

Beyond Inclusion to Transformation
Sunday, June 11, 2023, 10:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

It was 1998 and I was the Associate Rector at St. Peter's in San Pedro. The Inclusion Wars in the Episcopal Church were heating up with a resolution from the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops declaring "homosexuality incompatible with Scripture" -- a resolution the Diocese of Los Angeles immediately "declined to receive."

A "concerned parishioner" made an appointment to come and talk to me ... and we met in my office. He started out by assuring me he wasn't anti-gay ... "but the thought of two homosexuals standing in the same spot in my church where my wife and I stood and took our marriage vows makes me sick to my stomach -- nothing personal."

Yeah. "Nothing personal." Except, of course, it was.

How is the fact that your relationship with the love of your life makes someone sick to their stomach not personal?

That moment came flooding back to me this week as I read about organizers of the protests against LGBTQ inclusive curriculum in North Hollywood and Glendale who declared: "We want to reiterate that our protest is in no way an attack on the LGBTQ community" while at the same time urging parents to keep their children home because "videos about families will be shown to the students including one where it says, 'some kids have two mommies, some have two daddies.'"

Yeah. This "is in no way an attack on the LGBTQ community." Except, of course, it is.

How is the fact that the very existence of LGBTQ families causes outrage, protests and even violence not an attack?

For those of us who have been at this work of bending the arc of history toward inclusion for God's beloved LGBTQ people over these last decades, it feels a little like we're in a bad remake of the film "Groundhog Day." Wait – didn't we already do that? Didn't we already fix that? Is there really someone on the sidewalk heckling us with the same toxic theology talking points we endured back in the 90's when we started blessing same-sex unions and in 2008 when we were fighting Prop 8?

But we in the LGBTQ+ community are not alone in this Groundhog Day scenario.

The overturn of Roe v Wade and the stripping of bodily autonomy from those who can become pregnant has turned the clock back on reproductive freedom while hard won voting rights are being rolled back, disenfranchising Black and Brown voters. Science is suspect, data is debatable and hate is being monetized to finance an upcoming election cycle in our divided and polarized nation.

White Christian Nationalism is on the rise and Homeland Security has declared a heightened threat environment for domestic terrorism from “individuals inclined to commit violence due to their perceptions of the 2024 general election cycle and legislative or judicial decisions pertaining to sociopolitical issues” and a CNN feature this weekend drew a lot of attention declaring “11:00 on Sunday mornings one of the most dangerous hours in America.”

Nevertheless, we persist.

We persist in proclaiming the Good News of God’s inclusive love available to absolutely everybody ... the work that has been part of the DNA of All Saints Church at least since the 1940’s when the then-rector Frank Scott protested the deportation of Japanese Americans during World War II ... the work that incited death threats to the rectory when then rector John Burt helped organize the rally that brought Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to the Coliseum ... and the work that inspired then rector George Regas preach the words we heard as our first reading from his sermon at the 1997 Beyond Inclusion conference.

Beyond Inclusion. That was the language we chose in the 1990’s to frame the work of moving beyond simply including to centering and celebrating gay and lesbian people in the work and witness of All Saints Church. And that was the context where George preached these words to a packed church which had become accustomed to picketers and hecklers on the sidewalk on Sunday mornings after it risked stepping out in faith – and ahead of the rest of the church – with the blessing of the union of Mark Benson and Phil Straw in 1992.

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 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.

My brothers and sisters and gender fluid siblings – the nation still longs for such a church.

Longs for a church willing to risk getting into the Good Trouble that results when it follows Jesus – the radical rabbi from Nazareth who got into his own Good Trouble by centering the marginalized, by siding with the oppressed, by eating with sinners and outcasts, by insisting that the kingdom of God could not come until there was not a single stranger left at the gate – and by insisting that centering those who have been historically excluded is not erasing those who have been historically centered – it is erasing the silos, barriers and boundaries that keep us from being the human family God created us to be.

Yes, it sometimes feels like a bad remake of Groundhog Day as we take two steps forward only to find ourselves one step back on the journey toward turning the human race into that human family. But it is the journey we sang about in our opening hymn – the journey we’re called to make if we are going to move beyond inclusion to transformation of this broken world into the Beloved Community of blessing it was created to be.

And the words of the reading we heard this morning from Jan Richardson *"Here's one thing you must understand about this blessing: it is not for you alone."*

It is not for you alone.

For if we stop at inclusion – my inclusion, your inclusion, anyone's inclusion – we miss the point of what it is we're being included in when we proclaim -- as we do every time we gather here in this sacred space -- "Whoever you are, and wherever you find yourself on the journey of faith, you are welcome to come to this table to receive the bread and wine made holy."

These beloved and timeworn words of welcome -- coined by George Regas and become ubiquitous throughout the Episcopal Church -- are Step One.

Step Two is to be fueled by that bread and wine made holy to go out into the world as beacons of God's love and justice ... of compassion and transformation.

And there are as many ways to do that as there are beautiful, diverse, gifted images of God gathered here this or any Sunday.

If there was only one way, Jesus would only have had one parable. And he had a million of them ... because he knew whoever you were and wherever you found yourself on the journey you needed to hear the Good News he had to proclaim in the way it would speak to your heart and transform you into a partner with him in the work of making that kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

This kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed ...

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast a woman added to the flour ...

The kingdom of heaven is like a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to search for the one lost one

...

The kingdom of heaven is like a woman who lost a coin,

like a son who squandered his father's inheritance ...

like whatever story it is that is going to get through to you that God's love is absolutely limitless and that Beloved Community includes absolutely everybody.

Which makes me think of another story.

It was 2009 and the Episcopal Church was gathering for its first General Convention after the 2008 meeting of Anglican bishops at Lambeth. The Archbishop of Canterbury had traveled all the way to Anaheim to bring us greetings ... and a not so thinly veiled warning, saying he hoped there would not "be decisions in the coming days that could push us further apart" ... which was code for opening the way to ordaining any more LGBTQ bishops.

And in that context, we gathered for a Eucharist organized by Integrity – our then LGBTQ

Episcopal Church Caucus – where Bishop Barbara Harris of blessed memory was our preacher and uttered these immortal words:

"If you don't want LGBT folks as bishops, don't ordain them as deacons. Better yet, be honest and say, "We don't want you, you don't belong here," and don't bestow upon them the sacrament of Baptism to begin with. How can you initiate someone and then treat them like they're half-assed baptized?"

My brothers and sisters and gender fluid siblings, the word we have to the world today from All Saints Church is that there's no such thing as half-assed baptized and there's no such thing as half-assed Beloved Community.

And the word we have for world today is that All Saints Church will continue its legacy of being a first responder church ... running toward – not away from -- whatever threatens anyone from being a loved, valued and centered member of the Beloved Community we aspire to be.

Because either we're all in or none of us are.

Either all of us are safe or none of us are.

Either all of our stories and images are represented or none of us are.

Either the radical welcome that calls us beyond inclusion to transformation includes all of us or none of us.

La lucha continua -- the struggle continues. But we're in it to win it ... so as much as we yearn to hear those longed-for words "arriving at destination" from our spiritual GPS, we know there are miles to go before we rest – before liberty and justice for all really means all -- before that kingdom come on earth is not just a prayer we pray but a reality we live.

And so we continue to take two steps forward and the occasional step back ...

trusting in the depths of God's mystery that truth will be vindicated someday ...

trusting God will continue to bless the courage of this place ...

trusting you can do the right thing and not just survive -- but thrive – as we journey together into the of the God who loves us beyond our wildest imaginings – and into the blazing day.

We your people, Ours the journey

Now and ever, Now and ever

Now and evermore. Amen.