

# **The Story of our Story (GLBTQ Sunday)**

**June 12, 2011**

**Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini**

**Welcoming, Centering, Kindling**

**Opening Words:**

We are here  
*after a week of sun and dark storms*  
to worship, to openly claim who we are  
*refusing the manipulations of shame,*  
revering truth for authority,  
*and remaining open to questions*  
while living out the answers of love.

**And so, we pledge to journey together along the ways of truth and affection, as best as we can name them now, or may learn them in days to come; that we and our children may be fulfilled, and that we may speak to our world in words and lives of peace, justice and goodwill.**

**Story: All the World by Liz Scanlon**

Following a circle of family and friends through the course of a day from morning till night, this book affirms the importance of all things great and small in our world, from the tiniest shell on the beach, to warm family connections, to the widest sunset sky.

**Hymn: We Are Dancing Sarah's Circle**

**Sequence:** *a dance from our Movement Choir*

*following second temple bell, these words of William Butler Yeats:*

“Labor *is* dancing...  
dancing where the body is *not* bruised to pleasure soul,  
nor beauty born out of its own despair...  
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, how can we know the dancer from the dance?”

And how can we know the griever from their particular griefs,  
or the grateful from their unvoiced thanks?  
And so we enter a place of spiritual safety where  
we may name our joys, our griefs, our losses  
within our quiet hearts, or sounded aloud,  
knowing that just as we can't separate the dancer from the dance,

so we cannot separate our  
common worship from our personal hearts.

*naming*

All the world is in this place and in this moment:  
sorrow and joy, wood and skin, memory and hope,  
glass and color, story and absence, culture and personhood, love, fear, hope, friendship  
and the delight of playfully familiar music.

### **Choir Anthem:**

**The First Reading** *is from the Gospel of Luke, written at the end of the first century by an anonymous person we know by that name only since the middle of the second century. This story is also found, with variations, in two other gospels, and is clearly based on an original story which the writers had before them to shape with their own author's voice. This is Luke's version, and I am leaving one word in the original Greek for a reason:*

In the city of Kefar-Nahum, a Roman centurion stationed there had a certain *doulos*, whom he was very fond of. The *doulos* was very sick, even at death's door. When the centurion heard stories about Jesus, he asked some of the influential locals to speak up on his behalf, so as to ask him to come and heal the *doulos*. They did so, urging Jesus strongly with these words: "He is very deserving of this boon, for he loves our people, and even contributed to the building of a local Meeting House for us." So Jesus went with them toward the house of the centurion. The centurion however sent a messenger out to Jesus and said: "Don't trouble yourself to come any further. Stay where you are, for I am not some exemplary person that you should grace my home with your presence. But just give the word from where you are. After all, I understand authority. I tell a private "Do this or that" and he does. I tell another to come to me, and he does. If I ask my *doulos* for a favor, he does it."

When Jesus heard this little speech, he was astonished, and he turned to the group of people who were trailing behind him and said: "I have not heard words of such pure confidence anywhere before, even among my own people." And when the messengers went back to the centurion's house, his found his *doulos* was all better.

**The Second Reading** *is a wise observation by a woman named Laura Riding Jackson, from her book called The Telling, from 1972.*

How our story has been divided up among the truth-telling professionals! Religion, philosophy, history, poetry, compete with each other for our ears; and science competes with all together. And for each we have a different set of ears. But, though we hear much, what we are told is as nothing: none of it gives us ourselves, rather, each way of telling stories steals us, to make *its* reality of us.

### **Sermon**

Several times after I first arrived in Ohio, I had the pleasure of attending a concert of the Bill T. Jones-Arnie Zane Dance Company. I have been a fan since my California days. Some of you may remember that I have uplifted the wisdom of his performance art a number of times in sermons during my tenure here.

I even ran into Bill while I was interviewing to serve as senior minister here in May of 1998...he happened to be walking across the OSU campus, as I happened to be that afternoon, and we stopped and chatted for a while. We're not friends in any meaningful sense of that term...he doesn't know my name. But I have talked with him many times after performances. And did write him a long letter once after a concert, thanking him for his wonderful choreography, but thanking him even more profoundly for a singular act, which I received as a personal gift. At the end of each concert in Berkeley, as the applause was finishing, he and his late beloved, Arnie Zane, would turn to each other and kiss.

A simple act. Not a European peck on the cheek mind you, but a loving kiss. But, even as late as 1986, I had never seen two men kiss publicly before. *Publicly* I said. Not hidden in the shut-off privacy of a house, or some dark bar. And to my surprise, I would always get teary when they kissed there out in the open, under the spotlights. That compact Italian Jewish guy, and that lanky, stately African American guy. And some time after Arne had died, I wrote Bill all about the effect of that kiss in the letter I wrote. I told him how that simple, tender and public act affected me, strengthened me, encouraged me. When Bill and I would talk after a concert from that time on, say, while he was autographing my program, I would simply say: "I'm the guy who wrote you that letter." And he would say: "Ah, yes, the letter...the letter about the kiss. I remember. Thank you."

Now, of course, people of the same gender have kissed before. In private. The future King David, according the Scroll of Samuel, went off to a wilderness place with crown prince Jonathan, where (I Samuel 21:41b), and I quote: "they wept and kissed passionately." But the sad people of the world try to diminish such things, trying to convince me that David and Jonathan were "just friends..." as if friendship could be called "just" anything, and worse, as if friendship always included passionate kissing, which makes no sense. It's this kind of denial that has made up much of the story of same-gender love and cross-gender identity. And I find myself more and more frustrated and angry that this is so.

The historic story often told about the progress of variant sexuality and gender identity is trotted out at this time of year because of the Pride parade. But it's a very limited and little story, really. The first Pride parades were held in New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago on June 28 in 1970, in celebration of the Stonewall Riots that had erupted in Greenwich Village the year before. This riot exploded when police raided a working-class bar owned by the Mafia, but favored by drag queens, homeless street hustlers and other sorts of people on the margins of even Greenwich Village society back then. The people in the bar fought back, refused arrest for being who they were, and the riots continued for several nights. This is the official Story I always hear, and often tell...but it's not the full story...it affirms that all of the sexual and gender identity

minority liberation movements began in planned police violence met by unplanned violence, in late June of 1969.

But the trouble with this story is that it isolates this incident as an initiating event. And worse, it associates sexual liberation entirely with urban America. As if people didn't live out their unique identities and lives long before...and often openly...all over the world. From ancient times till now.

Take the story found in the gospel of Luke, variant forms of which are found in other gospels as well. Not matter what your opinion of Jesus is, no matter whether you think this whole business of him being a healer is too much for you or not, no one can deny that the gospels, which give their slant on this Galilean story, were all set down at the end of the first century, and were completed, in common Greek, by the early second century. In other words, a thousand years before English was born, and smack dab in the middle of a culture very different from our own. So when this story was told, it was told to people with ears that opened onto that culture, not ours in Columbus, Ohio. And long before any of our words for variant sexuality were used. But in the first century, the word *doulos*, like so many English words, had many authentic meanings, and one of them meant "younger partner in a romantic relationship between two men." Why do we know that first century ears would have heard the word to mean that instead of any of its other meanings? Because the story is about a centurion, a Roman captain in the military in charge of a hundred privates. One of whom was his *doulos*, in training to become a centurion one day himself. And because the emperor had passed a law forbidding centurions to marry women or have children, the *doulos* was a sexual partner and portable family as well as a mentee. And the text we receive says that the centurion was fond of this *doulos*. The Greek word is *entimos*, meaning much the same as our cognate word *intimate* in English.

So the story is a story about a man living openly with his lover in a small lakeside city in the Galilee. Jesus heals the lover of his fever, and even praises the centurion for his thoughtfulness in asking him not to come into his house...he obviously knew that it would taint Jesus' reputation if he was hanging out with one of the oppressors of his own people, and thoughtfully asked him to expel the fever from a distance with his singular authority over evil spirits.

Long before Stonewall, someone was living out and open, with love, with tenderness, with public kisses perhaps; but we don't know that because a hetero-normative (you can figure out the meaning of that word with no trouble) reading has been given to all ancient texts. In the English gospels, *doulos* is rendered *bondservant*, and intimations of loving intimacy are covered over. There are many other stories in the gospels which speak of same-gender issues too...but all of these have been disguised, and twisted into submission by the translators. It's a form of literary violence, in my book. And frankly, it hurts...

But even though most of us can't read ancient Greek, we can read English. Yet I would wager cash money that few have read about the Iowa Sisterhood, that is, women ministers, living as couples, who served Unitarian congregations in Iowa in the last century. Or, who have read the story of Deborah Sampson, the Massachusetts woman who dressed herself as a male, and fought in the Revolutionary War, getting wounded several times until she was discovered. She was

honorably discharged by Washington himself, and received a pension by his demand. Some people say of Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Speed exactly what they say of David and Jonathan ...they were “just” friends, and the fact that they slept in the same bed for four years was just the culture of the time. The intimacy of their letters to each other tells another story, sorry. The story that remains hidden, stuffed, denied, ignored. It infuriates me.

But like I already lamented, the story of same-gender love is so parochially American that I need to leave our shores for a few minutes, so as not to think WE invented same gender love or alternate gender identities, or are the only ones on earth responsible for courage and freedom. How about vast ancient China, and the millions of women who refused to get married and lived with each other, remaining openly coupled. The clumsily cobbled word “homosexual” was fused from Greek and Latin roots in the 1900’s by a Hungarian physician and bad linguist, but the Chinese phrase “Love of the Cut Sleeve,” which means exactly the same thing, goes back to three centuries *before even our gospel story* this morning was written down on paper. In Japan, the samurai warriors had *wakashu*, which translates exactly like the word *doulos* in the Greek for our centurion. Nothing hidden there. In India, the *hijra* are referred to as Third Gender People, and have been, since long before a European named Ulrichs suggested calling gays and lesbians by that same phrase in 1864. At the famed erotic temple of Kajari you can see sculptures of monks caressing a lay visitor to the monastery carved in stone forever, perpetually visible, public and not hidden.

Back in English speaking lands, Queen Anne and Sarah Churchill had a relationship which some have wanted to shove under the radar just like David and Jonathan...but anyone reading their letters would never be able to do that and still retain their sense of honesty. Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby eloped openly in 1778 and settled in Wales, coupling openly for 51 years. The poet William Wordsworth used to visit them in their cottage. No one stoned him for visiting the two women, nor were they banned from society.

Then there was the tremendous San Francisco-like same-gender, and mutable-gender love life in Berlin before the war...open, free and totally out in the open until Herr Hitler rose to power. Have you read about the transgender natives in this country, the Berdaches or the Inhamana? Their importance in Indian culture? The same-sex relationships open and out among the Ashante in Africa, in Ghana? Or among the Zande? Or the ritual same-sex behavior among the Ndembu, also in Africa? How about the *mahus* in Polynesia, or *aikane* in Hawai’i, both terms referring to same sex relationships which existed without shame or denial? The cultivated stereotype of Islamic culture is that same-sex love is always punished by death...yet no one killed the still much appreciated authors of the homoerotic and still well-read *The Delight of Hearts* by Ahmad Al Tifashi, or Omar Khayyam’s famous *Rubiyat*, or Sa’adi’s *Gulistan*, all of which celebrate same-gender love undisguised. And my same-gender friends, who go dancing right across the street from the royal palace in Saudi Arabia, do not live in fear of their lives all day long, nor does the Somali lesbian I know hide herself in Cairo, although she is careful, certainly. They know fanatics exist there as they exist here, and are not careless, but they don’t define their lives by the possibility of social bullying. And earlier this year I twice read readings in services by my Muslim Moroccan gay email bud, Abdellah Taia, who has been featured on the cover of Moroccan magazines as openly gay.

Oh, please, don't get me wrong. I understand that bullying and religious and political persecution are real. In several state legislatures recently, the conservative legislatures are trying to forbid even mentioning same-sex realities. In North Carolina, the legislation is so bad that even some conservative churches are embarrassed. I know that young folks take their own lives each and every day because they are bullied into doing so...in this country, in this state, in the year 2011.

But I wanted to lift up "the story of our story," of sexual and gender liberation, in another way this morning. To remind myself that first and foremost, I am a person, not a sexuality, a human being, not a category. When people bully my sexuality they are bullying *me*...I cannot separate out parts of myself and I cannot hide sections of my soul just because it upsets someone else's stomach or something. You can't do that either. Like Laura Jackson says in the second reading, and I want to read the whole thing again...it's short: *How our story has been divided up among the truth-telling professionals! Religion, philosophy, history, poetry, compete with each other for our ears; and science competes with all together. And for each, we have a different set of ears. But, though we hear much, what we are told is as nothing: none of it gives us ourselves, rather, each way of telling stories steals us, to make its reality of us.*

These words are as true as steel is hard. None of the story as we usually tell it *gives me myself*. I am more than someone who has been hurt by others...I am someone who has been loved by others, and who has loved others much. I am someone who has read the theories of psychologists trying to explain sexual variation, and have never found myself there. I have read studies of the brain, and find lo, I am not reducible to a loop in the limbic system; I am a person. I have read the philosophers speaking of constructed same-gender relationships, and do not find myself there. I have read the philosophers speaking of constructed same-gender relationships, and do not find myself there. They are all very passionate...and, like Jackson says, they all want me to buy into their own theory, their own lexicon, and bow to their theories. Someone wants me to think I have a lifestyle, not a life. Someone else wants me to admit I had a weak father and strong mother. Someone else thinks it's important to look at the length of my middle toe. Someone else wants me to bow to their sociological construction theory. Yet someone else insists that I secretly hate myself and want to be bullied by anti-gay legislation. And yet another talking head tells me that it's only my sexual identity which allows me to like things like Bill T. Jones dancing, and that "real men," whoever they may be, prefer doing other things. All of this...a complete waste of time, and consummate baloney.

So instead, I go home and do the laundry, which I don't enjoy doing, fold some beet ravioli called *casonsei* for friends coming over Monday night, which I do enjoy doing, worry about family issues with my sister on the phone, have a total kick of a conversation with my son, schedule a date for the latest Terrence Mallick film, answer fifteen emails, thank a friend for birthday dinner, help out my out of work friend Kenny with a few bucks, and go out with my friend Anthony to a late night establishment where we laugh and talk till two AM, and then go home and cry a bit before I sleep, because of the pain I share with some friends going through a divorce. And, because I miss being able to see my mother very often. You know, human things. Person things. Mark Belletini things. Non-categorical things.

Things a lot like Arne Zane and Bill T. Jones kissing in public... without shame, embarrassment, or explanation. Things that are very human. Things that are evidence of wholeness, things not separated out from the rest of my story...my supper, my dancing, my grief, my laughter, my aches and pains. The best stories, after all, are whole, not partial, full, not empty, bold, not ashamed. The best stories remind us, as our children's story did this morning, that we are each and all part of the whole world, with every part of that world equally resonating in every one of us. As the story put it: All the world is here. It is there. It is everywhere. All the world is right where you are. Now.

The Pride Parade next Saturday is not going to change anyone's mind about anything. Fred Phelps and his family will still be a cruel after it is over with, and the legislatures will still pass laws making some of us in this room even more second class citizens than we already are. And 90% of the folks walking in the parade not only don't know what happened at Stonewall, but were born long after it. So it's hardly some solemn commemoration. The parade is just a big block party, some fun in the sun more than anything else. But it is, in a way, about pride. It's about pride in being a human being, a human being that is a whole person. Not just pride in a certain kind of sexual or gender history, each of which remains always and entirely unique...but pride in *everything* about you and you and you and you and me, no matter how you define the sexual or gender part of your wholeness. Pride that the story of our story, when told fully, is filled with examples of open, courageous, and unashamed people over the last 5000 years, and that not everything can be defined by the post Stonewall "coming out" metaphor. Some of us have never been "in," thank God. I don't think any kissing I see in public during the parade will be as meaningful as that first kiss between Arne Zane and Bill T. Jones. But it won't hurt....

**Offering** The sun does not choose where to shed its light, and the rain does not fuss over where it falls. In like manner, when we give, our giving calls forth life within the *whole* congregation, and within our own *whole* hearts. There are many other ways and times we give, for we don't follow a strict schedule any more than the rain and sun do. But this time is important to many as *their* time. Let the ushers come forward.

**Prayer** (with Bob Rice)

*Roots hold me close:*

*Let me see the faces of those who struggled to be who they were as living reminders that we can be who we are.*

*Let me remember the courageous, tell the stories of those who refused to be either ashamed or quiet.*

*Let the roots they sent deep into our common earth move through my heart and root me in their power as they lift up nourishment from the deep, so as to open wise, but often wounded, hearts.*

And wings, spread forth now, and lift me off the earth into the skies of hope, and let the faces of the past recede that I can see the world to come, where no one tip-toes up to any subject, where no question is considered stupid, where the bright light of no honest and mutual love is blotted out by clouds of ignorance and false and twisted certainties, and where visions of justice for every person, and hopes for a world at peace unbetrayed, are never ridiculed, suppressed or denied. Roots, hold me close. Wings set me free. Love, ordain me and all here gathered to be who we are without shame or hesitation.

