

Back to the Garden
Pride Sunday, June 9, 2024, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

Good morning, All Saints Church – and Happy Pride! It is always an honor and a privilege to step into this pulpit and bring a word as part of our Eucharistic celebration -- and never more so than on this second Sunday in Pride Month as we do our part to proclaim God's inclusive love for absolutely everyone here at 132 North Euclid while our siblings from around the diocese are gathering ... even as we speak ... to bring the same message to the annual L.A. Pride Parade on Hollywood Boulevard. Photos coming soon to a Facebook page near you!

I want to begin this Pride Sunday sermon by invoking the theme for our Centennial Year ... **Engaging our past and Imagining our future** ... and start by looking back to 1996 -- the year I came out on the Fourth of July in the National Cathedral.

But that's not the story I'm going to tell – you can ask me later or Google it.

The story I'm going to tell is the one about what happened when I came home from that experience and met with my then-bishop +Fred Borsch to break the news to him.

Now, as a quick aside, everyone who has ever gone through the coming out process has their own experience of how that rolled for them ... but for me the unifying feature was absolutely no one I came out to reacted with: "Oh my gosh, you're kidding!"

It was pretty much unanimously: "Oh my gosh, you finally figured that out!"
And that was true for Bishop Borsch.

After listening to my story, he asked me two questions –
How can I help and
How are your boys.
(And he helped me a lot and my boys were fine.)

And then he told me this:

He told me he believed the voices, stories and experiences of gay and lesbian people were going to be a gift to the church because they were going to challenge the unexamined sexuality of most straight people ... and while those weren't always going to be easy conversations to have, they were going to be critically important in order to heal the church of the homophobia that infects it and to liberate both the oppressed and those participating in the oppression ... whether they're aware of it or not.

"And that includes," he said smiling, "old bishops like me!"

And on this Pride Sunday morning at All Saints Church in Pasadena, I look back today at how far we've come since that July 1996 afternoon in the bishop's office ... deeply aware of how much we have yet to do to finish that work of healing and liberation and at the same time profoundly grateful for how very far we've come ... even though it has been a journey which included plenty of two steps forward and one step back.

And since we are also on final countdown to the 81st General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Louisville the week-after-next, I am remembering many of the ghosts of General Conventions past.

Twenty-four years ago as we prepared to head off to the 2000 Convention in Denver, we were assaulted on all sides:

By those who thought we were moving too fast and were going to split the church and by those who thought we weren't moving fast enough and were planning to come and chain themselves to the convention hall doors in protest; by those who were telling the clergy planning to vest and process at the Integrity LGBTQ Eucharist that it would be end of our careers in the church; and by those who were convinced that the fact that there was going to *be* an Integrity Eucharist at the Denver Cathedral was the end of the church as we knew it.

We were a church polarized and divided and that polarization and division was being fed, watered and fertilized by a cohort of folks who had lost the battle to stave off the ordination of women and were losing the battle to impose "Biblical Orthodoxy" on the Episcopal Church -- fomenting that polarization by insisting that our differences were irreconcilable and that they alone had sole possession of the Absolute Truth.

It was not the best of times. Nevertheless, we persisted.

And this morning as we prepare to head to Louisville to "take our place in the councils of the Church" we count six queer bishops in our House of Bishops, we have a Task Force on LGBTQ Inclusion as one of our official Interim Bodies and just last week, the Episcopal Church Communication Office introduced this official Pride Shield with a press release that included these words (and I quote):

"In affirmation and celebration of The Episcopal Church's LGBTQ+ members."

I literally did not think I would live this long.

Which does NOT mean we are done.

Which does NOT mean there isn't work yet to do.

And certainly does NOT mean we can risk underestimating the forces at work in our world marshalling their resources to push back the gains toward full inclusion in our church, our nation and our world.

Nevertheless -- as the inimitable George Regas of blessed memory taught us -- the way we're going to get where we're going is the same way we gotten as far as we've come: and that's by **setting audacious goals and celebrating incremental victories**.

And the way we're going to get there is together
as a Beloved Community created in beautiful diversity
intended by God in her infinite wisdom to **complete each other** –
not to **compete with each other**.

That idea of “complete not compete” has been echoing in my head ever since I heard Sally say it in her sermon two weeks ago ... and anybody who has spent any time at all listening to or preaching sermons knows that anything that gets remembered after coffee hour gets extra credit – so something that's still preaching two weeks later has got to be an A+.

And this morning I'm thinking about it in the context of our first reading from the Book of Genesis – which is, of course, the oft told story of a man and a woman and an apple in a garden. A story that the church has used for generations to explain what it has called the “Doctrine of Original Sin.”

What I've come to wonder after decades of reading and re-reading the text we read this morning is if the “original sin” it recounts has less to do with disobeying God ... which I am **not** arguing was a good idea ... and more to do with the first thing that happened AFTER disobeying God – and that was Adam throwing Eve under the bus.

What I've come to wonder is whether the act of “othering” of human siblings – the rejection of the Garden of Eden ideal that we were created to complete each other – not to compete with each other -- is as old as Genesis and the prophets and as new as whatever social media platform they're cooking up to replace Twitter.

What I've come to believe
is that what happened under that apple tree
is absolutely an “original sin”
if we understand sin as that which separates us from the God

who is the Source of love that calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves:
absolutely ALL our neighbors.

During this Pride Month we have the gift, the opportunity and the challenge of offering the Good News of God's inclusive love to members of the LGBTQ+ community as an antidote to the toxic homophobic and transphobic theology that has been weaponized against them. One of the tools we have to offer that witness is a series of "FAQs About Jesus, the Bible and LGBTQ People" which has been evolving over the last decade or so.

This year – in response to escalated assault on our transgender siblings we added this new Q&A to the list:

Q. What do you say to someone who defends their anti-trans theology by saying: "God doesn't make mistakes"?

A. God doesn't make mistakes -- but we do. And we make a mistake when we project our own narrow, binary understanding of gender onto the complex, beautifully diverse continuum of humanity God created and we are still learning to understand. It's the same mistake we make whenever we project our own finite knowledge onto God's infinite creativity and capacity to love. It's the first mistake human beings made in the Garden of Eden by presuming that they could be like God by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

And it's a mistake God had a response to in one of our most ancient scriptural texts -- Job 38:2 "Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?" God doesn't make mistakes -- we do. So let's not make the mistake of failing to fully embrace our transgender/nonbinary siblings wherever they fall on the continuum of gender identity.

My sisters and brothers and gender fluid siblings,
this is the essence of the collective, human cosmic journey we travel together:
the journey beyond anything that separates us from each other
to the destination of becoming the Beloved Community God created us to be
where there is no stranger left at the gate
and every single human being knows that they are loved beyond their wildest imagining
by the God who created them in love in order to walk in love with each other.

It is a destination that evokes the words Joni Mitchell made famous ...
as we journey to **get ourselves back to the Garden**
before the "original sin" of "the woman made me do it"
turned us into creatures striving to compete with each other
rather than complete each other.

And one of the ways God has given us to get back to that Garden

is the gift of the Spirit we celebrated on the Feast of Pentecost:
the Spirit our brother Bishop Charleston evoked
in the second reading this morning ...

*The Spirit who is the maker of all things
who calls each one of us to share her image.
Not to be complacent.
Not to sit idle in the heart of change,
but to take up our tools
and make tomorrow happen.*

Not to sit idle in the heart of change.

The tomorrow we are being called to make happen
is a tomorrow of love, justice and compassion –
a tomorrow in alignment with the values
the God who created us in love
and then loved us enough to become one of us
in order to show us how to love one another
has been calling to us to since the beginning of creation.

It is a tomorrow that that can seem an impossible dream
because of all the yesterdays piled up behind us
with the narratives of oppression, domination and marginalization
we not only inherit but continue to inhabit.

And it is a tomorrow which the devotees of the myth of redemptive violence
are working overtime to keep us from moving toward
by turning back the clock and sending us instead in exactly the opposite direction – toward a
dystopian tomorrow of hatred, judgement, and absolutism
fueled by the condemnation of anyone who is “other.”

These are not the best of times.
Nevertheless, we persist.

We persist because like a GPS connected to the satellite
that keeps it on course as long as it is plugged in,
we are guided on our journey forward trusting that
it is our connection to the love of God
which will keep us on course if we stay plugged in
and if we keep our own lives in alignment
with God’s justice, with God’s love, and with God’s compassion

we can be the change we want to see in this beautiful and broken world.

And what keeps us in that alignment –
what keeps our spiritual GPS charged and connected to that satellite –
is community.

So it is to this place that we come –
as generations of the All Saints faithful have come
over these last 100 years we celebrate in this Centennial year.

It is to this place we come
to remember both **that** we are loved
and that we are called to **walk in love**;
And it is to this place that we come to be fed and fueled
in order to go back out into the world in witness to that love:
to partner with the Spirit in building a tomorrow
calling the creation back to the Garden.

“Do this in remembrance of me” – we will say in just a few minutes,
when we gather around this table
to share the bread and wine made holy.

“In remembrance of,” to remember – to reverse our amnesia –
that we are loved by the God
who created us in love
and then called us to walk in love with each other,
and who will at the end of this journey
gather us back into that love.

That is the Good News we both claim and proclaim
here at 132 North Euclid not just on Pride Sunday
but every time we gather as All Saints Church:
as a community grounded and centered
in the call of the Spirit to share in her image:

*Not to be complacent.
Not to sit idle in the heart of change,
but to take up our tools
and make tomorrow happen.*

Together.

Won't you pray with me?

Another world is not only possible

She is on her way.

On a quiet day, you can hear her breathing.

She is on her way.

Amen.