

Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me

Sunday, June 26, 2001 - Christ Episcopal Church in Poughkeepsie, NY
Jeremiah 28:5-9 - Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18 - Romans 6:12-23 - Matthew 10:40-42

We can be welcome, just so long as we can 'pass'. As long as we don't look 'too gay' or 'too lesbian' - or sound 'too gay'. So long as LGBT Christians only want to sing in the choir, or work in the kitchen, or arrange the flowers, they probably are welcome in most churches.

Jesus told his disciples *Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me.* (Matthew 10:40)

The church uses that word welcome, a great deal. I suspect that if you did a survey of the websites, Sunday bulletins, mission statements, and vision statements of 10,000 Christian churches across America, you would find the word *welcome* in most of them. The question of course, is do we really mean it.

I can tell you, from my own personal experience, that not every church in America – not even every Episcopal parish – welcomes gay and lesbian individuals into their communities.

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But for far too long – and it is still so in far too many places – we have to adhere to the original 'Don't Ask – Don't Tell' rule. The Christian Church has much more to answer for in our determination to keep LGBT persons in the closet, than does the United States military.

It is still true in most Christian houses of worship that a 'known' gay or lesbian person may not read the scripture, may not serve at the altar, and heaven forbid – don't even think about working with the children.

It is still true in most Christian houses of worship that a 'known' gay or lesbian person may not be ordained, as they seek to respond to God's call on their lives.

It is still true in most Christian houses of worship that a gay or lesbian couple may not have their relationship blessed within the context of their community of faith – a marriage ceremony is clearly beyond the pale.

How can the Christian Church dare to use the word welcome, and then force a portion of their worshipping community to live a lie?

Jesus told his disciples *Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me.*

I am thankful today to be an Episcopalian. To be a member of a denomination that has struggled and considered and studied and fought and cried and laughed and prayed about this 'issue' of whether or not we welcome LGBT people as children if God.

I am also thankful today to be a priest in the Diocese of New York. To serve in ministry with Bishop Mark Sisk, who said yesterday that we “give our most profound thanks for the step that has been taken in affording equal civil rights for our brothers and sisters.”

While it might not be true of every single parish within our Diocese, there is no doubt, that the culture of the Diocese of New York calls each of its worshipping communities to be a place of welcome to the LGBT children of God.

I came here from a Diocese that struggled with whether or not to simply ordain me as a priest. They had never been presented with an aspirant for ordination who was, as our culture likes to say “openly gay”. I really don’t like the phrase “openly gay”. I much prefer the word – honest.

The Diocese did of course ordain me – but only because I was single person, and only because I understood that I was expected to remain celibate for the rest of my life. Even so, it was not possible to find a call to ministry in the Diocese after my two-year post-seminary assignment at the Cathedral in Houston. I can tell you, from my own personal experience, that not every church in America – not even every Episcopal parish – welcomes gay and lesbian individuals into their communities.

Jesus told his disciples *Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me.*

And so I am lastly thankful today to have been called into ministry with you, here at Christ Episcopal Church, in this place, and at this time.

I was asked to be on a talk-radio show last night – they were looking for a local pastor

who would speak in response to the passage of Marriage Equality legislation in New York on Friday evening. Our conversation began with the host asking me ‘what will it be like in your church tomorrow, in response to this legislation.’ I told him that while I could not speak for each and every member of the parish, that I did believe that most of the parish would be celebrating and thanking God that the extension of the civil right of marriage had at least been granted to the LGBT children of God in New York state.

I could ‘hear’ his jaw drop over the telephone lines. He said something like: You mean that your church supports the marriage equality law?” I told him yes – and the interview took a decidedly different approach than I think he anticipated.

There was a misunderstanding that I based my support for Marriage Equality primarily on the issue of civil rights. I tried to set the record straight (no pun intended) that my support of Marriage Equality is primarily based on my beliefs as a Christian.

That we are called to respect the dignity of every human being.

That we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves.

That we are called to not cast judgment, to not throw that first stone against those who are different than ourselves – and especially to not cast judgment on those with whom we disagree.

As I have told you before, I am thankful to be engaged in ministry in his parish, where I experience welcome. Where I experience a safe environment. Where I can examine my own understandings, and my own life experiences,

as I try to faithfully determine the work that God has given me to do.

This busy season of conversation, lobbying, letter writing, and phone calling about Marriage Equality has been a very poignant time for me. Most of you know that I was in a long-term, indeed in one regard, a life-long relationship earlier in my life. My partner Stephen and I shared our lives together for nearly eleven years, before he succumbed to illness as a result of AIDS, and died in the summer of 1994. Over the last several weeks, I have carried the memory of our life together very close to my heart. The idea of our getting married in 1983 of course never entered our mind.

We worried about keeping our jobs, about being able to find a place to live together, about not getting beat up. About not falling victim to one of the bullets that would fly through a bar fence or window as we sat having a drink. About not getting killed on the streets of Houston – as one of our friends was one summer night. So much has changed since those days.

For some people I guess – some of those changes have been painful. For myself, some of those changes are the things that give me hope. AIDS is no longer a death sentence – at least not if you have good health insurance. Job security and access to housing is less and less an issue – Stephen and I eventually experienced that ourselves, even in Houston, before the end of his life. And now, the civil right to live together as a married couple – at least here in New York and a handful of other states – is a reality.

I am thankful that we are a community who will celebrate the marriages of God's gay and lesbian children. A community where a young

gay couple – as Stephen and I were back in the 1980's – can find a place of encouragement, and support, and hope.

I am thankful that we are a community who strives to be welcoming to each of God's children who walk into our doors.

We are, no doubt, not perfect in that striving. I pray that when we fail – we can become aware of that failure, lean to understand from the experience, and do better the next time.

Jesus told us that when we welcome any Child of God, we welcome him.

Let us pray.

Come Holy Spirit. Come and burst open the doors of our hearts. That we may be made ready to recognize and welcome the next child of God who comes to this place seeking comfort and hope. Help us to be prepared to offer a safe space for all of your children.

Come Holy Spirit. Come and burst open the doors of our minds. That we may be made ready to recognize and welcome the next child of God who comes to this place with something to teach us. Help us to be prepared to learn something new – especially from someone who is different from ourselves.

Come Holy Spirit. Come and burst open the doors of our souls. That we may be made ready to recognize and welcome the next child of God who comes to this place and who will change us. Help us to be prepared to listen – to learn – and to change.

Come Holy Spirit. Help us to live into the hope that you are ever ready to enter our hearts, our minds, and our souls. Help us to be true to our calling as children of God. Amen.