

Scripture and Marriage Equality: Resources

2006 Colloquy resource materials



It's Time for This to Change

– Rev. Joe Hoffman*

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Text: 1 Samuel 3:1-20

A month or so ago, I became clear that I had to do something different in my life. It was one of those experiences that you can't make happen – it happens to you. I think of it as an epiphany, a time when God's presence fills us and we are changed in some way. It is a transforming moment. It was not an extraordinary event- I can't tell you specifically how it happened. More of an "aha" experience. No one came to me and said – Joe, you should do this. No one. The idea was one I first heard of in a lecture last fall. It was a like a seed in me that grew. I am glad to have the opportunity to share it with you today.

This text about Samuel hearing God call is an epiphany text. It also is one of my favorite texts – one that I loved as a child. I found myself wanting God to call me, to use me to do some good in my life. I prayed the way Eli taught Samuel to pray – an opening prayer – God, here I am. God use me.

I didn't know what I was asking. We never know. But God can take our prayers and shape our lives with them. Be careful what you pray for.

This text has haunted my imagination all these years. I chose this text as the one for my ordination service. And I have chosen it today because I find in it words of challenge and hope for times such as ours.

I grew up across town in a United Methodist church. I remember back in the early 70's when a black family started coming to our otherwise all white church. I only remember two members of the family – the mother who sang in our choir, and her son who was about my age and who joined our youth group.

Our youth group had a tradition of going to the beach on a retreat every summer. We went to the same place each year. Somehow the retreat center down in South Carolina found out that we had a new member in our group, and they contacted the pastor and said: "we are delighted that you plan to come again this summer. We love having you. We do need to tell you that it is not possible for you to bring the new member of your group who is black. We on the staff don't have a problem with that of course, but the board of directors has made this policy, and we are sure you will understand. "

Our pastor, a most beloved man, came to us and simply said – we will need to find another place for our retreat this year. Because a place that will not allow all our people to come is a place where we will not take any of our people.

That story has helped to shape my understanding of what it means to be Christian and what it means to be the church.

* The thoughts and ideas in this sermon have come from my readings of a number of people, including Mahan Siler, Marvin Ellison, Evan Wolfson, William Sloan Coffin, Carter Heyward, Rebecca Voelkel, and many more.

In 1982, I went away to a small graduate school in Nashville, TN. My world view was very small – having not traveled or read very much, and this school was multi cultural, multi racial, open and affirming, and international. I loved all of that – but I had a lot to learn.

One day a man in one of my classes asked me to have coffee. I am going to call him Lewis. We went down to the corner coffee shop and talked. He was in his 40's, I was in my 20's. He was an ordained United Methodist minister and worked as an editor for the United Methodist Publishing House. He told me in that conversation that he was gay.

What he didn't know is that I had a very limited understanding of what it meant to be gay – and I really thought that gays were people who were sick, who had some broken place inside that needed healing. I did not say this to Lewis of course.

He invited me into his life. And I accepted the invitation. I think he needed a friend on campus. And I needed such a friend too. So we walked an unlikely road together. He invited me to his home, where I met his long time partner and some of their friends. He told me how careful he and his partner had to be in public spaces – how they had to withhold their affection for each other in places where others might see – like the airport, like in church. Because if people knew they were gay, and in a relationship, they could lose their jobs. There were no laws to protect them.

I was appalled by that. That someone could be fired simply because of their sexual orientation. And I was appalled that people that I had come to know and love had to live in such fear. I knew deep inside of me that things needed to change.

That was 1982. I hope you saw the Mountain Express a couple weeks ago – it told the story of our own Kathryn Cartledge in 1996 being offered a chaplaincy position here in the area – only to be fired from that job before she even worked her first day. Just because she was lesbian. And the recent news about a woman named Laurel losing her job at the Wolf Laurel Ski Resort because she put in the Asheville Citizen Times an announcement of her wedding to Virginia, her partner.

Things still need to change! It is not okay for our laws to discriminate against certain people. That is not what our country is about. And I do not want to participate in the injustice.

Now, I want to stop at this point and acknowledge something. I am piled up with privilege. I am male, white, American, middle class, educated, clergy, heterosexual. I do not put myself down for any of these identifications. It is who I am. And I know that most importantly, I am a child of God, loved and blessed. I love who I am.

But I am not the only one loved and blessed by God. All of us are. Each and every one of us – a child of God, loved and blessed. My privilege in society does not come from God, but from our culture, our laws, our government. God blesses us all the same. It is our world that gives some of us privilege and power – and denies that to others of us. The powers that be give us our privilege and power.

Now, in this text from Samuel – God comes to Samuel and says – Samuel, I call you to be an agent of my presence in the world. Not just to be a nice guy. Not just to do good things. But – listen now – God called Samuel to be an agent of God's spirit that would overpower the powers that be. And in particular, God called Samuel to speak out against Eli and his family – the dominant priestly family – who had stopped listening to God, for whom the word was not frequent, for whom the light had grown dim. They had allowed abuse and corruption to become part of the temple practices. And God said to Samuel – it is time for things to change!

I believe it is time for things to change in our world too. And I know it is time for me to do some things differently.

One of my responsibilities and privileges as a pastor is to work with couples who want to be married. I counsel with them. We plan a religious service. And I officiate at that service. I love this part of my job. And I hope to be doing weddings for the rest of my life with those couples that I think are in a just, loving, and mutual relationship. I will continue to do weddings for heterosexual couples, and for gay and lesbian couples. It is the role of the church to bless and support loving and just relationships. But I have decided that I can no longer, I will no longer, legalize marriages for heterosexual couples. By that I mean I will no longer sign the document from the state of North Carolina that makes a religious wedding also a legal ceremony. When I sign that piece of paper, I participate in the perpetuation of a system of injustice and oppression. I sign over about 1100 rights and privileges that are written into law to those who are heterosexual. This is discrimination, this is injustice, and I cannot knowingly participate in this as an agent of the state any longer. My job is to be your pastor. To offer pastoral care to all of us. To advocate for the rights of all of us. To make sure as best I can that the practices of the church are not discriminatory and oppressive.

We are a church of God's creative diversity. We are not a heterosexual congregation. We are a church of many people and many family configurations. James Nelson has written that most Biblical scholars today agree that there are at least 40 different kinds of families named in the Bible. Not just one – not a man and woman, or a man and a woman and a child, but 40 different kinds. We are a church that includes many of these different family configurations. And I thank God for that. And I want to offer blessing for that.

Rebecca Voelkel is the executive officer for the Institute for Welcoming Resources, and she reminds us that the Biblical imperative is to follow Jesus' commandment to love God and to love our neighbor. When I study the story of Jesus life and ministry, I see that he grew into his understanding of faith and leadership by living out this ethic of love, and often that meant standing apart from or against the rules and traditions of his time that he found to be unjust or not God filled.

I believe we are called to do the same. I believe this was at the heart of our decision to be an Open and Affirming congregation. I have come to see more clearly that I must be more diligent in naming the ways I have power over others, and working hard to not let my privilege be a source of oppression for others. I want to use my power to overcome the powers in our world that create injustice for others. And I want to let go of my privilege and power that participates in the discrimination and injustice of our laws.

Marriage is one of the oldest, most traditional institutions in our society. It is about social arrangements. Marriage encompasses economics, property, reproduction and child rearing, caregiving, and extended family and community relations. And the essence of marriage is the courage and generosity with which two persons commit to each other in truthfulness, mutuality, fidelity, and the expectation of permanence. The laws of our land do not support the possibility of marriage for anyone who is not heterosexual. And thus, the laws of our land do not allow for legal social arrangements for those who are gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgendered. (ideas from Marvin Ellison)

It is time for this to change!

We are a country in which we pride ourselves on freedom. Why do we allow that freedom to some but not to others? Marriage is an institution that is important and valuable. But it should be for everyone, not just for some of us. Abraham Lincoln once said: “Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves; and, under a just God, can not long retain it.” Congressman John Lewis, a great leader in the civil rights movement in our country, has cautioned us to not think in terms of separate but equal with gay rights – because we have been down that road already and separate is never equal.

When we get to the place of trying to put people in categories, and make laws that work out of those categories, we need to stop and ask ourselves what we are doing. I want to suggest this – the issue is not one of gay marriage. That is what we hear most of the talk focus on. But I suggest the issue is not about gay marriage – it is more truthfully about heterosexual privilege – and how those of us who have that privilege choose to use it.

I do not believe that most of us ever intentionally try to hurt someone else. But in the words of Martin Luther King Jr, read by Courtney and Emma Claire in the youth service a few weeks ago, “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Those words have continued to ring in my ears. Our doing nothing allows things to stay the same. By doing nothing we support the status quo, which is causing some of our people, some of our family, some of our neighbors, to live in cruel and unjust realities. William Sloan Coffin once said: “tolerance and passivity are a lethal combination.” And we just can’t forget that “compassion demands confrontation.” (The Heart is a Little to the Left, p. 37) To put it another way, again in the words of Coffin, “God’s creation is far more pluralistic than the eyes of many straights have wished to perceive. “ (p. 40) And I would add that God’s blessing is for all of that creation – not just some of it.

As your pastor, I have listened to the stories that many of your have told. I have heard parents say that they struggle when their child says – I am gay or lesbian, not so much because their sexual orientation is an issue to the parent, but because the parents know how hard and violent the world can be. One parent said: I never imagined that my child would have fewer rights under the constitution than I had. But it is true.

I have heard stories about partners who are not allowed to make end of life decisions for their dying loved one – because they are not married. It is written into our marriage laws. I have heard about the adult child of one of our families – who gave birth to a child herself, then spent a lot of money in lawyer fees to give away her rights as a mother, then spent a lot more money in legal fees so that she and her lesbian partner could adopt that same child together – so that both of them could have the rights of a parent.

I have heard the stories of not being able to access your partner’s Medicare or Social Security benefits; of not having access to a partner’s health insurance, of not being able to leave your inheritance to a partner.

None of us who are married have to face this. We are protected by the law. A law that is written on heterosexual privilege. A set of laws that put at risk a lot of people in our congregation. A lot of children. A lot families.

In the text, God called forth a new day through Samuel. God could no longer let things be the way they were. God called on Samuel to have courage and overcome the powers that were doing this injustice. And Eli, the one who had been unfaithful in many ways, Eli was now faithful in that he yielded his power, he yielded his privilege in order to make way for God’s change to come about.

I think both parts of the story are important. We have to listen and even ask for God to speak to us. And we have to be willing to yield our privilege in order to make way for God to do a new thing.

It is time for things to change. My decision to no longer legalize weddings is but a very small step. But it is something I have the power to do. My decision will cause some of us a small inconvenience – because we will have to legalize our weddings in a different way, if that is what you choose to do. I will talk you through that process – which is very simple and very inexpensive. Noel and I went through this process ourselves last summer when we were married. We had a religious service, then two days later we legalized that wedding with a justice of the peace. It was very simple.

I hope whatever inconvenience we might experience will help those of us with heterosexual privilege to think more about the huge injustice that our gay and lesbian friends must endure. I make this decision because it is one way I can be less complicit in the system that perpetuates that injustice, and more in solidarity with those who suffer from it. I also make this decision knowing full well that I am still deeply complicit in the injustice.

I want us to talk about all of this. I hope you will come to the pastoral conversation tonight at 5pm. It is a first conversation. I am providing a resource list, available in the narthex as you leave today, for further reading and study. I hope the Open and Affirming committee will help to create some learning opportunities around all of this. And I invite you to talk with me. I apologize that I will be out of town all of this coming week. I had wanted to preach this sermon last Sunday, but because of the weather, had to change the schedule. I am sorry for that, but I promise I will be available once I am back in town.

I invite you into this new journey with me. I would love to have your support – even to the point that someday this church might decide that we will no longer have any legal weddings in our sanctuary for some people until we can have them for all people. But for now, I ask you to pray with me, to talk with me, to seriously think about what I have shared and to learn more about it.

I long for the day when our children can marry whomever they love – without having to live in fear, without having to be oppressed. I long for the day that parents of gays and lesbians do not have to worry about how their children will be treated in school – or in church – or in the work place – or in the public square – or by the laws of our land. I long for the day when a child who has two mothers or two fathers can know that he or she is part of a real family – not some strange abnormal living arrangement that others make fun of. I long for a time when we can all feel the blessing of God for who we are .

I believe its time for things to change. I have to do some things differently now because it is the only way I know to live out my commitment, my promise, to follow Jesus. I ask you to hold me in your prayers. And I ask you to walk with me along the way. Amen.