

On Being a Gay Pastor: A Pilgrimage of Inclusion of LGBTQ People

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Like many of my classmates at Princeton Theological Seminary, and later among my students at Duke Divinity School, there was the constant buzz around the question of “vocation” or “calling,” as we endlessly parsed the Latin word *vocare*. Like all seminarians I remember praying about my calling, agreeing wholeheartedly with Frederick Buechner that a “calling” is best defined as the work a person needs to do and the world needs to be done.¹ After a wide-variety of experiences in and out of the Church, the call became more or less clear, though my call did not fill any preconceived niche. I was not called to be in a tall-steeple church pulpit, nor necessarily always in academia. The calling was to be a scholar-activist, in the guise of a preacher-teacher-guide. I often work on, and walk around, the margins of the Church and academia rather than in the heart of either institution. My focus has been broad, focusing on the place and presence of people with disabilities in faith communities, along with research and writings in the area of Christian religious education as pilgrimage. My life as a writer, pastor, and professor embraces all these interests, feeding my body, heart, and spirit.

There was more to my calling than these professional avenues. I have the habit of using my life stories as fodder for articles, sermons, and lectures. However, unlike a great many students, preachers, and professors, I was not able to pour my entire life into the enterprise of studying, doing research, teaching, or preaching. The reality of the difference in who I am came to light as I filled out the official Presbyterian Church (USA) “Personal Information Form” (PIF). The form itself informed me that I was not like the rest of my colleagues who are professional clergy: while I could fill out parts about my family like being a dad with two children, there was no place in which I could mark “Partner” as my spouse for medical benefits with the Board of Pensions (our insurance and retirement coverage). To do so would reveal I was gay, which was suicidal professionally. Up to this year (2011), after nine years of graduate education, having served seven churches as interim pastor and having taught Christian education at a prestigious Divinity School for over a decade, I could be censured or defrocked from my denomination, losing all financial benefits along with the honorific title, “The Reverend.”

Here’s where a miracle took place: Even though I was outed involuntarily at my previous place of employment and wrote a book *On Being a Gay Parent* (New York: Seabury Press, 2007), with the knowledge of my supervisor, a.k.a., Presbyter Executive and Committee on Ministry, I was called to be the interim senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Henderson, North Carolina (an hour’s drive north of Raleigh), for fourteen months (2008-2009). The circumstances around my call were rocky at first, because I did not divulge the complete story about my family. I thought that would be the sure kiss of death to this position. After all, straight clergy do not have to share stories of their family either, so why should I? Again, I was involuntarily outed by someone else on the church staff. But the Holy Spirit’s presence was evident

the night that I met with the Session of the Church to talk about who I am and who we are as Christians in the body of Christ. It was during this time that a handful of Elders unexpectedly shared stories of loved ones who are lesbian or gay, and I shared openly about my pilgrimage of coming out. And with that discussion, followed by prayer, the deal was sealed: I became the interim pastor of the Church, much to the surprise of all who had gathered in that room.

While the Church members were, by and large, willing and able to get their mind and heart around the truth that I was an awesome preacher who preached the Gospel, who happened to be gay, the same could not be said by the townspeople of Henderson, many of whom were church-going people. The hyper-bigotry, fangs of prejudice, the sheer disgust, and the underlying fear of those of us who are different from the “rest”—whoever the rest may be—was breathtaking in its viciousness. In an unofficial town blog, known simply as “Home in Henderson,” the people of the town and surrounding county were able to write thoughts and feelings about the new interim pastor at First Presbyterian Church. I was impressed by the vitriol and deep-seated hate and shame that covered my computer screen when I first glanced at the blog site in my church office. The bloggers’ words made me feel a twinge of shame, and I regret getting hooked by this feeling so easily. I became the “Homo in Henderson.” One person wrote that my being in the pulpit was “astounding, and that people should take their children and run,” while another followed suit: “If I belonged to that church and had children, I would be out the door.” The theme of my lusting after men went on for months. Some people claimed that many dead Presbyterians were probably rolling over in their graves.

Through reading the blogs, I learned how people understand the authority of Scripture, as some cited long passages of Scripture that have nothing to do with a modern understanding of sexuality, ending it with this declarative statement: “If the homosexual community chooses to practice homosexuality in privacy, that is their choice...., but they will be deemed unfit for the kingdom of heaven.” Things subsided for a while, until a copperhead snake bit me in my backyard. A blogger wrote: “Sources are reporting that the openly gay minister of the First Presbyterian Church was bitten by a water moccasin yesterday. The minister has been released from the hospital and is in good condition. The snake remains in critical condition on life support.... I am praying for the snake.

Upon my leaving the church after it called its new installed pastor, there was this last comment on Home in Henderson: “Thank GOODNESS this church has a new minister. Could not believe they ever brought the other one into that church. What in the world were they thinking? Hopefully, this one is different.” When I left the church, the membership had increased, and the quality of faith among the members had matured as we discussed the issues of the day, buoyed by God’s grace. The congregation practiced some rituals they had not tried before; the church finances were maintained in this age of recession. The church was on the vanguard of social action in hosting a Spanish-speaking Wednesday night gathering of children, in inviting an African American civil rights leader for a yearly lecture event, and in becoming one of a handful of congregations who had welcomed an out-gay pastor.

What I was intrigued with in reading and re-reading the long list of blogs was one of the quips made early in my tenure at the church: like most churches, First Presbyterian Church had a sign that was changed weekly in front of the church, an-

nouncing the sermon title and upcoming events of the Church. With tongue in cheek, the bigoted blogger wrote that the sign in front of the Church should read, "The closet is open! Come on in!" While the psychology of coming out of closets has been central to many LGBTQ people for decades, with much written on the sociological and psychological act of LGBTQ people coming out of our closet of fear and shame, declaring our freedom to be who we were created to be, the metaphor is also highly applicable to the life of churches. In the Church as the body of Christ, there are those who live in their own closet of fear and shame over a host of issues. In many ways, a church is an assemblage of closets where culturally constructed categories keep people imprisoned. For example, while some congregants hide in closets of homophobia, other parishioners hide in closets where only racists dare dwell. Meanwhile, there are some faith communities themselves that find they are in an all-encompassing closet as they struggle with the hidden secret of sexual indiscretion practiced by a clergyperson. Still other gatherings of God's people wrestle with the Holy in closets on issues of class warfare or discrimination against people with disabilities. Many erect closets in which they hide their encrusted, ancient prejudices based upon ethnicity or hide dangerous political ambitions.

What releases a person from suffocating closets is not us, for the closet doors are either nailed shut or locked from inside *and* outside. Instead, it is often Christ's Spirit among us today which, by grace, breaks us out of our self-created closets and leads us on a pilgrimage of wholeness. Harkening back to the day when the disciples were in hiding after Jesus' resurrection, we read that "it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews" (John 20). For those who have lived life in a fiercely well-made closet, this image is all too familiar. We are paralyzed by fear of others who, if they find out our sexual orientation, would exclude us from our respective community of faith, our jobs, our homes, and would separate our families. We who live in closets are master builders with overly elaborate locks, with signs that say "No Trespassing!" which society buttresses with glue, nails, bolts, and more boards while we hunker down.

What does the resurrected Christ do with our locked, windowless closets? Just what Christ did with the sequestered group of disciples: he simply walks through locked doors, thick walls, and shuttered windows, stands among them and us, and says, "Peace be with you." This is the power of resurrection and resurrected lives: there are no barriers between the resurrected Christ and us. The Spirit can enter wherever and whenever the Holy chooses. Living the resurrected life is realizing, in the deepest and darkest parts of our human existence, that there are no more closets or doors that can be locked to keep the Spirit out of any part of our lives.

Today, with a wink and a nod, the Spirit is moving and breaking open closets and merrily confusing denominational politics across the Church as well as in other communities of faith. For example, the denominations of the United Church of Christ (UCC), Disciples of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the Moravian Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), and now the Presbyterian Church (USA), have witnessed the Holy Spirit move among churches in relationship to people who are LGBTQ. The people of God appear to be maturing in welcoming people who are LGBTQ as more of us share our life stories. New relationships are being established between LGBTQ and straight people. Old prejudices are quickly falling to the way-

side as Scripture is reinterpreted in light of modern theories of sexuality and biblical scholarship. A refreshing spirit of welcome and acceptance seems to be blowing within faith communities as LGBTQ people are taken in not only as members, but as ordained religious leaders, whether as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament or as priests and bishops. Children, parents, grandparents, and extended family members of LGBTQ people are now received warmly.

While there is empirical and anecdotal evidence of increasing inclusion of out-LGBTQ people as religious leaders in terms of the polity of our respective denominations, there is a great deal of work that will need to be done in terms of welcome and level of acceptance among individuals and churches. In many ways, we are at a rudimentary or basic orientation level of getting to know one another as people are grappling with why, how, and when communities of faith slowly learn to adjust and adapt to what the Spirit is doing with us or in spite of us. It will take several generations of growth before people who are LGBTQ and straight treat one another not as the suspicious, unknowable “other” or wary adversaries, but as sisters and brothers of the faith, equals in the purview of the countenance of God. Such growth toward full acceptance will need to be directed and led by religious leaders and grassroots efforts as we conscientiously attempt to overcome old prejudices in practicing acceptance of each other as created in the image of God. After all, the Spirit is doing something new today, in our midst, nudging faith communities to be the broader and more inclusive living body of Christ. It is our obligation to follow the Spirit, for we are on a path of wholeness, being taught by the Holy the way of transformed lives, LGBT and straight alike.

To provide some reference points on this pilgrimage of growth, there are at least four milestones communities of faith may touch upon as they strive toward their destination of being and becoming Christ’s inclusive body. The first issue church members will wrestle with is hospitality. Many LGBTQ people who grew up in a community of faith experienced not welcome, but subtle or overt exclusion not only from their families but also from a church or synagogue when they came out. Some LGBTQ people were denied participation in Church sacraments simply because of their sexual orientation. Even children of gays and lesbians have been treated as outcasts by churches. Still other LGBTQ people hide in closets because they’ve experienced shame, fear, and hatred by many people and leaders in faith communities. By hiding in closets, many gay and lesbian clergy have risen successfully in churches and other ecclesial offices but are always burdened by living a lie. Questions are raised: “Why be part of an organization in which one is treated as a second class citizen? Is there a covert caste system within the body of Christ, in which only straight people are fully members?” Simply moving across the portal of a church’s building becomes an obstacle in which LGBTQ people have experienced an imaginary barrier that says—through the gestures of a faith community—“Gays not welcomed.”

Hospitality is a fundamental moral practice for communal life. Theologian Christine Pohl writes that hospitality is “necessary to human well-being and essential to the protection of vulnerable strangers.”² One of the first places that people either experience welcome or feel excluded is at the threshold or portal by which one enters a holy space. The portal or threshold of a sanctuary, or a holy space where people are gathered in the name of God, literally or figuratively, is highly important in faith communities historically and biblically. Martin and Micah Marty stress the

importance of thresholds of our lives so that “the innocent (may) cross and enter our lives, (yet) strong enough to bar the beguilers God rightly frames the door to our souls and our lives as promised, and friend and neighbor freely cross its threshold.”³ For the ancient Israelites, the act of hospitality was essential because of their precarious existence. For example, the story of Sodom is not about the contemporary myth that it was destroyed because of the “sin of homosexuality,” but about the importance of hospitality to and between friend and stranger alike. The act of welcoming a stranger was a primary motif among them because the people of Israel themselves were often the strangers in the wilderness. The protection God provided the Israelites in the wilderness established a covenant with God that in turn provided a model for integrating the outsider, the pilgrim into Israel’s communal life. Hospitality was associated with God, covenant, and blessing.

In the New Testament, Christ himself was never a homeowner and was always the stranger, the pilgrim on the road of life, dependent upon the hospitality of others. He was the epitome of being the stranger when he moved among the disciples running off to Emmaus after his crucifixion. It was in the breaking of bread—a primary act of Eucharistic hospitality—that the clueless disciples were suddenly aware of who was in their midst (Luke 24). Later, Paul insisted upon the centrality of hospitality in which he urged all believers to “welcome one another” as Christ welcomes us (Romans 15:7). And the Benedictine order places hospitality as a primary virtue of their communities, which is an example for other communities of faith throughout time, welcoming strangers for they are Christ, showing the stranger “every courtesy, especially to servants of God and pilgrims.”⁴ Hospitality will need to be practiced both by people who are LGBTQ and by those who are straight as they gather together anew, welcoming the Christ in each other. In worship, hospitality may be practiced in the simple act of extending the peace of Christ after confession or celebration of the Eucharist with broken bread and cups of wine. Welcome may be discovered at a potluck soiree or in the gathering in a prayer circle. It will be in the relationships between one another that there will be a glimpse of how the mystical, wonderful body of Christ and the gift of grace bind us together. Coming out of isolating closets into the warm embrace of the Holy, present in the life of others regardless of one’s sexual orientation, will feel like cool water upon a thirsty tongue.

In extending hospitality there emerges a second move that will take place as a community heals and comes together in resolving and healing old wounds. In the process of coming out within a congregation, LGBTQ and straight people alike, we will be scandalized and afraid of what has gone on in the name of the Christ: people were excluded, made to feel “less than” others. Some have been pushed to the edge of society, people shunned far away and far apart. The reality of this ostracism people experienced “in the name of God,” either overtly or covertly. In order for LGBTQ people and straight people to fully embrace the other as God embraces us all, there will need to be a simple acknowledgement and confession that like Jesus at times, “I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me” (Matthew 25:43). For example, I was not aware of what hatred, based simply upon who I am, felt like until I came out of the closet. I can now appreciate what a person who is African American experiences in a predominantly white culture, or a woman in a largely masculine world, being looked down upon simply because of who one is, rather than because of what one has done or is doing. Simply put, there were and are times that the Church is instructed

not by Scripture per se, but is complicit with the powers that are *around* the Church, creating barriers between people who are LGBTQ and straight.

In order to move to full, unfettered acceptance, in order for an authentic experience of welcome and acceptance to come to the fore in congregations, there will need to be a time of confession, perhaps in worship, before there is a sense of acceptance and resolution among all. After all, grace instructs us that there cannot be the sweet sense of redemption without embracing the awkward pain of confession. In the history of the Presbyterian Church (USA), there is a host of written confessions that have been composed in light of the Church's acknowledging its complicity with the systematic sin that has kept the body of Christ less than unified, which is its original purpose: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one birth. This mammoth task of confession and redemption will be ongoing because generations of believers—LGBTQ and straight alike—were taught an antiquated understanding of “biblically based” human sexuality, followed by curious, if not harmful, interpretations of Scripture that kept LGBTQ people as second-class citizens in faith communities, e.g., Scripture references from Leviticus, Romans, and 1 Corinthians in terms of sexual acts. Not only have biblical scholars, theologians, historians, and preachers promoted a skewed understanding of sexuality, but many LGBTQ people placed themselves in closets of shame based on these interpretations, fortified by our families feeling humiliated as part of an LGBTQ person's life.

Hospitality, confession, and redemption will lead to the third move, which is inclusion. Inclusion will involve reorientation and re-configuration—psychologically, socially, and spiritually—of all people, LGBTQ and straight alike. Inclusion is a co-creative process of integration, in which we are guided by the inclusive nature of the realm of God's love. This realm is captured with words used as broad brushstrokes in the story of the Great Banquet Feast (Luke 14:15-24) in which Jesus reminds us that everyone has a place at the festive table of Godly love. For LGBTQ and straight people alike, such good news will call for a re-orientation of communal living as we begin to be among the people of God, re-imagining or re-claiming our co-equal place as God's beloved, which is an affirmation of our baptismal vows. Inclusion literally means “to shut in” or “enclose.”⁵ In other words, in the enclosure of God's realm of love, manifest in the body of Christ, people who are LGBTQ and straight are called to gather together in worshiping God, becoming accustomed to life with one another as God's beloved.

What will inclusion look and sound like? To begin, there will be changes in who is leading worship. For example, my daughter has been given a vision of women in leadership in church worship by seeing countless women in the pulpit on Sunday morning. Likewise, many LGBTQ people will also go through a re-orientation process as they see and hear other LGBTQ people leading worship. Or LGBTQ people and straight families will meet new patterns of relationships as women and men bring their partners or spouses, depending upon the agreed upon configuration. Many of us with partners have not felt free to bring our spouses, let alone our children, to worship for fear that our loved ones will receive the hurt and hate we've received in the past. Finally, those who are marginalized preach from their unique vantage point as outsiders, providing a one-of-a-kind interpretation of Scripture in light of their community's struggle against strong opposition. As people of various ethnicities, along with women, have preached out of a deep conversation between one's experience as

a community of outsiders and sacred texts, the same will hold true for people who are LGBTQ and their message on any given Sunday. There is no doubt that it will take a generation or two for people to become accustomed to what will feel like the novelty of open LGBTQ people as part of the daily, weekly congregational life.

Last, what sustains and becomes our reward on this pilgrimage is love. In moving beyond social exclusion based on sexual orientation and consciously reaching out to others different from us in terms of sexual orientation or gender, we will discover and be nurtured by love in genuine friendships. As Richard Rohr reminds us, such friendship is a practical decision to lay down our life for the other, whoever the other may be, as Christ did for all of us. In doing so, we discover that love is patient, not jealous, endures all things, does not take offense, and waits, believes, hopes, and forgives.⁶ In practicing such love, we consciously put aside hurtful rhetoric of the past as we also practice a love that brings forth justice among and for the good of all. Love then gives us permission to be free to welcome one another into each other's good company as we confess the error of our ways and accept one another as God's good creation, simply living out the promises made at our baptisms, engaged in the Eucharistic practices of unity.

Moving beyond politics of discrimination toward affirmation about who and whose we are as members of Christ's body, we realize we are on a pilgrimage toward God's holy realm, accompanied by the Spirit. Granted, we are but at the starting line in our pilgrimage toward full and fuller acceptance as LGBTQ people who are called to be preachers, teachers, and leaders, as well as members, in *all* communities of faith. Like all pilgrims before and around us, we need to get on the road and pick up the map that will get us moving on a new walk of faith, following an unknown path accompanied by the Spirit. In time, all closet doors may be open as all of God's people learn to walk and move in their own way, at their own pace, in the light of God's grace.

Notes

1 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

2 Christine Pohl, *Making Room* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 17.

3 Martin Marty and Micah Marty, cited in Lonni Collins Pratt and Fr. Daniel Homan, *Benedict's Way* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2000), 65.

4 Anthony Mesel and M.L. del Mastro, *The Rule of St. Benedict* (New York: Image Book, 1975), 89-90.

5 Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Beyond Accessibility* (New York: Church Publishing, 2010), 18.

6 Richard Rohr, *Radical Grace* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Press, 1995), 368.