had just had a fight, in which he told me, quote “I have never understood you since the day you were born.” unquote.

Then he left the house in a huff and slammed the door. I was left crying in my room, convinced that what my father said was somehow connected to my own sexual nature, which I knew very well was forbidden by society, church, family and as far as I could tell, the whole world and God. Remember, it was only 1965 when this happened. My poor mother, who felt it was her job to make peace between me and my father whenever things like this happened, trotted up the steps to my hot attic room and tried to comfort me. I blurted out that the whole mess was all because I was gay. Of course, I didn’t use that word...it wasn’t really in ordinary usage back then. I used the more technical word, which newspapers continued to favor over the word “gay” for well over three decades afterward. My poor, poor mother. She wasn’t prepared for that outburst, that’s for sure. Who was back then? But she asked me if I wore her clothes when she wasn’t there. As soon as she said that, I knew I had made a mistake. I realized that she didn’t know what the word meant. I knew that some folks did wear clothes usually worn by “the other” gender...and for many reasons; witness the medieval warrior Jehanne Tarc, whom we usually call Joan of Arc, for example. I just knew I myself didn’t do that, and I learned to my despair that’s what she thought being gay meant. There were no books, no Oprah, no magazine articles back then. We were all on our own. Harvey Milk and the almost-famous, but definitively formative, riot at the bar called the Stonewall in New York City were still in the future. And I was “out” but the door hadn’t really opened, since there was no one outside to help me to turn the handle and welcome me when

I got outside. My father knew no more than my mother; he too confused the clothes issue with the identity issue. The drama of what happened did end the fight, however. At least that was good. My folks sent me to a psychiatrist to cure me of my "ailment" very quickly afterward, and I went for many years, which was a remarkable waste of my time. He kept on telling me that religion was the issue, and that if I just gave up religion I would be fine. Of course, I didn't want to be who I was either in those days, so I went every single time, hoping for a miracle.

But of course, he was not terribly observant or wise to say such a thing. My folks went to church but that didn't make them "religious" as some people view the term. They didn't know the details of the book of Leviticus or the Epistle to the Romans. They didn't even know church teaching on this subject. Please. No priest or bishop mentioned such things in sermons or letters in those days...remember, it was 1965. Their understanding of the whole idea was mostly social and shame based...indeed, they may have only got their information from rude jokes as far as I can tell. But rude jokes have always served to shore up bigotry and misinformation of all sorts, and frankly, that cultural phenomenon alone would have been enough. Add the system of family shame, and you don't have to analyze much further. Oh, my mother did pass down legends of men with candy who came after children in their cars, something she never explained. (And of course, all of my parent's adult friends came over to our house and immediately threw candy in my hand, so the whole idea that giving a kid candy was just a mystery to me.) And, listen, I was never abused by any priest, or anyone else for that matter. But I have always known I am the way that I am, since I was a child of six. I just never had any words for it until I was much older, and none of those words were anything more than what we now call "hate speech."

So the door was open, but just a crack. And look, even though its forty four years later, and even the Unitarian Universalists have deepened enough to affirm gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender ministers, (which once, I assure you, they most certainly did not!) the door is still not wide open. For goodness sake, think about it! Sometimes you keep quiet about who you are because you get tired of living your whole life with your spiritual dukes up in the air all the time, waiting for the first nasty

comment to come your way. Even now, in an era where I can get married in four out of fifty states, (no small achievement that!) I still have to listen, as I walk down the street, to junior high school kids dissing each other by saying "That's so gay! Ewww..!" I could stop and try and educate them, I suppose, every time I hear such a thing, but believe it or not, I have other things to do in my life besides being a perpetual social educator. Like the laundry, piles of dishes and a sermon or two.

Or yesterday, for example, I went to the gym and worked with my trainer for the first time. My doctor wants me to exercise in a certain way because he diagnosed me with diabetes II a month ago. Slowly I've been "coming out" about diabetes too...see, there are other uses for that phrase...but the thing is, my trainer, a very sweet fellow, had lots and lots of religious tattoos on his arms, with crosses and nails and sacrificial symbols, and I had to spend time thinking about whether this might mean I might have to not talk about certain things with him so as not to engage him in anyway about any religious scruples he might have about the fact that I spent 16 years with a man as my partner. I don't think I have to worry, frankly; I didn't get the slightest hint from his speech that he was either religiously devout or negative about gay people. But I didn't know that for a while, and had to think it through. I felt embarrassed I had to, but I did have to.

Even though my parents were culturally, more than religiously, horrified about my erotic orientation, I do realize that there is an awful lot of religious language these days about same-sex realities that has all the charm of fingernails on a blackboard. The late Jerry Falwell wasted no time in telling as many untruths about people like me as he could in short time, and the so called American Family Association, which preaches his same message, tells more lies per day than Pinocchio does in a week.

Powerhouse preachers hold forth every hour of every day on television and on radio and pollute the hearts of millions. If I am walking down High Street from my car to meet a friend at Haiku, a wonderful restaurant, I am often verbally assailed as "faggot" by usually college-age people passing in their cars. I am just walking alone, but it happens almost every time I am meeting a friend down there in the later evening, or even when I go for a late afternoon haircut at Waldo's. I have such sympathy for young same-sex oriented kids in high-school these days who

have to listen to this “that’s so gay!” language all the time. And they have it better in many ways than the composer Benjamin Britten, who composed this morning’s anthem, and lived with his lover Peter Peers for decades without anyone every acknowledging they were partners in life and had an erotic relationship. Peter was invited when Britten was knighted by the Queen, but the nature of their relationship was never mentioned. He simply was invited. Like a “friend.” No wonder he chose for his anthem text a poem about a flower that only blossoms in the dark of night, and never in the sunlight of day.

The religion and same-sex love thing is complicated. Clearly, the Christian church in most of its forms has had difficulty with this. There are exceptions, certainly, but they are few. Many liberal Christian people will try and tell you that Jesus said nothing about same sex love. Positive or negative. And they are happy about that. I understand. At least HE remained silent about it. But I am not so sure that’s true. First, as I read it, he clearly says, as recorded in at least two gospels, that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah has nothing to do with same-sex anything, but rather, with hospitality, with an open door policy, with welcoming the stranger. (cf Matthew 10:15) Second, he is depicted as healing the younger partner of a Roman soldier who refers to the sick young man with words that every Greek speaking person of that era would have instantly recognized was referring to a love partner. Remember, the gospels were written in Greek for Greek speakers, not for us. So that story has to be taken seriously emblematic of Jesus’ attitude toward same sex love, especially as that particular story is only one of three stories that is found in all four gospels. Lastly, there is that passage I quoted to you from this morning from Matthew, although its also found in Luke, which is unusual in that it has an Aramaic word embedded in it. Raka. Why would the Greek author have an arcane Aramaic word in a Greek text? Good question. The answer is, I think, that the word is a form of the word used at the time, (and for that matter, even in modern Tel Aviv, -rakh) to refer to someone like me. A judgmental word. Something like “sissy” in English. And the second word, which I translated as “damn fool” comes from the word “moros” which does indeed mean “damn fool,” but which in other Greek writings of the era has the connotation of “sexual wrongdoer and rebel.” So as I read this passage, I think the author left the Aramaic untranslated because, there were

already, by the time the gospels were written fifty years after Jesus died, influences from Paul that called into question any sex-positive attitude toward same-sex love. So just like the modern poet e.e. cummings who put scandalous words referring to sexuality in Greek so as to avoid censure, the author of Matthew was embarrassed by Jesus' clearly furious condemnation of people using "hate speech" toward anyone, including people like me. "That's so gay!" isn't quite the same thing as "damn fool" but I would say it hurts just as deeply. It certainly is something I find disturbing when I hear it out of the mouths of school kids. How many of our family systems here in America fail our young ones! And their own children no less.

Fortunately, many of the younger men and women I have met turn out far more courageous anyway, far more courageous than I ever was. Story after story that I hear moves me deeply. More importantly, they actually recognize that it's their story that's important, not their category. So using the word "queer"...a word that meant terrible things when I was younger, has become a way of saying, look, my erotic life is complicated. Maybe I just had a crush in junior high on a member of the same gender. Maybe I have a relationship with a person of a different gender now. But, hey! that first crush was important to me, and a real formative part of my life. I am not gay or bisexual, I am just me. Stop trying to fit me in your idiotic either/or shoebox...I assure you, I don't fit.

I like that kind of courage. I like that kind of moxie.

My parents have worked all their life to try and make sense of my story and how it related to theirs. The social pressures they know, and sense of shame they feel are great, and they have only been able to go so far. I understand. I am sad, of course, but I understand. Just like I am sad that at age 60, I still have to think twice about whether I can be myself or tell my story or not to strangers. Yet I spend my life trying to lessen the gap between who I am, and what I can say about who I am. I spend my life trying to be accountable to all those who come after me, and all those alive now who dream of a just world just like I do. In Carter Heyward's magnificent words: I am accountable to those who are committed to justice for all. That does not mean I live this value very evenly or very well. Most of us do not. But the commitment

is honest and strong.

I do think my commitment is honest and strong. And I do think that my story is one of many stories that need to be told, since the best and deepest theology, affirms Heyward, is not about categories or abstractions, but about real human lives in relationship with each other. Mutual relationship. Where we are always helping each other to open the door, to come out as who we are, not what someone else thinks we should be to make them happy. The open door is the basic theological metaphor here. The door that stays open so that anyone of us..gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, diabetic, person with HIV, anyone, can tell our story freely in a welcoming environment. The stories are important, not the categories. The welcome is important. The affirmation.

The hospitality. Its all just a matter of keeping the door open no matter what.

Offering

We give as who we are. We give to build a place that welcomes all, that opens doors and affirms stories. Let the offering be now given and received.

Closing Vision: from Ranier Maria Rilke, *Der Studienbuch* (The Book of Hours) 1905 *Translated by Jesse Jones and Mark Belletini*

Everything will come into its own power:
the lands without boundaries, the waters flowing free;
the trees branching tall, and the walls built low.
And in the valleys, a people diverse and
tending to their quilted land with strength.

And there'll be no churches where God
is nailed down or lamentably caged
like some trapped and hurt animal.
Householders will open their doors to all who knock,
and you'll find a sense of expressiveness
in all relationships, including yours and mine.

There will be no fretting about any afterlife,

no looking beyond what's here, no disrespect of death
but only a steady practice to live a deeper, earthy life,
as if we were not new hands at this.

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