

“Out In the Open”

Rev. David Gregory

July 7, 2019

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost



First reading

John 10:14-16, New Standard Version

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Second reading

“For a New Beginning” by John O’Donohue

In out of the way places of the heart,
Where your thoughts never think to wander,
This beginning has been quietly forming,
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire,
Feeling the emptiness growing inside you,
Noticing how you willed yourself on,
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.

I watched you play with the seduction of safety
And the gray promises that sameness whispered,
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent,
Wondered would you always live like this.

Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,
Your eyes young again with energy and dream,
A path of plenitude opening before you.

Though our destination is not yet clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is one with your life’s desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.



Fifty years ago last week, on a hot summer night in Greenwich Village in lower Manhattan, a police raid on a Mafia-owned bar in a plain-looking building at 53 Christopher Street ignited an uprising that sent shockwaves across the country. As a twelve-year-old, seated at a dinner table in a small town in southwest Ohio, hearing the fatherly voice of Walter Cronkite—the same voice that three weeks later would narrate Neil Armstrong’s first steps on the moon—New York City seemed as far away to me as that moonwalk would seem when later I heard about. No one at the dinner table said a word. I can recall a very uncomfortable silence. No such thing was ever discussed in our home, and as the dishes were cleared and washed and put away, life went on as it always had before. Words like *homosexual*, *drag-bar*, or *gay liberation* were just not in our lexicon. In those uncomfortable moments, I could not have imagined how those far-away events, as well as the parental silence that walled them off would one day radically alter the trajectory of my life.

I want to say a word of thanks to those who serve on our Governing Board for their encouragement, and to Carol Hannon—who wouldn’t take *no* for an answer—for making it possible for me and Tripp to attend the PRIDE parade in San Francisco one week ago. The night before the parade for a warm-up we watched a PBS documentary on the Stonewall Uprising, and seeing the spare footage from a half-century ago, I traveled back to that time of silence and shame. The program began by describing cultural attitudes of the late 1950’s and early 1960’s—how same-gender attractions were widely considered to be signs of mental illness, how some people were jailed or institutionalized, sometimes treated with electric shock, or in extreme cases castrated or lobotomized. As I look back at the young boy I once was, how could I have been anything but silent on that night so long ago? How could I not have sought to conform to the image my family, my church, and my community had of me? So I want you to think with me what it was like last Sunday to stroll down the center of Market Street wearing a purple shirt complete with clerical collar, hand-in-hand with the man to whom I am legally married. The changes that have come to us in the last fifty or sixty years are staggering. And although PRIDE parades have become more celebration than protest, the pushback is becoming more and more evident with each passing day. Minorities of all kinds carry with them a very tenuous feeling these days. But that’s not what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about “coming out”—not about mine or anyone else’s, actually. I want to talk about the emergence of something called *love*. I want to talk about a new uprising that only takes a small spark to ignite, an uprising that is happening all over the place, and not limited to any one location.

Jesus reminds us that there are always some sheep that are considered “other,” but his message demonstrated that the opposite is true. There is but one flock and one shepherd. There is one family of earth, and Divine Love is its one and only shepherd. His entire ministry engulfed and included everyone—widows, fatherless, the poor, the sick, extortioners, prostitutes, Samaritans; there were no outcasts. Name any population that wasn’t talked about at polite dinner tables; those were the ones at Jesus’s table, and we in the church still have a lot to learn about emulating his practice of inclusion.

Back in the 90’s, CCC “came out” officially as an Open and Affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ. We are listed in our national directory as such. We are identified on the national website as such. It is stated clearly on our own website. We are part of an organization called “United in Spirit,” a collection of Bay Area faith organizations who affirm the LGBTQ community. We marched with them last Sunday, and most of them were UCC, Episcopal or Presbyterian groups. There were a few brave Methodists in the mix, even a couple of “Mormons for Equality.” My favorite was a group called “Church Ladies for Gay Rights.” At times during the parade, one of the leaders of our group would walk toward the crowds with a megaphone, talking

about the unconditional love practiced by our communities. Every once in a while, I'd hear him say "Anybody from Tiburon? Here is the minister from Community Congregational Church. If you're in Tiburon, go visit them. They love you." And I know we do. But I want all of us to understand exactly what that means. I always begin our services by saying that "we are an Open and Affirming Congregation of the United Church of Christ, and no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." It is a lovely thought, but it isn't enough. It isn't enough to say, "Well, of course, everyone is welcome here."

One church that I have served in the past became Open and Affirming while I was there, and a thought that often came forward was "We welcome everyone; why isn't it enough to say that? Why do we need an Open and Affirming statement?" My answer to that is always the same. In the middle of my life I spent four years not darkening the door of any church. It was too painful, and I was too bitter. My community was found in the Monroe Avenue Pub in Rochester, New York. When my mother died, those people from the pub were the people who called me up; they sent flowers; they asked me how I was. Many of them had also been wounded by the church in some way. The word "church" signified a place where we were not welcome. But just like in "Cheers" this was a place where everybody knew my name.

But there was an emptiness deep inside me. My spiritual quest refused to die, and I kept wishing I could find a place to fit. And one afternoon I was driving down East Avenue in Rochester, and there on the tall stone bell-tower of the Third Presbyterian church was this HUGE rainbow banner, flowing from the top to the bottom. It made me think I could possibly visit there, so one Sunday in late July in the year 2000, I worked up the courage to walk through the door, and what I found inside was more than just words. It was a welcome so wide that I'm still not over it. It was an embrace. It was an acknowledgement of my hurt. It was a recognition of my gifts, and it was a desire on the part of the people there to heal my wounds and ultimately get me back out the door and back into the ministry to which they knew I was called. They didn't just offer me a welcome. They restored my dignity.

So no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. It does not matter what your gender is. It does not matter what your gender identity is. It does not matter what your gender expression is. You are welcome here into the full life and work and leadership of this community. If you are differently abled, we want every bit of our space to be fully navigable, not because the government tells us it must be, but because we want you here, and you are welcome into the full life and work of this community. If your background is Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or Hindu, you are welcome here. If you are Buddhist, Muslim or Evangelical, you are welcome here. If you consider yourself atheist or agnostic, you are welcome here. You can be any race. You can be any age. All are welcome into the full life and work and leadership of this community.

Let's let love out of the closet and celebrate the PRIDE of all creation. Let's become THE place of radical inclusion and extravagant welcome. It takes work. It takes outreach. Sometimes it takes a huge rainbow banner, but we cannot say we follow Jesus and fail to do this work. And when we do it and do it well, it's going to change everything.

