

TUMC Sermon: Pride Sunday, June 24, 2018

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Scriptures: Mark 4:35-41

Staying Safe

I felt it was important to add my straight cisgender pastor voice to this service.

A few years ago, I was walking with a friend of mine down at the U of T campus. We were on a sidewalk that had grass on either side of it. Then, for whatever reason, maybe to let someone else pass, or maybe because the sidewalk had a barrier, we had to step off and on to the grass. She hesitated for a weird moment before stepping on it. She explained to me that she had to overcome a deep fear to be able to step on the grass. You see, years earlier she had worked in a war zone and in the war zone you NEVER stepped on the grass because there might be land mines. She knew she was in Canada now, she knew it was just grass, but that deep instinct of self preservation was still a habit, just to be safe, she tried to avoid walking on grass. But when she had no choice, she had to talk herself through it before stepping on to the grass.

That's the way it is with fear. It can come from a deep reflex to save your life when you are facing real physical or emotional danger, it can come from experience – you know when something is going to happen -- or it can come from a traumatic memory even if there is no present danger. "Trauma or bad experiences can trigger a fear response within us that is hard to quell."¹ Sometimes it's like fear has a mind of its own.

Church has often been this kind of minefield experience for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transsexual, Queer, two-spirit, intersex, and questioning (LGBTQ2) people. No matter how welcoming and inclusive a congregation or a group wishes to be it can be a place where LGBTQ people feel that they are not safe or at best that they need to be on guard. As we saw by the timeline that was read earlier in the service there are plenty of well-founded reasons for fear or for its little cousin guarded reluctance. In Portuguese there is an expression that says to keep one foot back. (Ficar com um pé atrás.) It means that you just don't go in with two feet, you always have that one foot back so that you can step back. This is how it is in the experience of LGBTQ people.

In the gospel reading we learn a bit about fear from the disciples. What's going on in the story? We have a bunch of fishermen (fisher people) who find themselves in a boat in the middle of the night, not because they went fishing but because this new teacher they are following told them to get into the boat and head out to the "other side." Their teacher, Jesus, is asleep. A mega storm comes up, and their experience

¹ Psychology Today

as fishermen tells them they are all going to die, they are in terror. They are very afraid and they wake Jesus up so he can see their situation. "Jesus, don't You care that we're going to die?" They have no idea that he'll do anything, they just want him to wake up. They want a woke person in the boat with them. Jesus wakes up to see their fear, their very present danger. Then he commands the storm: "be quiet!" and now there is mega calm.

The disciples, while grateful, are even more afraid. Who is this and where is he taking us? (I paraphrase) Little do they know that more adventures await them.

Here at TUMC Jesus has taken us on quite a ride in a boat headed towards LGBTQ inclusion. It's been a long journey for our congregation, starting over 30 years ago – that we know of. Full of pain, full of loss, full of real and imagined dangers. Over that time our fears have somewhat changed in nature. Maybe at first we were afraid of what God thought of LGBTQ folk or of anyone who loved them wholeheartedly. By now we've been through several fatal, terrifying edifying storms (aka as discernment processes) where God's Spirit has led us towards the relative calm of an inclusion policy and a sense that the storm is over (at least for our little boat).

Friends, I've got news for us. Though it has calmed down, we have not arrived at our destination, we're still in the boat trying to get to the other side. At least it's now a boat where nobody is sleeping and nobody is in mortal danger. Thanks be to God!

Until we arrive at what is next for us, I propose that we try to keep the boat as safe a place as possible for everyone who is in it.

There is still fear in our system, fear by LGBTQ folk as to whether there are conditions on inclusion. Fear by folks who've been around for a while that this will be the only thing TUMC will ever attends to with any diligence. Maybe fear about the turbulent waters of our denomination. And my own fear, I confess, is that our congregation will not remain intentional and continue to grow into an understanding of what it means to be a truly affirming and safe church.

How do we move towards that place of safety for everyone? Here are some possibilities:

Keep our oars in the water. We must continue to affirm our welcome and our commitment to "love across difference" until it becomes second nature – and even then keep on coming back to it. Keep on paddling to the other side

We must not wait until folks are yelling at each other in fear for their lives in the middle of a storm! We must continue to listen to rather than "discuss" and evaluate each other's experience. Remember that in loving relationships, not everything is a decision-making opportunity or a call to action. There is much healing that can come to all of us through the practice of listening.

And here the boat metaphor breaks down. We must continue to be humble, in Christ. Remember that we don't know what we don't know. We are invited to examine our assumptions and our privilege, always and to repent and move towards new life. Move out of our comfort zones, stay on the boat.

We must educate ourselves. There are many faith-based resources available to us through the Supportive Communities Network <https://www.bmclgbt.org/scn> of which we are now a part and the Canadian organization Generous Space <https://www.generousspace.ca/what-are-we-about/>

We must learn about how to be good allies for each other – Google it, there are lots of ideas. It's your job to figure it out.

Then, to take our final cues from the gospel story, we remember that God is greater than the storms. We learn from Jesus to wake up and to listen to and validate the experience of those around us. We remember that fear is not a good place from which to make decisions.

Jesus is in the boat with us and we will get to the other side.

#105 STJ – Don't be afraid

*Don't be afraid, my love is stronger,
My longer is stronger than your fear
Don't be afraid, my love is stronger
And I have promised to be always near.*

How To Be An LGBTQ Ally

"It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences."

– Audre Lorde

LEARN

- (1) Listen to the experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ people; (2) respect these experiences and perspectives; (3) acknowledge their validity (even if you don't understand them).
- Seek out information and opportunities to expand your understanding (learn through media, attend events, meet LGBTQ community members, and learn about local services and supports).
- Remember your learning is *your* responsibility – avoid asking LGBTQ people to answer all of your LGBTQ questions (not all LGBTQ people are comfortable acting in an educator role).

REFLECT

- Be open to feedback about how your behaviour is impacting other people.
- Reflect on and question the stereotypes and negative assumptions held by yourself and others.
- Avoid assuming how people identify. Listen for, or politely ask, how someone wants to be identified.
- When talking about LGBTQ topics, assume there are LGBTQ people or people with LGBTQ loved ones in the room and consider how they might be impacted by the tone, spirit, and direction of the conversation.
- Observe the way other folks around you act as allies, even in the smallest ways.
- Remember, everyone's experience of gender and sexuality is different and it's impossible (and unfair) to ask one person to speak on behalf of a whole group!

PRACTICE

- Intervene when you witness offensive behaviour or language.
- Use inclusive language to ensure everyone feels welcome and respected.
- Challenge policies, practices, and procedures that create barriers for LGBTQ people.
- Apologize regardless of intent. Everyone makes mistakes in an ally role, what matters, is how you respond when it gets brought to your attention.
- Be courageous! Don't be afraid to learn, ask for more information and provide support.

<https://egale.ca/how-to-be-an-lgbtq-ally/>