

Sermon TUMC – June 19, 2016

Borders and Boundaries I – Seeing beyond the fence

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Texts: Psalm 23, John 9

Intro to theme, borders and boundaries: Each preacher can approach it as they are inspired and so I'm going to be talking about fences.

Welcome to the first meeting of FSA, fence-sitters anonymous.

My name is Michele, and I'm a fence-sitter (*Hello, Michele*)

My eyes have been opened, I was blind, but now I see.

By (internet) definition, fence-sitting is for people who like to see both sides and remain neutral in a conflict. – not bad aspirations for someone who wants to be both a peacemaker and a Mennonite pastor. It has served me well.

Fence-sitting, by definition, is also about people who hesitate about choosing sides in an argument or a competition, or who are unable to decide due to lack of courage.

So this morning, I'm here to let you know clearly that I consider myself knocked firmly off my fence regarding LGBTQ inclusion in the church. I'm here to call myself an LGBTQ ally.

Let me also tell you some about how that has come about and why I need to say it so clearly **today**.

I have been listening to LGBTQ stories for a long time now ...

It is Pride month and I've been wondering more intensely how and whether a church who wants to be inclusive and welcoming (such as ourselves, who say we are welcoming every Sunday morning) can further affirm its "positive stance against discrimination and violence toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people to promote their self-affirmation, dignity, equality rights, increase their visibility as a social group, build community, and celebrate sexual diversity and gender variance."¹

Pride, as opposed to **shame**.

¹ Wikipedia

I confess that it was a reflection full of could we's, yes buts, and maybes. I was and am unclear on what, if anything, TUMC could do at this point in our story.

Then, across the border, the Orlando shooting happened: a targeted mass murder of Latino people sons,
daughters,
lovers,
allies
who were part of the Lesbian, Gay, By-sexual, Trans-sexual and Queer community.

It is an event that sits at the crossroads of about a zillion things that are messed up about our world right now:
hate,
guns,
racism,
political posturing,
score keeping in the face of tragedy (who said what first, how did they say it, and so on).
And it is was about **homophobia**: fear of anyone who does not fit into the pink and blue boy/girl prince and princess categories that have shaped most of our society. (I won't begin to get into all of that right now the internet is full of it if you want to better inform yourself).

What I will say is, let us not fool ourselves that this event stops at the border between Canada and the US.

The roots of all that spewed out in that calamity run very deep. The violence has echoed far and wide, mostly, my dear friends, because it resonates with the fears and very real lived experiences of LGBTQ people, who still literally risk losing their lives
or at best risk being shamed
and shunned,
or ignored
or silenced
or tolerated.

Who fear holding hands or embracing in the wrong crowd,
who are denied rights,
whose identities are preached against
and debated about by religious folk.

I don't know how to respond to Orlando because I cannot possibly get it right.

[This sermon has been prepared under the following prayer that I found on facebook: “For preachers struggling to write faithful sermons rather than just standing up and going off or fall to the floor weeping, Lord we pray.”²]

What I do know is that as a follower of Jesus, Prince of Peace who taught us about what it means to live in God’s image, **I cannot be silent.**

At this time, for many LGBTQ people silence feels like further violence and shaming. I cannot be on the fence about that.

For the last few years in my circles, I’ve been walking with people who are coming to terms with their own identity as LGBTQ people, many from church communities. (The Listening Church video that we watched this morning in Sunday School gives evidence to some of that).

I also worked for a while with a group from U of T called Queering religion, ministering to people who are trying to reconcile their sexual identity with being a person of faith.

I don’t own the heartbreaking and heartwarming stories I’ve heard and so I cannot tell them but I have heard very real pain in them. There can be estrangement from family and faith, self-loathing, shame, anguish and even danger.

And I know that the teachings of the Christian church (and of other religions as well) have most often brought oppression and judgment to LGBTQ people – sometimes even from within the people themselves, who carry the shame deeply.

Religion has underwritten some of the hate and self-hate in many LGBTQ experiences.³

I know that seeing the Church’s part in LGBTQ oppression is a shift, hard to get one’s head and heart around, hard to know what is being lost or gained theologically -- and that it is all important to think about ... but not today [oops, I almost got on the fence again.]

So now let me tell you what the Bible offered up to me this week. Since I’ve begun an intensive Biblical Storytelling course, I’ve been starting to ask myself the question “What biblical story am I living in this moment?” and John 9 presented itself.

It’s a familiar story, the healing of the man blind from birth, so I want to set it up for us in a bit of a different way. There are many ways we can approach a text, but today lets use it as an allegory, a symbol of LGBT inclusion.

² (Robin Roderick to Unvirtuous Abbey)

³ Wording attributed to Colleen Shantz in a facebook post.

Suppose the blind man is someone who has been closeted from birth, an LGBTQ person who is blind to who God made them to be or maybe unable to live in the fullness of who they are because of fear. Then Jesus comes along and frees them from the idea that this is about sin, and opens their eyes.

Or the blind man might be someone who was not affirming, but suddenly finds themselves seeing things differently.

Watch to video – John 9 telling https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hA8w4Tn_xzk

What stands out? (Hear from the congregation)

- *Religious leaders arguing – trying to decide who is the sinner, order of events, what rules have been broken.*
- *Healing can be a messy process*
- *Mud has echoes of the story of creation/ re-creation*
- *Jesus flips the tables on naming where the “sin” lies.*

Who is on the fence?

- *Parents (what do they fear)*
- *What do the religious leaders fear?*

I don't know yet how to be a good ally (you can look it up on facebook and there are many lists of suggestions) but here are a few things that I offer:

It starts with listening,
Withholding judgment and offering grace above scrutiny.
It goes on to speaking and affirming,
offering support,
It might involve learning.

Especially for someone who is part of the heterosexual systems – such as myself -- it also involves speaking up, and working to dismantle systems that keep homophobia in place,
naming places where we are assuming that our way is the “normal” way and anything else is wrong or odd.
Calling out toxic masculinity, toxic femininity and toxic religiosity.

We are no longer blind, we have been part of the muddy mess that leads to healing. Let us be like the blind man and wonder less about the technicalities and more about the wonder of being transformed by the divine healing touch.