

Alphabet Soup

June 8, 2014

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Reflections before the Celebration begins

"In a century when many composers have worked to write music that sounds like everyone else's, Aaron Copland has spoken in his own voice." Donal Henahan 1975

"No government has the right to tell its citizens when and whom to love. The only queer people are those who don't love anybody." Rita Mae Brown 1982

Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,
in a community of promise and purpose,
to worship, to contrast the way things are
with a way that would bring rivers of blessing
to every individual, indeed, all life
on our blue-green hills of earth.
May we choose a way of blessing.

And so, bearing witness both to our world as it is, and as Love can imagine it, we would claim that vision of a just world in our own lives. And because of a growing sense of kinship with all beings, inviting our compassion, we begin in this celebration to engage our mission with our whole lives: body, mind, and heart.

Singing: #1007 There's A River Flowing in My Soul

Ingathering MLB

Once upon a time, there was a 12-year-old named Jamie. Jamie's family had always lived in their brick and wood house next to the wide and peaceful Rainbow River. The family had a dock in the river, and several boats. They loved to sail down the river, and so Jamie, having learned the skills of handling a sail boat, was now old enough to explore the river a little bit too.

Jamie got into the yellow boat with some food for lunch, a life-jacket, and a good hat, and some sunscreen to keep the sunburn away. Up went the little sail, and the afternoon breeze caught it, and the wind got the little boat moving along beautifully.

Jamie had sailed for about a half hour, but suddenly saw something amazing on the shore. It was a little house made of blue bricks and a red tiled roof. The windows were round, and the door was shaped like a fish. "What kind of a house is that?" asked Jamie aloud. "I'll find out." Jamie sailed to the shore, and pulled the boat next to the little dock there. Just as the boat was safely tied up, Jamie heard a voice. Spinning around surprised, Jamie saw a girl about the same age.

She had curly red hair and dark green eyes and skin the color of caramel ice-cream. "Hello, who are you?" asked Jamie of the little girl. "*My name is Jordan,*" said the girl. "I love your little yellow sailboat. And who are you?" "My name is Jamie, and I love your blue and red house. I have never seen anything like it before."

"Well, thank you, Jamie," said the girl. "I've seen sailboats on the river before, but never one painted yellow, like yours. Hey! It looks like there is room in your boat. Can I travel with you a while, Jamie? I can always walk back to my house along the river path."

"Sure, Jordan, I am only going for a while longer. My parents will pick up me and my little boat with their boat trailer when I get to town. They can take you home, too." "Wonderful," she said, and they climbed in and set sail.

In just a few minutes, they came to a house neither of them had seen before. It was shaped like a pyramid, but had a green circular roof on top of what looked like vines of some kind. The walls of the house were bright yellow that looked as if they were made of glass. Jamie brought the sail boat to the beach and pulled it ashore, and they both got out. Suddenly, a boy about their age came out of the odd house. He had hair dyed purple, and blue eyes, and skin the color of chocolate ice cream. He smiled, and said, "Who are you? My name is Jordan." The two of them laughed. "My name is Jordan too" said Jordan number 1. "And I am Jamie." They talked for a while, and got to know each other. Then the new Jordan asked if he could join them. "Sure!" said Jamie.

A while later, when Jamie's parents came with the trailer to pick up their young sailor at the town dock, they found five friends laughing there. All of them, new friends. They all fit into the two back seats of the truck, and, one by one, Jamie's parents dropped them off at home. "I had a great day!" said Jamie to his parents. After supper and some fun reading, and after putting some yellow pajamas on, Jamie crawled into bed and soon fell asleep. There was a smile spreading across that happy, happy face. Jamie's parents knew that their beloved child was dreaming about new friendships.

Greeting and announcements....

Affirming #1009, Meditation on Breathing

(led by Brandon)

Communing Sequence

Breathe in, breathe out.

Breathe in, breathe out.

Both are needed to be fully alive.

Breathe in the skeptical.

Breathe out the faithfulness.

Both are needed to be fully alive.

Breathe in the reflection.

Breathe out the action.

Both are needed to be fully alive.

Breathe in the overview.
Breathe out the details.
Both are needed to be fully alive.
Breathe in things as they are.
Breathe out things as they might better be.
Both things are needed to be fully alive.
There is no day without a night.
There is no beginning without an ending.
There is no river without a source
and a mouth both.
So let the river run,
past the castles where the self-anointed live,
past the broken down towns where
the cult of uniformity divides
the people into the abandoned and the unaware.
Let the river run, from mysterious small source
to wide embracing currents that flow toward the larger mysterious sea of the future.
There may we find the New Jerusalem,
not an ancient divided city far way,
but a new city of welcome, of refuge, of peace, built by our children,
whom we have taught to love and feel and think.
The new Jerusalem, where we will not just live with each other,
but for each other, and for the common good of every single individual.
Everyone will vote.
Everyone will eat.
Everyone will be able to come in from out of the storm.
Breathe in, breathe out.
Breath in love, breath out hope.
We need both to be alive.
So let the river of life run forward,
the New Jerusalem shining bright, just past
the horizon signed by this silence.

The Great Silence

Everyone on this blue green earth is related to us, but our own circles are much smaller than our vast globe; these circles of love and loss are the homes of our own hearts: And so, as the river of life runs forward, we pause on its banks for a moment to name aloud, or name within our hearts, the names of those who love us, who have nurtured us, the names of our friends and family whom we may cherish, or even those with whom we struggle; the names of those who live far away, but whom we dearly miss, and the names of all those whose lives live on in the tender memories of our heart.

The Naming

Let the river run. Let all the dreamers
wake the nation. Come, the New Jerusalem.

The First Reading *is from my favorite Berkeley CA poet, Julia Vinograd. This is an excerpt from her poem with the hilarious title **My Own Epitaph, Which I Better Write Because I Know Too Many Poets.***

When I am dead,
please don't say nice things about me.
I wasn't tall and thin and friendly.
And I stuttered between silences.
I was *me*; please don't remember
someone you would rather've known.
Don't just remember the poems I wrote
remember the inconvenient rides I begged
and I always seemed to have a cold
and I was *me*.
I liked mangoes, roast beef and science fiction.
Don't just say I was a good listener,
add that you sometimes wondered why.
Don't make me one-dimensional-nice,
with a tragic story or two,
like everyone else.
I wasn't everyone else, I was *me*.
I carried a *me* black purse
and wore a *me* black dress
and I had a bad leg so I was usually looking
for a place to sit down.
I was too shy
to be a fascinating conversationalist,
but I was very *me*.
I loved filling up my room with *me*.
I always read by naked light-bulbs.
I read late, very late,
not just for the books,
but so not to lose the time I was *me* in.
Please don't say nice things about me
when I'm dead.
Don't treat me with respect
as if I were a stranger.
If I'm lucky the poems will live.
This isn't for the poems,
this is for *me*.
From God's dubious blessing,
to the buttons on my cap
to the godawful cough in the back of my throat

I was a *me*.
Remember.

The Second Reading comes from Keith Kron, who has been to this congregation a number of times, and who co-wrote a book called **Coming Out In Faith**, published by our own Skinner House, which is about same-gender love, bi-gender love, transgender and mixed-gender folks within our national Association. Susan Gore co-edited the 15 unique stories in the book with him.

It is worth noting that there are people who are in same-sex relationships privately who do not want to be described by any particular label. It is also important to remember that sexual orientation and gender identity are distinctly different dimensions of identity. Someone may be transgender... and gay, (or) lesbian, (or) bisexual, (or) straight, or asexual.

Unfortunately, the sheer number of terms and usages related to LGBTQ people can lead to self-defensive withdrawal into silence “for fear of offending,” or an aggressive response that these self-descriptive labels reflect nothing more than attempts to shock and/or confuse. We forget how many different ways people describe themselves and each other, based on the situation and their level of intimacy. In general, we think nothing of the complexity of choosing whether to use someone’s first name, first and last name, married name, professional title, parental status, geographic origin, age, race, or nationality to identify them. We do this based on circumstances and social conventions.

The variety of identities in what was once known simply as the “gay” community has expanded exponentially. Acronyms that reflect the growing awareness of diversity within the community now include a variety of shorthand combinations of the following letters:

A (for ally)	B (for bisexual)
G (for gay)	I (for intersex)
L (for lesbian)	T (for transgender)
Q (for queer)	Q (for questioning)

First, last, and always, terminology is never as important as honest and respectful intent. Be patient with yourself and your dialogue partner. Silence is the most powerful enemy of understanding. Keep talking, and keep listening, even when you’re not sure of the words.

Preaching

Since the Pride Parade is in two weeks, and many members of this congregation will be marching in that parade, I thought I might say something this morning briefly about the names applied to people who might march in such a parade. Like “allies,” for example. Allies are folks who do not claim to be part of a sexual or gender minority, but who support and walk side-by-side with their friends, their co-congregants, their co-workers, their physicians, their clergy, their neighbors, and their family members. It’s a great word, ally. Comes from the same Latin root that gives us our word “religion.” In this case, it means bound together in common cause. Perfect.

Thank you, allies, all of you everywhere. I assure you, there is no way I would have been called to serve as a minister in this congregation without you being allies for a couple of generations. But there are many other names for folks who claim sexual or gender minority status for themselves. Not all of these names are nice or kind. But it seems to me that a little education can remove the sting of these words a bit, and deflate the shock of their venomous intent. If you march, you will see or hear some of these words along the parade route perhaps. They are there every year. On signs. By voice. Mercifully, confined to a block. But there.

For example, recently, a famous actor used a word...I'll say it because if you read the story, you'll be thinking it anyway...namely, *faggot*. He got into hot water and has been apologizing all over the place, and quite sincerely, I have to say. Something that wouldn't have happened, probably, even just twenty years ago.

Of course, this actor is cultured, educated and in every conceivable way, an ally. He made a social faux pas in a fit of pique, and now he's sorry. But recently, as you all heard, that sad, sad man who founded Westboro Baptist Church died. And he was *never* sorry for using that word. He and his family would carry signs to picket the funerals of soldiers. The signs would say "God hates fags," because Fred Phelps, as well as his daughter Shirley, wanted to tell us that all these soldier died in vain protecting an immoral nation, and they wanted to grab us, as it were, by the lapels, and shake us. The word was spewed by them, never spoken. It certainly got my attention. I, who am normally un-shockable, was shocked that the present world had this to deal with besides curtailing the right to vote, increasing poverty, chicanery and every other form of injustice. But, always the "word-guy," and even as I was disgusted, I wondered... where did that ugly word come from originally? Turns out it only dates as name calling for male same-gender lovers from 1914. It used to be a medieval name insulting to women...men would call them *faggots*, meaning, a bundle of sticks, to accuse women of being simply unpleasant, but necessary baggage in their lives, the very image of a sick all-pervasive sexism.

Of course, sexism of this particularly vile kind hasn't died out. Recently the news has been filled with all these young men killing women because they feel entitled to "have" them, and the women wouldn't give them the time of day. It's a total nightmare to me. Women have become mere *things* again in the lives of many young men. All of them with guns. And in the same vein, there is so much talk about rape on college campuses these days, and in the armed forces, that I find myself simmering in outrage day after day. I want to explode sometimes.

Of course, many progressive types have fallen for the urban legend that the word "faggot," which does indeed mean a bundle of sticks, was used because same-gender lovers used to be burned at the stake like heretics. Actually, no, they were hanged, so that word origin is false, and they still died. But yes, many of them *were* heretics, too. You know, thinkers. Whole people. If you have a same-gender orientation, you don't just engage in erotic behavior all the time. You might actually think about religion, like the late preacher at Harvard University, Peter Gomes, or philosophy, like Ludwig Wittgenstein, or develop the computer like Alan Turing. Or maybe you might write song lyrics, like *America the Beautiful*, written by a lesbian, Katherine Lee Bates. Or maybe you might compose music, like Aaron Copland, who took his lovers with him everywhere on tour, openly, and long before the Rights Movement gained any steam. Copland got into trouble with the Joe McCarthy-distorted US government, yes. He was pretty leftist. But he never got much

into trouble for his relationships. His famous *Fanfare for the Common Man* was considered a musical front for the workers movement, but no one read anything gay into it. Funny, huh? The governor of Texas, Rick Perry, famously, and ignorantly, used the *Fanfare* in a video decrying gays and lesbians in the military.

Yet mostly, Copland was an exception. Alan Turing, the inventor of the computer, was sentenced to receive injections of female hormones to dampen his libido for having a relationship with another man, which was always a criminal offence in the UK in that era. Gay authors who were also African American, like James Baldwin, had to become ex-patriots to keep their sanity.

The word "Queer" has changed significance in my life time. When I was called it as a kid, I knew it wasn't a compliment. When, in high school we read the famous Robert Frost poem with the line "my little horse must think it queer," we all giggled with embarrassment. Rita Mae Brown, back in '82, tried to turn the word upside-down, by saying that the only queer people are those who don't love anybody. However, when my rabbi, at the synagogue I used to attend, just back in 1996, called herself a "Queer rabbi" because of her unusual family relationship, many gay men in particular, of the generation just past mine, were put into a simmering rage; "How dare she use a word that's an insult to us?"

But now, as Keith Kron points out, the two Q's in the alphabet soup line-up of GLBTQQI stand for both "queer" and "questioning." The younger generation finds the word "queer" more open than either gay or lesbian or bisexual. Less constricted. More alive, less categorical. I can have sympathy with that. And "questioning" is where a lot of people I talk with these days spend most of their time inside their emotional hearts.

Gay, of course, was originally a word that meant carefree or a bit showy, a purely French word; but by the 17th century it had connotations of moral looseness. But nothing to do with same gender love. A gay house was a brothel, and a gay man was...a womanizer. It was not until the early twentieth century that it took on its more contemporary meaning...until, of course, it was demoted again by school age kids..."That's so gay!" came to mean "That's just rubbish!" And now people of MY generation are grinding *our* teeth like the older guys at my synagogue did.

Lesbian, of course, comes from the Greek island of Lesbos, where the poet Sappho lived. Her verses to women, erotic and ravishing, lent the island's name to women who love women.

Transgender? A relatively new word, from 1965. However, a transgender activist is on the cover of a recent issue of *Time* magazine, so the word is getting some wind in its sails. And, as the reading pointed out, if you are transgender, you could be straight; or gay, or lesbian, or bi, or asexual, or questioning... since gender and sexual orientation are *not the same thing at all*. I hope that's clear.

The word bisexual goes back before Alfred Kinsey and his famous studies in the late 1940s, but originally it meant a hermaphrodite, that is, a person who had at least some of both female and male genitalia. But like all words, it evolved, and its present meaning is someone who might find attraction to males and females, although perhaps with different needs being met by either gender.

Intersex is a slightly older word than transgender, going back to 1954 at least, but most people have never heard of it. One percent of the human race can be considered intersex, meaning that, for a variety of genetic, chromosomal, and genital realities, often unique in each person, they are neither, or both, some combination of male and female. Often they will not use either the pronouns *he* or *she*, but something gender neutral, like *gher*. You may have noticed that, in the story this morning, I used no pronouns whatsoever when talking about Jamie, which is a name used almost equally by both males and females, and for that matter transgender and intersex folks. Did you imagine Jaime as a boy? Or a girl? Just curious. A little experiment on my part.

But all of this is so confusing, you might say. So much to remember. But I say we remember a lot more than that without complaining about confusion. The essay on language you heard from *Coming Out in Faith* puts it this way: *We forget how many different ways people describe themselves and each other based on the situation and their level of intimacy. In general, we think nothing of the complexity of choosing whether to use someone's first name, first and last name, married name, professional title, parental status, geographic origin, age, race, or nationality to identify them. We do this based on circumstances and social conventions.*

Right. So just ask if you don't know. It's OK. Don't be afraid. Knowledge doesn't just float into your head. You have to ask. All words evolve and change, as I tried to make clear, and that will happen again, and nothing we can do will stop it. We will always be learning and adjusting and deepening for the rest of our lives. We will always have to ask.

And anyway, this is not just about gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning or intersex folks. It's about all their allies too, many of whom gather in this room. We are all the ones who take as our mission "to claim diversity as a source of our strength." We are, all together, the ones, no matter our gender or sexuality, who claim the principle which affirms "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Including, I must imagine, the worth and dignity of that wonderful poet Julia Vinograd:

When I am dead, please don't say nice things about me. I wasn't tall and thin and friendly. And I stuttered between silences. I was me, please don't remember someone you would rather've known. From God's dubious blessing, to the buttons on my cap to the godawful cough in the back of my throat I was a me. Remember.

Like Julia, I am a me too. So are each of you. So is everyone on the earth. Inherently worthy, inherently dignified. No matter which of several genders we might be. No matter what orientation propels us into our lives. No matter what questions or confusions we have. Oh, I know, we can hurt each other, and do things that make us wear out our welcome now and then. I'm not some naive idealist here. But that is another sermon for another day.

It remains that each of us is a me. With our "own voice," even if we're not Copland. And even if the dish of alphabet soup that is set before us, which once had just two letters...g and l...and now has many more, gets twenty more letters stirred in besides that, the soup will still be delicious.

All sorts of folks live in unusual dwellings along the shores of the river of life; colorful, unexpected. Some of them will march in parade soon, not to change anyone's mind, but to

celebrate and have fun. To be with and make new friends. Join me, join a great number of us, if you want.

Offering

Returning

Today we conclude the celebration by marking a transition which will affect this congregation, Mark and Lane and I, and Dick Dawson himself. For six years Dick Dawson has served as chaplain of this congregation.

He was trained for two years, with the help of Rev. Wendy Fish and Rev. Mark, took courses in seminary at the same time as his son Eric was doing the same thing out East, which was wonderful for them both. For years he has done more behind the scenes of this congregation to help with the pastoral needs of especially our senior congregants. Dick will take some time off from the congregation, a sabbatical, if you will, to begin to make room for others who may be willing to serve in this way. It will take some time to not automatically call his name when there is a need in the congregation, but it's something we will all have to learn. He has certainly set the bar of service very, very high.

I know one thing for sure...during his chaplaincy, Dick was the happiest person I knew. He loved this work. Mark will now read some words written by his son Eric Dawson:

In The Plague, his wonderful treatise on oppression and hope, Albert Camus writes of people who, "while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers." I've always thought of my dad as a healer in just this way: Fully aware of the pain and loss and cruelty and sorrow that accompany all human lives; yet a firm believer in the transformative power of shared experiences and just-showing-up. Someone who knows that friendships matter, that hope is not willful ignorance but a powerful tool against darkness; that love has the power to redeem.

And it is this love, his thoughtful and plodding and comforting love that my dad embodies in his chaplaincy work here – because love must be embodied. Through a held hand, a listening ear, focused eyes, his warm and inquisitive smile. Arms that set up chairs and clear-up dishes. Feet that push car pedals to bring people to church and home again. Legs that stand in the back of the room ready to move toward where the need is. A mind that absorbs and processes and files and connects. And a heart that holds it all. All of the stories – so many stories – both mundane and profound that form the tapestry of loss and loves and lives that linger within all who pass through these doors each week.

And in the end, witnessing these stories is the best and only tool we've been given to feel a little less alone in the rough seas of living our lives. And it is the gift we have received from my dad.

Ultimately gifts of generosity cannot be measured in dollars or hours but in their power to do good in the world. My dad's time as a chaplain here is a testament to this. So, rather than fretting about how the congregation can manage without Dick Dawson – How will the work get

done? What will we do? – ask: how can we honor his gifts to us by seeing ourselves as we have been seen? To care for one another as we have been cared for? To love one another as we have been loved?

As a receiver of 40 years of this love and this care from this man, it is the challenge I arise to each and every day.

I don't want to say anything else after that masterpiece of writing. All I would like us to do is to give Dick a remarkably vital round of applause to say thank you, thank you, thank you. And please stay for some cake after the celebration, before you return here for the Annual Meeting of the Congregation.

All of us live on this earth, our blue boat home.

All of us are sailing down the river of life and into the sea of embraces. As we sail, may we be open to each other, show up for each other, and be at peace.

Singing #1064 Blue Boat Home