

Coming Out as a Christian
Sunday, October 13, 2024, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

“Walk in love as Christ loved us ... loved us enough to become one of us in order to show us how to love one another.”

These are words I use whenever it is my turn to give what we call in church-speak “the offertory sentences” ... the invitation to the altar to receive the bread and wine made holy ... the outward and visible sign of being knit together as the Body of Christ in the world ... the food and drink of new and unending life that gives us strength for the journey of going *back* out into that world as beacons of God’s love, justice and compassion.

And if that seems like a tall order to you this morning you are not alone.

As we gather in this sacred space this we are deeply aware that we live in a world torn apart by war, violence, climate crisis fueled super storms and wild fires; and in nation polarized and divided in the final countdown to arguably the longest election cycles in the history of voting.

Nevertheless, we persist.

And as we persist in the aspiration to walk in love into God’s future – in spite of the very real challenges we face – we equip ourselves not only with the bread and wine made holy we will receive from this altar, but with the stories of both struggle and celebration we hear from this lectern and pulpit of those who have gone before us on that journey.

And one of the stories we mark today at All Saints Church is the story of National Coming Out Day.

Launched in 1988 to mark the first anniversary of the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, Coming Out Day is the annual invitation to stand on the shoulders of Harvey Milk – who famously challenged the LGBTQ community saying "You must come out ... and once and for all, break down the myths, destroy the lies and distortions."

And it is the annual renewal of our commitment to follow in the footsteps of the visionary leaders of that National March who called together organizers across differences under the slogan ... wait for it ... **"For love and for life, we are not going back!"**

In case you’ve forgotten – or never knew or weren’t born yet – the 1987 National March was organized around a list of demands which extended far beyond the scope of single-issue LGBTQ concerns, underscoring the recognition that oppression of one group impacts oppression of all groups ... that we are -- as Dr. King taught us – *“We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.”*

Those demands included:

- The legal recognition of lesbian and gay relationships.
- A presidential order banning discrimination by the federal government.
- Passage of the Congressional lesbian and gay civil rights bill.
- An end to discrimination against people with AIDS and AIDS related conditions
- Massive increases in funding for AIDS education, research, and patient care.
- Money for AIDS, not for war.
- Reproductive freedom, the right to control our own bodies, and an end to sexist oppression.
- An end to racism in this country and apartheid in South Africa.

And if there was any complacency in the LGBTQ community — or among straight/cisgender allies — that 36 years later in this post-marriage equality, Pete Buttigieg is a Cabinet Officer and Billie Jean King is going to be the Grand Marshall of the Rose Parade era that Coming Out Day is somehow “old school” then the concerted efforts of our political landscape in general and this election cycle in particular to roll back human rights in general and LGBTQ equality in particular has been a clarion wake-up call that we are clearly **not** done with this coming out, standing up, speaking out thing.

And we won't be done until no gay kid is afraid to go to school because he'll be bullied. We won't be done until no lesbian teenager is afraid to walk home because she'll be jumped. We won't be done until no transgender woman has to hope she can make it to the ATM and back to her car without “an incident.” And we won't be done until no child ever has to grow up being taught by their youth pastor that they are an abomination to God.

That's why this year on Coming Out Day I'm Coming Out again ... but I'm not just coming out as a lesbian — which frankly by now is breaking news to absolutely nobody.

I'm Coming Out as a Christian who is going to do whatever I can to offer a rebuttal to the rabid rhetoric of the religious right who have taken the Good News of God's inclusive love and distorted it into a vehicle of judgment rather than justice in the service of the toxic theology of Christian Nationalism.

I'm Coming Out as a Christian this year because my brothers and sisters and gender fluid siblings, the stakes are too high and the damage to precious souls is too costly, not to break down the myths, destroy the lies and challenge those who would hijack the Good News of God's inclusive love and turn it into a weapon of mass discrimination aimed at God's beloved LGBTQ children.

"For love and for life, we are not going back!"

And – for the record --the reason we are not going back has absolutely nothing to do with being politically correct and absolutely everything to do with being Gospel obedient. Yes, we stand on the shoulders of Harvey Milk ... but we also stand firmly on the shoulders of the prophet Amos who reaches out to us this morning down through the ages with these words of challenge:

*Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate.*

Hate evil and love good are straightforward enough – but to unpack the “establish justice in the gate” part is to discover it was a message to those in leadership in the Israel of his day – to challenge those with political power to use their authority to do justice rather than to line their own pockets. To serve rather than to exploit. And to establish justice “at the gate” – an image rooted in ancient Near Eastern traditions, where the city gate was not only a place of commerce and travel but also where legal matters were settled and disputes were resolved.

It is an example of what Rabbi Abraham Heschel called “*the two-point job description of a prophet: to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.*” And it is a reminder that establishing justice at **our** gate – in our civic arena – is how we take the faith we profess in this place out into the world as we live out our baptismal promise to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.”

Every human being. Not just the ones who look like us, worship like us, vote like us or root for the same baseball teams as us. EVERY human being.

Because we not only stand on the shoulders of Amos we follow Jesus – the radical rabbi from Nazareth – who continually pushed the envelope of his own faith tradition ...reminding those who challenged his vision of a kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven that the Dream of God is a place where there are no outcasts and no strangers at the gate; that those who have been treated as last will be first and that **nothing** is impossible for God.

To walk in love is to share the vision of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed and Dr. King preached about when he said “It is the love of God working in our lives –the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization. But the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community.”

In the end, becoming Beloved Community is about moving beyond *including* those who we see as “other” to becoming a place where no one is **other** and everyone is **us**.

Yes, it is a tall order, it is a heavy lift, it is a longed-for destination, and it is a journey we are on in both our civic and sacred arenas.

In these United States it is the root of our country’s aspiration to be a nation where liberty and justice for all is not just a pledge we make but a reality we live. And we are not there yet.

In this Episcopal Church it is a core part of our church's baptismal promise to respect the dignity of every human being. And we still have work to do to make our common prayer common practice.

And in our own congregation – here at All Saints Church – moving beyond inclusion to celebration is part of the decades long journey we have been on as a community of faith to make “whoever you are and wherever you find yourself on the journey of faith there is a place for you here” not just an invitation but an experience. And we have yet to arrive at that destination.

Nevertheless, we persist.

And on this Coming Out Day celebration, we remind ourselves and each other that **Beyond Inclusion** was the language chosen 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.

It was the context where George Regas of blessed memory 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 Episcopal Church – with the first All Saints blessing of a same-sex union: 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 teaching 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 are on. And the good news this morning is that we are on it together.

Most of you are familiar with the blessing I customarily offer when it's my turn to offer the blessing at the end of the service. It is one I inherited from Bishop John Shelby Spong

via one of my mentors the Reverend Liz Habecker:

*Send us anywhere you have us go, only go there with us.
Place upon us any burden you desire, only stand by us to sustain us.
Break any tie that binds us, except the tie that binds us to you.
And the blessing of God – creating, redeeming and sustaining
Be with you – those you love, serve and resist – this day and always.*

I love it because it not only calls me – calls us – out of our comfort zone but reminds me – reminds us – to hold always in tension the powerful truth that this love of God we strive to live out in the world is broader and wider than tribe, nation, dogma, doctrine, race, creed, gender, identity or orientation.

And it calls me – calls us – to never lose sight of the humanity of those whose actions we resist – to never resort to becoming the evil we deplore – to be the bridge builders, the boundary crossers and the breach repairers striving with God to make the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven not just a prayer we pray but a reality we live.

That is the work we have been given to do. We are the people we have been given to do it together. And this is table we have been given to be fed by the bread and wine made holy to nurture and fuel us for both the challenge and the opportunity of living out the Gospel in our beautiful and broken world as we walk in love as Christ loved us because ...

"For love and for life, we are not going back!"

Amen.