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University Lutheran Church
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Taking Pride through Reconciliation

Ester 7:1-6; II Cor 5:11-21 & John 15:1-17

I would like to start this time with you by saying what an honor it is to be asked by your Pastoral Leadership to come and speak to you this morning and what a privilege it is for me to stand here before you as a minister who is “openly gay”, being a part of Worship this morning in conjunction with your participation of the Seattle Gay/Lesbian/Bi/Transgender Pride Celebration, more commonly known as the Gay Pride Parade.

As you may have read in this morning’s bulletin the little blurb about who I am, you will note that I started out my ministerial vocation as an American Baptist minister. This is how I became acquainted with your lovely Pastor, Anne Hall. In fact our very first time that we met was at University Baptist Church where she was pastor. The church had been working through the issue of becoming a Welcoming and Affirming congregation and was going to be voting on that issue after the service. In honor of that process, the Seattle Lesbian and Gay Chorus was asked to provide special music at that service. Anne in her usual up beat manor introduced the Chorus to the congregation before the Chorus sang and with great pride also said, “...and one of its members is one of our own American Baptist ministers!” This was the first time that I had been “outed” in my faith community and not by my own volition. So Anne, I don’t think I have ever properly thanked you for that particular introduction and wish to do so now.

I mention this story not to try to embarrass Pastor Anne, but as a way to talk about how we tend to move forward in our thinking and behaviors in little steps. Today I would like to share with you a little of my faith journey as a way of bringing parts of today’s scripture lessons into practical applications. In the reading of Ester, we see the story of a young woman who had been concealing her birthright as a Jewess from her husband King Xerxes as it could be very detrimental to her life if this fact were public knowledge. Finally she realized that in order to save her people from certain death and destruction, she was going to have to reveal to the King, her husband, that she also was a Jew. She did this not knowing whether she would be killed or not, so with great courage she steps forward and comes out of the closet about her ethnic background.

For anyone who is either gay/bi-sexual/lesbian or transgender or having gender reassignment, the story of Ester and the potential cost of “coming out of the closet” is a very real thing. I grew up in a small town in Kansas, at a time when sexual behavior was never discussed let alone using words such as homosexual. Due to social expectations and the lack of sexual education, I married and fathered three very beautiful children. I eventually answered a call into ministry and shortly after starting in my first pastorate I became divorced over the issue of sexual orientation. Although I was out to my wife at the time, I was still in the closet to the congregation that I was serving.

In 1989, the Minister and Missionary Board of the American Baptist Churches held the first convocation for lay leaders and pastors on “ministering to persons living with AIDS”. About a year before this convocation I was coming over to Seattle weekly for “therapy” dealing with my sexual orientation with a group known as Metanoia Ministries. Although it helped me work through issues that I had from my childhood, it didn’t seem to change my “feelings” about my sexuality. At the very first worship service of that convocation the speaker, who was a theologian from the Colgate Rochester Seminary, spoke about the gross misinterpretations of Scripture around the subject of sexual orientation. It was there for the very first time that I heard from the pulpit that being a gay man was not a sin and, despite what the majority of churches had been preaching for most of this century, ones sexual orientation was not a moral issue and that God accepted me for who I am. I cannot tell you how healing it is to thousands of men and women who get to hear this type of message from their pastors and feel the support through their local

congregations. I applaud you here at University Lutheran for being a “Reconciling in Christ” congregation and for your support to all who feel ostracized by conservative faith communities and a large segment of society in general. I understand that there is a group from University Lutheran that is marching in today’s Pride Parade as a way of voicing your love and support to the GBLT community. This type of demonstration by this congregation has great impact. At one point in my life I was the president of the Seattle Gay Fathers Association. While being on a boat as that person representing so many thousands of men who were married and have children, I cannot tell you strongly enough of the healing tears that I was able to see among those men who were in the crowds lining the streets as the boat I was on passed by.

Some of you may not be aware of how or why this Parade received its start. This parade is a statement of both celebration and of solidarity. It is the phoenix that came out of police harassment of the gay community in New York City on June 28, 1969, where the GBLT community came together and fought back at police during a raid made on the Stonewall Inn, a popular pub where gay men and women meet. Each year since Stonewall, a parade has been given as a symbol of “standing up for the dignity and rights of the gay individual.”

I mentioned earlier that we tend to move in little steps. Sometimes those steps are solid and firm, other times they are like those of a toddler learning how to walk. For me they were like toddler steps: it was sharing with my wife the understanding about my sexual orientation; it was leaving parish ministry and moving to Seattle to learn who I was as an openly gay man; it was joining the Seattle Lesbian and Gay Chorus and being outed by a fellow colleague; it was going to my conference minister and sharing with him my situation and ultimately having my ministerial profile “black listed” due to regional politics; it was leaving a denomination that I grew up in and finding a denomination that was welcoming to who I am as a person, not just a local church but a denomination; it is in speaking in public worship the journey that I am on with fellow Christians such as all of you.

In the Gospel of John we read: No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. There are millions of men and women who have felt alienated by the Church, cut off from the vine for being just who they are. They need communities of faith like University Lutheran, where they can continue to be apart of the vine that Christ speaks about.

With the readings of today’s lessons, there was one commandment given by Jesus, “My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.” The other was a mission given by the Apostle Paul, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to the Creator through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassador.”

As a “Reconciling in Christ” congregation you are ambassadors of Christ and are taking more small steps as you explore, as a family of faith, what it means in the phrase “laying down your life for others” and “what does the ministry of reconciliation look like?” I encourage you to continue to dialogue with leaders like Rev Rick Pribbernow, your pastors Anne and Ron and others from other denominations that are reaching out to the GBLT community. It can be very tough taking on this call of Christ’s, but it is through your understanding of Jesus’ command “to love one another” and Paul’s call to “the ministry of reconciliation” that you will help those churches within the ELCA and the wider Christian community to better understand the depths of God’s love to a world that so needs to experience it.

Praise God for all that you here are University Lutheran are doing, and know that my prayers are with you on your journey of faith, and take Pride through Reconciliation!

Amen!