

“Reborn”

Sermon given by The Reverend Joe Summers on the 2nd Sunday of Lent, February 17th 2008, at The Episcopal Church of the Incarnation. Readings: Genesis 17:1-7,15-16, Romans 4:13-25, Mark 8:31-38.

I was glad when they said unto me, “Let us go unto the house of the Lord.”

My best friend Anne said to me., “Joe I’ve got something important to tell you.” It was night and winter time. She and I were sitting upstairs on a staircase window seat overlooking the dark backyard of her house. I thought what on earth could Anne be wanting to talk to me about that’s making her look so apprehensive. Then in a hundredth of a second it came to me. Anne is going to tell me she’s a lesbian. It’s never something I had ever consciously thought before. I thought, how am I going to respond?

Am I going to hold onto what I think I know? What I was taught about homosexuality when I went through the Catholic Charismatic renewal, which reaffirmed part of my conscience and which helped alienate me from some of my family’s closest friends? Am I going to going to hold onto what I think I know about homosexuality from heterosexual pornographic literature where it is presented as an attraction to unloving sadomasochistic sex? Am I going to hold onto a couple of experiences I’ve had where gay men seemed to want to hit on me as a kind of conquest?

Or am I going to affirm a person who I’ve come to know and love as much as I’ve known and loved anyone -- someone:

who’s known my struggles with coming out of the charismatic renewal which I’ve hidden from most people because it would be viewed as so uncool by most people at the University of Michigan,

a woman I’ve worked closely with day and night as we worked on putting together a major teach-in on Human Rights in Latin America,

a woman I’ve come to know as one of the most decent, honest, caring, loving, committed, people I’ve ever known.

Thankfully grace helped me to let go of everything I thought I knew about homosexuality to affirm the truth I had met in Anne. She in turn was incredibly grateful. She had had the experience of coming out to several friends who were more progressive but who , while saying the right things, clearly distanced themselves from her. Given my background, she feared worse from me.

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Faith is the belief in things unseen. The paradigm of faith is Abraham’s willingness to leave his homeland and enter an unknown world--a world where, as a stranger, he could be at great risk. In his letter to the Romans Paul says that that action of being willing to follow God into the unknown--unleashed a world of good that would not have been possible otherwise. It also strikes me that this is also Paul’s own story, his having been a Pharisee whose whole world was

focused on the law,. Paul followed Jesus into the unknown world where “there is no law.” My being willing to go along with grace, to be reborn, to be led into the unknown, came back to me a couple of years later when I moved in with Anne and her partner Rhonna who had become part of the lesbian (with strong separatist tendencies) community in D.C. Some in that community then in turn had to struggle with what they thought they knew about heterosexual, white, Christian, men, because of Anne’s insistence that I was a trustworthy friend. There I found a refuge as I journeyed on towards my own sexual healing as a heterosexual who was deeply divided within myself because of what I had been taught about Christianity, desire, needs, feelings, sexuality and my body.

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Growing up always a stranger, you know what real hospitality means. It’s the difference between life as fear, life as a fortress, and life as a garden. It is the difference between life lived in a constant state of vigilance for that private, or public, moment when you will be objectified, marked as someone who doesn’t belong, for something that may have little to do with who you are, or something that is central to who you are, and being able to breathe, at least occasionally. It’s the difference between being viewed, and learning to view yourself, constantly with suspicion (in case you do or say anything wrong) and being affirmed. It’s the difference between life as so tiring, it often doesn’t seem worth it, and life as having profound moments of joy and connection.

I remember at age four pressing my face against the chain link fence that separated the house that we had just moved into in St. Louis from our backyard neighbors who were having a barbecue. It was the first group of kids my own age that I had seen and they were clearly having fun: running around, yelling loudly, diving and jumping into about a six inch deep concrete pool that I think was originally meant to be some kind of backyard goldfish pond. I stood looking, longing to join them. Then they invited me to come over, marking my entrance into a period of my life where I was among people among whom I did not feel like a stranger, people among whom I experienced life as joy, happiness, friendship, acceptance, people who watched after me and over me. At the time I had no idea how exceptional this was.

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I think most of us are born with big open hearts, hearts that are open and wanting to be in good relationship with almost everyone. Then we get educated. Through what we’re taught and what happens to us we learn who --not to trust. Jesus says, “where your heart is there will be your treasure also”, and so we learn to divest ourselves from valuing this or that person, or group of people, to close our hearts to this or that situation. Hearts that were once deep with black fertile soil, among which friendships could grow easily and deeply, become like depleted, hardened, leached ground that seems impervious.

Nicodemus, one of the well educated ones, comes to Jesus. He’s learned to be careful, He comes by night so he won’t be seen. Jesus tells him if you want to experience eternal life, if you want to experience heaven on earth, you need to be reborn. Nicodemus responds “What,

can I go back into the womb again?" To his horror Jesus basically says-- yes--you can go back into the womb again.

Those who define the past control the future. When we're in control of everything, then "Justice" is really about "Just us." Everything is defined, judged, in terms of our experience: our hurts and pains, joys and sorrows. But the God space is about a place of grace. This sounds good until you understand that grace means the God-given ability to change, which includes the God-given ability for you to change. Part of that change is about our letting go of ourselves as judges and letting God redefine things. It's about a place where we recognize our ignorance and let ourselves be led, often blindly, to what should be or could be. It's like re-entering the darkness of the womb to go back into a place of re-creation where we, our past, present, and future are all re-created.

This can feel like death. In some ways it is a death experience for the ego that's been trained to be the vantage point from which everything and everyone is to be viewed and judged, that's been trained to try to be in control of everything all the time. When divine love comes to town, it's not that we lose our egos, but our egos become only a part of who we are, not the center of everything.

Here we really need to hear Jesus' challenge as to what it means to be born again. Those who are born of the Spirit are like the wind which "blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you don't know where it comes from and where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nothing could be farther than the freeze-dried static vision of being born again promoted by those who say you can recite a certain confession and then you are born again once and for all. Being born of the Spirit sounds something akin to being continually re-born, continually being open to being led by the Spirit into new and unknown places.

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By the time we are adults, most of us have many good, profound, reasons not to trust, not to open ourselves to transformation. We know what it is to invest our hearts and then have them broken, what it is to discover yourself and life empty, because of the loss of something or someone, you really invested yourself in. You know what it is to have to get up each day to put one foot in front of the other to keep going, because you've lost whatever or whoever made life most meaningful to you.

Now God comes knocking at the door in the middle of the night. a stranger offering us a place of welcome, inviting us into rebirth: to know, in the midst of our lives, life in all its fullness, not in its absence.

That same challenge also comes to us as groups. Are we willing to let God take everything we thought we knew about some group---and --- let go of it--let God help us to see and experience them anew? This is not to forget what we know from our own experience, but to be open to

seeing it from a different vantage point. Those who resist undoubtedly have every justification not to, but at a deadly price.

Last week I went to the Creating Change Conference in Detroit, the largest annual gathering of LGBT activists in the country. It was a pretty amazing event. I often heard God knocking and could feel the tangible excitement about entering the house of the Lord.

No community has more reason to be frightened of religion, no group has been more abused by religion, particularly by the Abrahamic faiths, than TBLG people. Yet what we heard at that conference is that something different is happening. Victory is happening. Last year, for the first time, a marriage amendment was defeated in one state. Last year four other states passed non-discrimination ordinances that protect TBLG people. At the heart of each of those victories were Interfaith coalitions that made the critical difference in getting out the vote and victory.

Bishop Gene Robinson spoke of this strange new relationship between the faith community and the LGBT activist community. He said people in the faith community need to recognize that expecting LGBT people to become part of religious communities is like expecting a woman to return to her abusive spouse, but he also talked about the LGBT activity community to own where it really is. He talked about going to one of the largest gay and lesbian activist organizations in the country and meeting with 150 of the staff and asking --"How many of you are connected to a faith community?" He said almost 80% raised their hands. He then asked, "How many of you have talked about this with anyone here at work?" He said about three people raised their hands. He challenged them to have the same courage they had in coming out as TBLG people, to come out as religious people, because clearly there is some kind of vital connection between what they are doing as activists and their participation in religious communities.

Sometimes wisdom is admitting that what we think we know is what we don't know.

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Most of us have every good reason to resist letting ourselves enter the Godspace, the space where we are open to transformation, the place of continual rebirth.

Death is hard. It's not pretty. It's not romantic. It's about being empty and hopeless, and overcome by meaninglessness. It's about the horror of suddenly finding ourselves disconnected from what is most vital to us. It's about being a stranger, shut out of our own life. Most of us have every good reason to want to avoid experiencing that again, every good reason not to trust.

Yet here God comes, a stranger knocking at the door, challenging everything we think we know about life and ourselves, and inviting us into rebirth, death and resurrection, going from the world as we know it into an unknown land where, in Joe Strummer's words, "the future is unwritten." It's about a place where things are not as we thought they were, where we seem to have much less control and yet--a space where a picnic is being prepared and we're invited and life seems fun and vital and alive--even in the midst of so much death.

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I have known no greater joy than being in the house of the Lord, this amazing thing that happens when true union descends where it is not supposed to be, where if everything went according to our logic--it shouldn't happen. Yet it is there.

Death is awful. I will do all I can to avoid it. But I will also do all I can not to let my fear of death keep me from entering the House of the Lord, from living fully and freely.

But it's more than that. Experiencing death seems vital for us to stay alive. As people we seem continually tempted to put life in a box, to cut ourselves off from the lived, fluid, complexity of reality through some kind of judgment, some kind of idea we have or develop, about how things are. But the living glory is not to be found in ideas or judgments. It is to be found in reality. This is why crises can be such a gift. Crises tend to happen when something unexpected happens, when we discover things are not the way we thought they were. When we can meet crises with grace, we discover they can often be like a doorway back into lived reality, as they strip us of something hard and dead so we can once again connect with what is vital and alive.

In the midst of life, there is so much death that it should be easy for us to understand why we are tempted to hole up, to wrap a cocoon around ourselves that says no more risk taking, no more putting ourselves out there. I've had a enough of dying. But if we wish to truly live, as Jesus said, we need to take up our cross daily and walk with God. It's not about going out and looking for death. If we are living fully death will find us. It's about not letting the threat of death keep us from meeting life in all its fullness, the feast of the divine glory that is in us and all around us, and letting our hearts be reborn so that we can experience it.

And if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.