

Songs 1:1-7, Psa. 89:1-18, 1 Cor. 13:1-13

The Grace of Pride

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The Church of Saint Luke in the Fields
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Good evening and Happy Pride! It's wonderful to be back at St. Luke's. I have a lot of fond memories of Pride Week from when I was a parishioner here in the late 1990s. People joked that Pride Week was the real Holy Week around here – and perhaps there was a tiny bit of truth to that. (I'll just ignore the fact that the bishop is sitting right over there.) I remember one year my husband Michael and I marched in Pride, and we pushed a huge metal scaffolding replica of the church on wheels down Fifth Avenue. Another year, we carried giant photos of parishioners on large poles. I've never felt so butch in my entire life!

St. Luke's also was a place where I learned what radical love and hospitality was all about. It was a blessing to volunteer with the cake and tea ministry to people with HIV/AIDS at St. Vincent's Hospital, along with Michael and our beloved volunteer coordinator, Shields Remine. St. Luke's also was the place where I fell back in love with the Christian faith – after many years of wandering in the spiritual wilderness – and where I was received into the Episcopal Church. And St. Luke's was the place where Michael and I were married – liturgically and sacramentally speaking – almost eleven years ago to this day. So it's great to be back.

Speaking of marriage, how about the amazing news, on this Pride weekend and the 42nd anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising, that civil marriage equality is finally a reality in New York State? I thought it was particularly appropriate that tonight's New Testament reading is from the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, which is one of the most frequently-used texts for weddings. I also thought that the opening words for our service by the Psalmist were particularly appropriate: "Righteousness and justice are the foundations of God's throne; love and truth go before God's face." Yes, righteousness and justice prevailed this week, as did love and truth. As Fr. Hugh preached this morning, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was right when he said that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

As some of you may know, I teach theology at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Recently, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston cancelled a Pride Mass that was scheduled at St. Cecelia's Church in the South End, which is Boston's equivalent of the Village, Chelsea, and Hell's Kitchen. Mind you, that

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wasn't even a "real" Pride mass, in the sense that this is a "real" Pride evensong. It was simply a mass at which all were expressly welcomed. Although there was a huge outcry against the cancellation, many theologically conservative Roman Catholics defended the Archdiocese's actions. As one conservative Catholic blogger put it, why should any church be celebrating Pride? It is, after all, the root of all sin.

Now, theologically speaking, that blogger isn't entirely wrong. Throughout the history of Christianity, pride *has* been viewed as the root of all sin. As the saying goes, pride goeth before destruction and the fall. St. Augustine of Hippo argued in the fourth century that pride is the cause of original sin, which has infected all of us since Adam and Eve. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote in the *Summa Theologiae* that "*maximum peccatum in homine est superbia,*" or that "the greatest sin of humanity is pride." (How could I preach at St. Luke's without throwing in a Latin phrase somewhere?) And pride has the primacy of place among the seven deadly sins.

So why *do* we celebrate Pride, not only up and down Fifth Avenue, but also right here at St. Luke's and in Episcopal congregations around the country?

Well, it certainly is true, for many people, that pride is the greatest sin of all, including (dare I say) the Roman Catholic hierarchy – and quite possibly theology professors. By this I mean toxic pride – a pride in which we, like the fallen angels, try to lift ourselves up too high, higher than God. We put ourselves in the place of God, and we become the very idols that St. Paul condemns in the first chapter of Romans. Toxic pride is a sin that, in the words of tonight's *Magnificat*, God rejects by scattering the "proud in the imagination of their hearts" and by casting down the "mighty from their seats."

But as feminist theologians have taught us, pride is not the only sin. For many marginalized people, the greatest sin is not so much pride, but rather shame. Shame is not so much lifting ourselves up too high, but instead not lifting ourselves up *high enough*. Shame is thinking that we are never good enough, that we are undeserving of love. Shame is hiding, self-abnegation, and not reaching our God-given potential. Shame is not so much about making mistakes; shame is the belief that we *are* mistakes.

I believe that shame is the original sin for many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. I just finished teaching a June intensive course at EDS on queer theology and pastoral care, and I was amazed at the central role that shame plays in the lives of LGBT people both inside and outside the church. And I was incredibly saddened by the way in which Christianity often has contributed significantly to that shame.

As LGBT people, we are shamed from an early age for our nonconforming sexualities and/or gender identities. We are taught, in the words of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, that we are "intrinsically disordered." We learn quickly, as the wonderful book *The Velvet Rage* describes, to seek approval by creating a false self – a false self that is more fabulous than anyone else in terms of throwing the most exquisite parties, having the biggest pecs and calves, making tons and tons of money, and, yes, by being

the best liturgy queens in the universe. And, ironically, instead of feeling better, we become more and more alienated from our true selves, which can lead to emptiness, addiction, rage, and even a hatred of God.

So what is the antidote to the sin of shame? It is the grace of pride, of course. Not the toxic kind of pride that I referenced before, but rather a healthy pride that is grounded in *agape* love – the love of God, the love of neighbor, and the love of the self. Healthy pride is a function of a love, as St. Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, that is patient, kind, and rejoices in the truth. A love, in the words of the *Magnificat*, that lifts up the “humble and the meek” and that fills the “hungry with good things.” A love that is not dependent on what we do, but that is for *who we are* as beloved children of God. Period.

This is why I believe marriage equality, both civil and religious, is so important. Marriage itself is an antidote to shame because it sacramentalizes the fact that we are loved for *who we are*. We are loved by our spouses – period – despite all the dishes that are left done and undone, despite all the trash that needs to be taken out, and despite leaving the toothpaste cap unscrewed for the umpteenth time. And that’s on a good day! Marriage *is* “for better or for worse”; it’s a powerful way in which we can experience, in an embodied and incarnational way, God’s radical love and amazing grace for us in the face of human brokenness. Marriage is one way, for those of us who choose it, to counter the messages of shame and self-hate that we are bombarded with from an early age. And it can be a powerful way to start defusing the velvet rage that lies deep within all of us.

It’s sad that so many religious institutions, including the Roman Catholics, the Southern Baptists, the Mormons, and the breakaway Anglicans, have it completely backwards. Grace is not about making shamed people feel even worse about themselves. Grace is not about putting prior conditions on God’s love. Grace is not about rejecting marriage equality in the name of some fantasy “natural law” or biblical norm that is, in the end, nothing but smoke and mirrors and circular reasoning.

Grace is about the gift of God’s radical and unconditional love for us in Christ Jesus. We are loved by God – not because of what we do or what we don’t do, and certainly not because we are somehow deserving of such love – but rather because we are made in the image and likeness of God, and because God delights in us through the Creation and the Incarnation. Now this is not a message of cheap grace, antinomianism, or lawlessness. Conversion, or *metanoia*, a turning of the mind, happens *after* we realize we are loved unconditionally, not before. St. Paul couldn’t be more right in terms of highlighting the importance of grace over works. (Wow, did I really say that about Paul? I guess I’m getting conservative in my old age.)

So why is it that certain religious leaders are so obsessed with toxic pride and condemning LGBT people? My hunch is that they themselves come from a place of deep shame about their bodies, their sexualities, and their belief that they can be loved only for what they do – as opposed to who they are. These people – both lay and ordained – suffer deeply from the sin of shame and erotophobia, the fear of the erotic. Not only is

this shame a toxic sin, but it is dangerous because, unless it is acknowledged and addressed, it can come out in abusive ways – theologically, emotionally, and even sexually.

This is why I love the tradition of Anglican evensong, especially at an Anglo-Catholic parish like St. Luke's. To me, evensong is a celebration of sensuality and the erotic. (I know – you're probably thinking to yourself "What in the world is he talking about?" but stay with me for a moment.) Sensuality in the sense of appealing to our senses of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and movement. Erotic in the sense of celebrating our deepest desires and yearnings for connection to neighbor and to God. The sensual and the erotic is not something to be feared, but to be celebrated, as the Song of Songs teaches us. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!"

The Song of Songs is also a wonderful lesson in self-love. "I am black and beautiful," the narrator says. Even though she is seen as a stranger or foreigner by the daughters of Jerusalem because she is "dark," the Shulamite maiden knows that she is beautiful, loved, and sexy just the way she is. It is an important lesson for all of us who suffer from shame, and especially for those of us who are LGBT people of color – particularly in the face of the racism, rejection, and exclusion that exists in the predominantly white LGBT community. Have you seen how many people of color are in *Out Magazine's* Power 50 this year? Just two – Perez Hilton and Anthony Romero. No African Americans. No Asian Americans. No Native Americans. Not one woman of color! What, they could only come up with two powerful gay Latino men out of the seven billion people on this planet? Of which 80% -- four out of five persons – are people of color? But that's a whole other sermon.

So why do we celebrate Pride? As we've seen, a healthy pride, grounded in love, is an antidote to the toxic sin of shame. But even more importantly, as people who walk the path of Christ Jesus, we can understand these Pride Week events as pointing to the eschatological horizon, the *telos*, or end, to which our lives are truly ordered – to the radical love of God that, in the words of St. Paul, "never ends."

For me, watching and participating in Pride Week events, including this sublime evensong, is like gazing into a mirror, dimly, and seeing a glimpse of heaven on earth. It is a reflection of the community of radical love that we hope for, as people of faith. It is a reflection of the Body of Christ in all of its fullness. And it is a reflection of the joyous mystery of God's all-encompassing love that, someday, we *will* see face to face. And for that, we are greatly blessed, and we give thanks to God. Happy Pride!

+Amen.