

## THE CHURCH WITH THE RADICAL WELCOME

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There is a story about a minister trying to get serious and speak about the imminence of death and its power over us. His opening sentence was that "in 100 years, every member of this parish will be dead." And with that, a man in the fourth row began to laugh.

Now there is nothing in the world more upsetting and disconcerting to a preacher than to have someone miss the mood and the intent. So he thought the brother had misheard him and he said again, "I'm here to say that within the next 100 years, every member of this parish will be dead."

At that, the man laughed again. The minister began to get a little angry and was losing his fervor. So he turns to the laughing man and said, "You think that's funny?" "Yes, I do." "Why do you think it's funny?" "Because I don't belong to this church!"

There are some churches where I've preached over these last two years where people don't get the point. I'm not used to that because people at All Saints always had a way of getting the point before it was even spoken.

So I'm glad to be back at this podium today and so grateful that your Rector asked me to be a part of this incredibly wonderful conference, "Beyond Inclusion."

I can't laugh at the old preacher because I do belong to this Church. After I retired in May of 1995, Mary and I spent more than a year going to various and sundry places to worship on the Lord's Day. More than once, Mary said, "If you choose to go there again, it will be without me!" So we are happy to be home -- we belong to this Church!

Ed Bacon urged us to return -- even pleaded with us. And you know why? He loves my wife, Mary, with a passion and wants her nearby to hug on -- and he knows I am a tither and he wants my money!

There is something about Ed Bacon that none of you are privy to. When Ed and Hope came out to Southern California, Ed was captivated by the Hollywood stars. He did a screen test for the movie "Jerry Maguire." He outperformed Cuba Gooding on "Show Me The Money", but Ed couldn't hold on to the football in the end zone!

As I've come to All Saints week after week, and watched Ed take hold of the Rector's job with such excitement, competence, enormous energy and deep, deep commitment to the mission and dreams I gave my life to -- I do rejoice that I said it was time to retire.

Ed is all I ever hoped and prayed would be the Rector of All Saints Church. With your help and partnership, he will have an incomparable ministry in this place and throughout the world. You are so fortunate to have him and he is lucky to have you as his congregation. Back to Hollywood -- I loved Sandra Bullock at the Academy Awards. I can't remember what Oscar she was presenting. I just remember how lovely and beautiful she was and what she said. She stole a line from Hillary Clinton. "It takes a village to build a dream." You and Ed are in this together. What a dream you are building. It has great power. It can change the world.

Now before my time runs out, I better get to my assigned topic.

Thirty years ago when I arrived at All Saints, we had the Eucharist once a month at 11 and once a month at 9:00. The infrequency was not what surprised me but the huge number of people who didn't come to the altar to receive communion. They just sat there. It really upset me. Here we were preparing the banquet table of God and they refused to come to the feast. I began gently to inquire, "Why don't you come to communion? I feel as though I am doing something that blocks your communion with God." "Oh, no. It's not you. It's me," they would say. "I don't feel worthy." And then came all the reasons, all the guilt that burdened their souls. "I'm divorced." "I'm out of work and feel uncomfortable." "I've never felt I obeyed all of God's laws." "I feel I let my children down -- I wasn't a good parent." "I feel I let my parents down when they needed me -- I wasn't a good son." "I had an abortion." "I just got out of jail for embezzlement" -- and on and on it went. Everyone felt guilty about something. And that burden of guilt, that sense of not being acceptable at God's table, prevented their coming to the one place in all the world where those burdens could be lifted.

It was in struggling with the universal sense of brokenness, in acknowledging that all who come to the Lord's Table limp are wounded and as they walk to the Holy of Holies -- it was out of this experience long ago that I began to offer that radically inclusive invitation to the Eucharist: "Whoever you are, and wherever you find yourself on the journey of faith, you are welcome to come to this table to receive our bread and wine made holy."

In ways beyond my wildest dreams, those words have been life-changing to so many over the years who have felt unworthy to feast at the banquet of God. Tim Safford told me that his mother, Katie, started coming back to All Saints Church after more than 20 years when she heard that I was inviting people to come to communion, whoever you are. She felt safe to come if no one was excluded. The Eucharist became a transformative ritual because it not only connected people to the past but portrayed to them what the future might hold. Whites and people of color, poor and rich, the strong and the weak, gay and straight, liberals and conservatives, saints and sinners -- all together at the feast of transforming love.

The biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, writes, "Praise is not a response to the world already fixed and settled, but praise is a responsive and obedient participation in a world yet to be decreed and in process of being decreed through the liturgical act." Oh -- the wonder of that!

"Whoever you are, come;" "Wherever you find yourself on the journey of faith, come" -- come to the place where God welcomes you into the feast of love and acceptance, where no one is a stranger. Maybe, people over the years saw in that radical welcome the birthing of a new world of inclusion where all God's children would be loved and safe whoever they are.

There is more...

Gay men and lesbians heard about this radical welcome at All Saints Church in Pasadena and they came from everywhere and found it was for real. There is no way to describe adequately the humiliation and exclusion and rejection most of these precious children of God have experienced in Christian churches and throughout the structures of society.

These gay men and lesbians have frequently been told by their families that they don't belong to them, by many churches that they were perverse sinners because of their sexual orientation and their expressing their love for each other, by the Vatican they are told that they are intrinsically disordered, by some in the medical profession that they are sick, by the Supreme Court of this land that upheld the sodomy laws in 1986 that say they are criminals, and by the former President of the United States that they are not normal.

The brutal way these children of God have been excluded from normal life is breathtaking. What a task gays and lesbians have to maintain self-respect. A gay man said to me, "It is a hard struggle, an uphill journey toward self-acceptance, purging oneself of internalized self-hatred that all gay men and lesbians ingest at the hands of a hostile society."

Homophobia is the last respectable prejudice -- one seemingly sanctioned by the Church and the State. In such a world, those words of welcome had a liberating power, "Whoever you are," come. "Wherever you find yourself on the journey of faith," come to a God who loves you just as you are.

There is more...

Many gays and lesbians found a place of integrity in the life of All Saints Church. But one arena of my faith and practice brought great pain and consternation to this growing constituency. I refused to bless same-sex unions. Every time I met with GALAS (an acronym for gays and lesbians at All Saints), they pushed me to the wall. "You've given your life and the ministry of All Saints to bringing justice and liberation to the world. Blessing our covenants, our unions of love, is a justice issue. And don't tell us it is because the laws of the Episcopal Church forbid it. You've broken many unjust laws." And they were my friends! They pushed fiercely but I was a slow learner. This was the period of 1985 to 1990.

One day in 1987, Mark Benson and Phil Shaw came to my office to talk with me about blessing their covenant of faithful love. My response was cautious. I loved these men and they were central to our ministry. Both sons of clergy. They loved Jesus and were faithful disciples.

I can hardly believe my cautious response as I reflect on it now. I knew I wasn't ready for that event in my ministry. My staff was divided on the issue and we had just begun to talk openly about homosexuality within the congregation. Could this congregation in 1987 handle an event so explosive? But I cared about Mark and Phil. I said, "I will be glad for us to gather in my office with a few friends. There I could give a blessing to your covenant. No one would know -- except us and God!"

They were kind with my foolishness. I deserved harsh judgment but they were gracious. No, they didn't want a side room, private affair. They wanted a glorious celebration in the church with all their friends -- just like straight folks have for the blessing of their marriage covenant.

"We'll wait, George," they said. "We know someday you will be ready and so will All Saints Church. But let's get on with the process."

There is more...

I agreed that blessing same-sex covenants was a justice issue. But theologically, I was troubled. Gay unions did not seem compatible with the purposes of God's creation. So how can God bless these unions.

That was not an enlightened position. But over the years, I came to understand sexuality at much deeper levels. Homosexuality in the vast majority of cases is a condition that is given, not chosen. From my own reading and personal experiences with gay and lesbian persons, I am convinced that at least 90% of homosexuals do not have anything remotely close to a choice in their sexual orientation. Some do believe they have freely chosen to be homosexual and live out that gay or lesbian orientation. I respect that position and honor these people within the same moral perspective.

I have been guided very substantially in my understanding of homosexuality by the many books of James B. Nelson. He is a brilliant theologian and is recognized as one of the country's leading ethicists on human sexuality. He has spoke here at the Rector's Forum.

According to Dr. Nelson, we cannot say with any precision what causes homosexuality. It is likely to be an interaction of several factors, including genetic, hormonal and environmental. But psychological and social influences alone probably cannot cause homosexuality. He writes that the genetic, hormonal, neurological predisposition toward homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual orientation is present at birth for all people. But it takes the blending of various factors -- and no one seems to be quite sure how -- in the earliest years of a child's life to produce a lasting sexual orientation in that person. Once that is relatively fixed -- and the research now says this is between two and five years of age -- this sexual orientation cannot be changed permanently by therapy. Dr. John Money, the highly regarded Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics at John Hopkins Medical School, offers the same conclusions. Many gay and lesbian people tell us horror stories of how parents, upon hearing that their child was homosexual, sent them off to a psychiatrist "to be fixed." The dehumanization of that process is overwhelming.

In the deepest, profoundest ways our sexuality is God's good gift. I believe that now and affirm it with my total being. To deny or repress or hide one's sexuality is bad theology and bad psychology. The only healthy thing to do is accept oneself and affirm one's sexuality.

This wondrous acceptance is of the total person -- body, mind and spirit. James Nelson says that when we allow this radical grace to penetrate and we accept the body as loved by God, we begin to reclaim the lost sexual dimensions of ourselves.

Whoever you are, come to the Lord's Table. This radical welcome took on deeper dimensions. Grace is total acceptance. Our body's feelings, our body's erogenous dimensions, our fantasies, our masculinity and femininity, our heterosexuality, our homosexuality, our sexual irresponsibilities as well as our yearnings for sexual integrity -- all of this is graciously accepted by divine love.

That is the wonder and glory of the Christian faith. When we know God loves us just as we are and we put our arms around ourselves in acceptance and self-love, there is released in us enormous spiritual power -- power to grow into wholeness, into that beautiful person God has created us to be.

There is more...

The story is known. I did decide to bless same-sex unions at the altar of All Saints Church. However, all that went on inside of me and in the soul of this parish is not so well known. So, let's turn to that now.

During the summer of 1990, as I studied the assigned lessons to be used in Sunday worship over the next year with the hope of getting ideas for my sermons, one of the lessons for November 11, 1990 engaged my heart with such a tenacious power that I've never been the same. Listen to the words of the 5th Chapter of Amos: "These are the words of the Lord, the God of Hosts... I hate, I despise your festivals and I take no delight in our solemn assemblies ... Take away from me the noise of your songs. I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like a river and righteousness like a never failing stream."

In that moment, a decision was made in the deepest places of my being. I would bless the union of Mark Benson and Phil Shaw. I was compelled to do it. I had tried to live in grace and be open to the claim of God's justice on my conscience. I had listened to the pain of the oppressed gay and lesbian persons in our community and the larger church -- and I knew justice delayed any longer would be justice denied. The voice of God speaking through the prophet Amos and through the inclusive love of Jesus overwhelmed me. "Let justice roll down like a river..." On November 11, 1990, I delivered a sermon which had been a decade in the making -- "God, Sex and Justice." I invited the congregation to join me and an important Ad Hoc Committee in a pilgrimage of study, discussion and prayer as we made our way to the first same-sex blessing of a covenant of life-long, faithful, monogamous love. That celebration was planned for January of 1992.

That sermon took us into deep waters, harsh controversy, perplexing confusion -- and also into great excitement and a sense of liberation. It also got us into the newspapers. It was fear of what the media would do with all of this that had been one of the inhibitors of my moving sooner. I had wanted the sermon to be just between Rector, congregation and God. However, John Dart of The Los Angeles Times heard about it and finally got a copy of the full sermon. His story which appeared in the Metro Section of the Times was true to the text but the headlines sensationalized the article. And the story of this Episcopal priest deciding to bless a gay couple at the altar of God went out over the nation.

The foundation shook. Homosexuality is probably the most divisive issue since slavery split the Church. In that week following the L.A. Times story, I received 30 letters opposing what I had said and proposed to do and 100 supportive ones. In preparing this address, I looked over those letters again. I had almost forgotten how provocative all of this had been!

The letters of dissent from parishioners were graceful but tough. They loved me and this parish deeply, and were sad to be forced into strong opposition to me. Their dissent would not go away. Blessing gay life was against too much that was deep within them. I tried to hold on to them and give their dissent a place of legitimacy. I disagreed with what they were saying, but I honored their willingness to be square with me. We lost some of them and I grieved over their departure. Most hung on. Some became our greatest supporters of the gay and lesbian ministry.

Those angry letters from outside the parish were something else. Listen to some quotes:

"Satan is playing tricks with your mind."

"You don't know the bible. You were taught in a theological cemetery that didn't have regard for the living God."

"I have asked God to send George Regas, who is not fit to be Rector of All Saints Church, to the depths of hell."

"To the Rector of Sodomyland..."

I don't doubt that these were sincere people. But when I got one of those letters that began, "I write you in Christian love," I said -- Watch out! Duck!

Then for six solid weeks, we had a dozen protesters with those outrageous signs walking up and down the street in front of the Church shouting their bitter slogans at us.

It wasn't so easy seven years ago to be a member of All Saints. Parents wondered about bringing their children to church in the midst of such brutality and obscenity. But we held on. There was a power of liberation that permeated this place and upheld us.

On the day of the L.A. Times story, someone broke into Mary's car as it stood in the Rectory driveway and simply tore the inside of the car apart -- as though they were raping her.

But that same day, I received a lifegiving letter that said: "After years of anger, denial frustration, deep sorrow -- I heard in your sermon that I could embrace my sexuality, my gayness because God accepts and loves me. That was the most important thing I had ever heard. It changed my life. Like in Baptism, you took me, a clean and pure person, and presented me to the congregation as someone worthy to be loved and accepted."

We all felt walls around us crumbling -- and as those walls fell, we who were straight felt freer in our own sexuality. A burden had been lifted. We all could grow into the fullness of the life God had in store for us.

There is more...

For me, the meaning of "Beyond Inclusion" is simple. The inclusive love of Christ and the Church's welcome to all become real and authentic when the Episcopal Church allows for the ordination of practicing gay men and lesbians, and for the blessing of the covenants of same-sex couples who are committed to lifelong fidelity and love.

I believe that these acts -- ordination and blessing -- are the clearest symbols the Church can offer that these precious children of God are fully accepted into the community of faith and loved unconditionally by God.

Our saying that a gay person is good and beautiful is inseparably tied to our saying that his or her genital expressions of love are holy unto God.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has been a long-time friend of All Saints and a very special person in my life. I remember something he said a decade ago as he shared the deep things of the soul: "I was raised in the Anglo Catholic tradition of the Church with a tabernacle on the altar in which the reserved sacrament of the blessed bread and wine was kept. Every time I would come by the tabernacle, I would genuflect, bow the knee, in respect for God's presence on the altar. As I've lived in South Africa, I feel like genuflecting every time a white person or a black person crosses my path, bowing before them -- for they are holy and precious, vessels of the living God."

I could hardly imagine that he would be able to say something like that. In that cauldron of violence and bitterness and hatred of apartheid, Archbishop Tutu saw in every person the precious worth they have because they are the children of God. That's why his life shines as a light to the world.

Recently, Desmond Tutu moved into another dimension of apartheid. Although the official position of the Anglican church in South Africa still opposed homosexual behavior -- Archbishop Tutu strongly disagrees, calling the position inconsistent. "We have said that celibacy is a vocation -- to be chosen; but we've made celibacy obligatory for homosexuals -- a group of ten percent of the population." Desmond Tutu goes on to state very clearly: "Because physical expression of the sex drive (in a loving relationship) is important to becoming fully human, I am very uncomfortable with restrictions on homosexuals." Yes, this amazing man would genuflect before gay men and lesbians -- holy vessels of the Living God.

That's what the blessing of a covenant means in its profoundest dimension. It is giving equality to the covenants of love by gay and straight couples. It is doing what Andrew Sullivan of the New Republic says is the ultimate civil rights issue: "It is a fundamental statement that our loves (gay loves) are as good as anybody else's."

Now a final comment...

All of this put this parish in Pasadena at great risk. We launched out into deep waters not really knowing the outcome. We only knew that our study and reflection, our prayers and struggle, our experience with our gay sisters and brothers, all opened us to hear God speaking through Amos -- "Let justice roll down like a river." It took great courage for you to risk the livelihood, the reputation, the wonderment of All Saints Church on justice for gay men and lesbians. Yet, we trusted in the depths of God's mystery that truth would be vindicated some day -- the truth of gay love's holiness -- that truth would be validated someday because we believed God raised the Jesus of inclusive, unconditional love from the dead. We trusted God would bless the courage of this place. You can do the right thing and still survive and thrive. This nation longs for such a church.

Nothing this church ever did in God's name is more important than our standing at those tombs of cruel brutal oppression to our gay sisters and brothers, and proclaiming those words of Jesus to Lazarus: Come forth and live. Unbind them and let them go. Free to love.

As long as there is a memory of All Saints Church, Pasadena, this love for the oppressed will never forgotten.