

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Paisley LeRoy

June 28, 2020

In 2006, our congregational council adopted a statement of welcome, explicitly naming the welcome of “people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.” Three years later, in 2009, our denomination voted to allow LGBTQ+ folx to become ordained—a vote that gave me the privilege to be in this space today, as your vicar. Without this vote, I, a queer woman, would not be allowed to be publicly “out” while also serving as a Minister of the church’s most precious gifts of Word and Sacrament. Five years ago, our country passed legislation that allowed for marriage equality. We have, as a country and as Church, ...made great strides towards the inclusion of the queer community.

For me this decision, in a way, was another reformation—the Spirit’s holy work within the Church of Christ to bring about the Kin-Dom here on earth. A Kin-Dom that affirms diversity and lavishly loves all people of God in their varied sexual orientations, gender identities, races, and cultures. In a way, these decisions have allowed us to finally echo the recurring words spoken by God in the Genesis creation narrative when God gazes upon all She has made and names it “very good.” These decisions have made it so the Church faithfully and publicly affirms God’s creative words of inherent goodness that reside in all creation.

And yet this reformation, just as the first, did not come without great risk.

The last couple of weeks we have been deep into Matthew's Missionary Discourse and talked about the need to drive out the demons of the systemic evils in our communities. Jesus is sending his disciples "like sheep into the midst of wolves," to bring about the Gospel of healing and love. He himself notes the risk in doing so. Persecution. Violence. Upheaval.

See, the disciples were a minority group living under the Roman Empire. An Empire that would, as we know, end up murdering Jesus. To bring the unpopular and foreign message of Jesus in this hostile environment would surely lead to the rejection of many. He notes that not all will receive the disciples and, if this happens, if the explicit welcome is not achieved, to "shake the dust from their feet on their way out."

But, for those who do accept, the Kin-Dom of God has come near.

Therein lies the risk that we as Church took in bringing an explicit message of welcome to a church that historically justified the oppression of and violence towards the LGBTQ+ community. Some would accept the public declaration of the love of the gospel for our queer siblings and...some would not. Many would not. Churches left the ELCA. Individual congregations lost members. There was great risk.

And yet, the welcome stood firm and we "shook the dust from our feet" for those who could not join the welcome. And we knew that here, in this place, in this ever-expanding, ever-welcoming church, the Kin-Dom of God has come near. And as our welcome expanded...we welcomed prophets in our midst.

The Kin-Dom of God came near to me in prophets named Jerry and Phil. A middle-aged, gay, married couple that walked into a service I was leading one Sunday. After Church, I greeted Jerry and Phil and heard a bit about their story. Their coming to terms with their sexualities later in life after marriage, children, and many failed attempts to “fix” themselves of their sexual orientation. Jerry was excommunicated from the Mormon Church, a church that, though Jerry would admit had its downfalls, was near and dear to his heart. The pain of being ripped away from his church family and his own family was too much to bear. He had tears streaking down his face when he finished talking. “But I saw the rainbow flag outside the church and thought we’d risk it. But it’s clear...we’re welcome here.”

Yes, Church, we have made great strides towards expanding our welcome of the queer community. And we could stop there. Talking about how our hospitality has offered a figurative glass of cold water to “the least of these,” by welcoming and recognizing the beloved-ness of those on the margins.

But this passage, if we read it from the disciples’ point of view, as we often do, is not about welcoming but about **being welcomed**. And so this message gets a little more difficult when talking to a majority white, heterosexual, cisgender, middle-class community. Because many of us have never had to fear **not** being welcomed.

Womanist Scholar, Rev. Dr. Emilie Townes reminds us, “the one who welcomes often continues to be at home and retains a good measure of control; this causes us to welcome those who are dispossessed, the little ones, into our own worlds on terms we ourselves have crafted. It is

impossible to develop the reciprocal relationships express in this passage, for the host has near-absolute control.”

So long as we remain in the walls of our church, we have the power. Even when we risk our wellbeing in divisive statements of welcome, we still have the power. We are not and cannot be like the disciples in today’s passage who have been sent out with *nothing except* the radical and scandalous message of Jesus. Sent out with nothing except to power to drive heal and to drive out demons. Without getting out of these walls.

Perhaps we—many people of relative privilege—are called to do the same. Called into communities to bring a prophetic message. A hard message. A divisive message.

Because that’s what a prophet does. That is what we are called to do. To be so inspired by the radical welcome of the gospel message of love and grace that we cannot help but share that message with others. Perhaps with those groups of privilege that we are a part of...knowing that some will accept it and some will not.

To do more than show up to Pride and say “love is love” on Facebook. To do more than put a Black Lives Matter sign outside your home...but to go into the communities that we are a part of our families, our mom's groups, our biking clubs, our choirs...whatever groups we are a part of...go into those places with the message of God’s love even and especially for the queer community. The message of God’s love even and especially for people of color. The message of God’s love even and especially for the needy, the poor, the orphan...that marginalized.

Because, only you, Child of God, are in the perfect position to bring this prophetic message to these communities. Again, knowing that some will accept, and some will not. And being willing to take that risk.

When the welcoming and the being welcomed are true...the Kin-Dom of God comes near. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." This text is a promise. A promise that whenever and wherever this blessed gift of hospitality is shared, we are manifesting God's very presence (Working Preacher, Rolf Jacobson). And is that not the most beautiful vocation? To have the opportunity to take part in the very reforming of creation into what God intended it to be? Where all people—LGBTQIA+ individuals, people of color—all people, are reminded that they are good and perfectly made in God's image.

Yes, what a beautiful gift to be called into. To be Prophets of the Most High, with the breath of the Holy Spirit working in and through you.