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Isaiah 62:1-3, 10-12
 Luke 9:51-62

ALL ARE WELCOME

One of the principal tenets of a Benedictine monastery is that every pilgrim at the gate is to be received like Christ, in keeping with the 25th chapter of Matthew in which Jesus says, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." And so, the Rule of St. Benedict calls for every guest to be treated with the greatest care and solicitude. However, sometimes even Benedictines grow weary. An old story told in the order describes a seasoned abbot who, after welcoming thousands of motley strangers over the years, looked down the lane one day and saw yet another person wandering up to the gate. Forgetting how tired he was, the abbot blurted out to the stranger: "Jesus Christ. Is that you again?" [Sidney G. Hall, III, "No Longer at Ease," in Kelly Turney, Ed., *Shaping Sanctuary: Proclaiming God's Grace in an Inclusive Church*, Published in cooperation with the Welcoming Church Movement Reconciling Congregation Program, 2000, p. 20.]

As the Rev. Dr. Sidney Hall told the Reconciling Congregation Convocation in Denton, Texas, in 1999, we who celebrate "God's presence and prophetic voice at work in Reconciling congregations have an awesome and sometimes wearisome job: We are here to affirm what the Benedictine monk knew before he even asked it. The answer to that question is always, 'Yes.' Jesus Christ, is that you again? Yes." [*Ibid.*]

Our task as Christians is to see Christ in each person, no matter how different they are from us, and to affirm the worth and dignity of that person. Our task as members of a Reconciling in Christ congregation is not only to affirm each person here in this place, but to carry that affirmation beyond the walls of this building.

After worship today, some of us will march in Seattle's Pride Parade, a wonderful annual celebration of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in our city. Several of us have been at the Hillmans' house this week, building the float that we will share with the other congregations of the University District Ecumenical Parish. The theme of this year's parade is "Over the Rainbow," bringing to mind the song from the Wizard of Oz. So, we have built a little church on the back of Mark's truck, with a rainbow overarching it and a banner that says, in keeping with Dorothy's words at the end of the movie, "There's no place like home! Our churches love you!"

It is important to make that affirmation, because so many people have grown up in churches that tell GLBT people that their sexual orientation is sinful. I remember many years ago, when a group of us from University Baptist marched in the Pride parade for the first time. When people saw our church banner, folks all along the parade route cheered and cheered. Thank goodness, it is not unusual anymore to see church groups in the parade, but it is still essential that we march. We need to counter the voices of the conservative churches who may welcome GLBT people, but only with the understanding that they will change their God-given sexuality. We need to proclaim that each person's sexual orientation is a gift from God, and we need to make that proclamation not only in our churches, but in the street.

In today's passage from Isaiah, the prophet speaks of a triumphant return to Jerusalem. For many long years, the people have been languishing in exile in Babylon,

unable to sing God's song in a strange land. Now, at last, they are coming home, and the glory of Zion shines like the dawn, nations see her vindication, and she is a jeweled crown in the hand of God. Imagine the joy of the exiles upon their return. Imagine them rebuilding the temple, repairing their homes and replanting the fields they abandoned in such haste. Imagine how good they feel being back in the land they love.

But wait, the prophet says, not everyone is home yet. Go out, go out through the gates, and prepare the way for those still in exile. Rebuild the highway, clear away the rubble. Make a way for these others, for they too are God's holy people. Salvation comes for them, as well. Like the city itself, they are not to be forsaken.

So there is work for us to do, urgent work. As we hear in today's Gospel passage, this is not the time for taking care of those who are already home—to bury the dead, to attend to family. There are too many out there who are hurting, and there are too many out there still learning to hate. Listen to these words of a contemporary high school student in Massachusetts:

Every day in the high school, I hear it's okay if I'm gay so long as I stay in the closet, and that I'm an abomination against God, that I can change if I want to, and that people like me shouldn't be taught about in school. I'm told that I should be satisfied because our school is far better than it used to be, and that I shouldn't push for my equal rights and inclusion because the community isn't ready yet. I hear, ""That's so Gay!" all the time, and I hear that AIDS is my punishment for being who I am, and I hear the word *faggot* all the time. It's hard not to walk around angry all the time. [Kelly Turney, Ed., *op. cit.*, p. 37.]

Judy Shepard, mother of Matthew Shepard, who twelve years ago was tied to a fence in Laramie, Wyoming, and beaten to death because he was gay, describes how she speaks about what happened to her son:

I remind the audience that my son was killed because two men learned that it was okay to hate. Somehow and somewhere they received the message that the lives of 'the others' are not as worthy of respect, dignity, and honor as the lives of 'us.' They were given the impression that society condones or is at least indifferent to violence against 'the others.' We have become a SIC society: silent, indifferent, and complacent. For all who ask what they can do for Matt and for all the other victims of hate—my answer is to educate and bring understanding where you see hate and ignorance, bring light where you see darkness, bring freedom where there is fear, and begin to heal. [Judy Shepard, *The Meaning of Matthew*, Hudson Street Press, New York, 2009, pp. 266-7.]

We have a lot of work to do. Using Isaiah's metaphor, we have a lot of rubble to clear away. We have rubble in our hearts to clear away, as we come up against our own prejudices. Why do we have so few openly gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people in our congregation? Are there people who stay in the closet because they don't feel they'd be accepted here if they were open about who they are? What kind of messages

are we sending that they would feel that way? Or do GLBT people not choose to worship here? If not, why not? If we truly want to be a Reconciling in Christ congregation, how can we be more genuine, and more public, about our stand?

Then, there is rubble in the larger church to clear away. Last summer our Churchwide Assembly passed a resolution that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships. We can hold same-sex weddings and commitment services here without our clergy risking ecclesiastical trials. Do people know that? Further, a resolution passed that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church. Hallelujah!

Unfortunately, even though neither of these resolutions requires an individual church either to endorse same-sex marriage or to call a gay pastor, their very adoption by the larger body is causing a number of churches to consider leaving the ELCA. If you know members of such churches, could you reach out to support them during this difficult time?

Finally, there is rubble in the larger society that is preventing sexual minorities from coming home to the City of God. Last November, the voters of Washington State managed to preserve our law that grants same-sex domestic partners all the rights of married couples, with the exception of marriage itself. A handful of other states have similar laws. However, Eastern Washington was solidly against the law, as are many voters across the country. Thirty states have gay marriage bans in their state constitutions. We have a long way to go before everyone can come home.

The Rev. Sidney Hall tells a story about Archbishop Oscar Romero, the slain archbishop of El Salvador. He says that Romero:

...upon looking out at the poor in his congregation who had been marginalized by military, political and ecclesiastical oppression, give them a word of hope....With eyes of compassion and courage, Romero said, 'You are Jesus. You are Jesus. You are the embodiment of God, the hands and feet of God. You are the voice that God needs now. You are Jesus.' Do you know that it's true? Do you realize that it is you the monk sees coming down the road? And he asks, 'Jesus Christ! Is that you again?' [Sidney G. Hall, III., *op. cit.*, p. 25.]

It is you. You are Jesus. You can clear away the rubble and prepare the road for everyone to come home to the Holy City. Because you are not alone. We are all God's children, and God is at work in us, and together we will build a church and a city and a world where all are welcome. Amen.