

## Let Justice Roll Down: A Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving for Equal Rights

NATIONAL EQUALITY MARCH SERMON

Amos 5:14-15a, 24

John 2:1-11

She always knew that there was something different about her boy. She saw the big and little tell-tale signs from the very beginning. The way he spoke, the way he moved in the world all proved to her what she wanted to deny. And then there were those friends of his. If that wasn't a dead give away, she didn't know what was.

They never talked about it, but it was clear that he was talking to someone. She caught him, once or twice, talking in hush tones, but he only brushed her off if she asked about it.

She suffered in the way only a mother could, holding so many conflicting and confusing emotions in her heart: sadness and joy, grief and hope, denial and anticipation. She knew that once he claimed who he really was, life would be even more difficult for him, and like any mother, this realization clung to her like a dreaded dead weight.

They were attending a social function together. His friends were with him—they didn't go anywhere without each other. She realized, looking at him, that he was more than just her boy now. And in that moment, denial turned into resignation turned into acceptance. She knew that it was time for her boy to be the man he was created to become.

There appeared to be a crisis at the event. She never would have guessed that this would be the time and place, but there you have it: She elbowed him and motioned to the bartender: "Jesus, they're out of wine." Her implication was clear. If he was taken aback by this sudden shove out of the closet, he didn't show it. Without skipping a beat, he grumbled back, "Mother, stop it. It's not my time."

Who would have guessed that Jesus would be outted by his own mother?

By claiming who he was created to be, by leaving the closet, by allowing his mother to out him, Jesus offers us a very basic lesson on the importance of coming out: not only is it good and healthy for the individual, who can now live into the fullness of their God-given self, but the community benefits as well. If Jesus didn't step out and step up, the wedding would have been ruined, the joy of the day would have been overshadowed by despair and disappointment, the party would have been over.

I can just hear Jesus' theme song now:

(PINK SOUND CLIP: "I'm coming out, so let's get this party started")

Jesus models to us the importance of people being allowed to grow into their God-given selves, blessed by God, affirmed by those around them, supported by the community. When this happens, the community gets to grow its very best self. When we try to deny others from being who they are, when we shut closets as tight as coffins, when we are forced to live behind masks, the soul of the community becomes brittle, the spirit of the community becomes crushed, the bonds of the community are broken, and the joy, the love, the compassion we have for each other is lost. The party is over.

We are here in Washington, DC this weekend, turning a march into a party in the way only queer people can, to make sure that every person in this country has the rights entitled to them as citizens of these United States. We are here to ensure that liberty and justice for all is a reality, not just for some but for all, regardless of sexual orientation. We are here to support the gay agenda, which is nothing more than the agenda of the US Constitution.

A few weeks ago, my colleague at Glide, Don Guest, reminded the gay and lesbian members of the congregation about their legal status in the US. In a way that only Don can communicate, he said, "Those of you who are gay and lesbian, you know you are only free in a couple of states in the US." Don, of course, was referring to the fact that gay men and lesbians can only marry in a handful of places. Marriage and family being one of the key building blocks of community, the lack of marriage rights means that lesbian and gay men are kept from participating in this core communal institution. The denial of marriage rights, which exist to affirm, support and honor the love two adults share, means that gay men and lesbians do not have this nuptial net to strengthen their relationships, limiting the power of love to transform individual lives, the relationship a couple shares, and the community in which this love may bear fruit.

But marriage rights are only one aspect of the rights that transgender, lesbians, bisexuals and gay men seek.

We in the United Methodist Church fight for both rights (R-I-G-H-T-S) as well as rites (R-I-T-E-S) within our church and beyond. We are in a most schizophrenic situation. The UMC supports the civil rights of glbt persons in the world, but denies rights/rites within the church. We encourage the participation of openly gay and lesbian persons in the military, but have enacted a "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy for gay and lesbian clergy within the church. We oppose homophobia and heterosexism in society but limit the church's ability to openly and honestly discuss issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity because of a funding ban which does not allow the church to "promote homosexuality". We support legal contractual relationships between same-gender loving couples in society, but refuse to honor sacred covenantal relationships in our churches for the same couples. We affirm the importance of loving parents for all children, but refuse to work for the civil rights of same-gender parents which would support these families. We acknowledge that teens dealing with questions about sexual orientation are at a greater risk for suicide and then allow the name-calling of glbt persons as "things that come from the devil" on the floor of General Conference. Church, it is time to practice what we preach!

It is time for us to heed the call of the prophet Amos: "I can't stand your religious meetings. I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions. I want nothing to do with your religion projects, your pretentious slogans and goals...hate evil and love good and then work it out in the public square."

That's what we are here to do this weekend. We are here to work it out in the public square. Because you know what God wants from us? God wants justice—oceans of it. God wants fairness—rivers of it. That's what God wants. That's all God wants.

God wants us to get this party started.

It is time for us to enter the public square. Now, more than ever before, as a spirit of incivility has taken hold of this country, as shouting matches have replaced thoughtful debate, as lies are used to fuel irrational fears, it is time to bring our love and our faith to streetcorners and shopping malls, town halls and church councils.

We must stand firmly in the midst of the public square and seek justice—oceans of it! And fairness—rivers of it, making connections between our own liberation and the liberation of others. No one is exempt from being the recipient of justice and fairness. We all must work together to challenge and confront anything that stands in the way of justice and fairness, anything that seeks to create second class citizenship, anything that attempts to deny the dignity and self-worth of any of God's beloved sons and daughters.

In an era when racism wears a white hood of health care reform opposition, it is time for us to speak plainly about race in America.

In an era when so many are facing economic despair, it's time for us to challenge policies that exploit the poor.

In an era when educational budgets are being slashed, it is time for us to stand for our children.

Make no mistake, we must put the same energy we are putting in for our own liberation into the liberation of others. We are all interconnected. Whether racism or sexism or heterosexism or ableism or agism or classism, whatever -ism shackles the soul of our sisters and brothers must be broken. We must take a stand against the evils of oppression in whatever forms they are manifest. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. This is what it means to co-create with God the beloved community.

We are going to march tomorrow, but what are we going to do on Monday? What are we going to do about Maine and Washington, where the rights of gay and lesbian persons are facing serious opposition? What are we going to do to support transgender persons who face violence for living out their God-given identity? How are we going to work with communities of color, to eradicate racism in the many social systems it exists? How will we be allies and advocates with persons with disabilities? How will we create safe communities for our children? What will we do to ensure that the poor do not fall through the cracks but are supported by their communities?

We gotta work it out in the public square. It is time for us to come out, come out as the people of God, come out as disciples of Jesus Christ, come out as those who hate evil and love good. We gotta work it out in the public square.

The glbt movement is but one more stream that flows into the ocean of justice. Others have walked this path, modeling to us how we are to walk our talk, beckoning us to lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty. Remembering the lessons of the past, taking hope in the present, facing the rising of the sun of our new day begun: Let us march on till victory is won.

Rev. Dr. Karen P. Oliveto

Pastor, Glide Memorial United Methodist Church, San Francisco

Sermon preached at Capitol Hill UMC, Washington, DC, October 10, 2009 for: Let Justice Roll Down: A Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving for Equal Rights

Sponsored by Baltimore Washington Area Reconciling Methodists and Of Sacred Worth of Wesley Theological Seminary