

“Paul Would Have Liked Gay Pride” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey  
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Text: Galatians 3:23-29 Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise

I THINK THE APOSTLE PAUL would have liked Gay Pride Day.

After all, he understood the destructiveness of division and prejudice. He lived in a world whose fundamental structures were rooted in pairs of opposites: Circumcision / uncircumcision; Jew / Gentile; slave / freeman; male / female. And he believed that the message of Jesus worked against that. The Christian message is one of grace, forgiveness, justice, and unity, a freedom that trumped the old rigidities of literal law.

Paul would have loved Pride Day’s insistence that under God’s grace there must no longer be rules that separate people -- into haves and have-nots, righteous and sinner, blue states and red states, fundamentalists and progressives, Israeli and Palestinian, Sunni and Shite, Pharisee and peasant, Pope and laity, Ba’al and YHWH, gay and straight... They can and must co-exist.

Yes, Paul would have liked Gay Pride Day.

Paul was a Jew by birth, as indeed was Jesus himself. Part of the Jewish culture was an emphasis on being set apart—many of the provisions of the Law, including circumcision and the dietary laws, were primarily ways that the people demonstrated, through their actions and appearance, that they are not like others. Supposedly, there was a daily prayer common among observant Jewish men around the time of Jesus and Paul, in which the man would thank God he wasn’t born a Gentile or a woman.

The young church seemed to have bought into the notion that Christians weren’t really Christians unless they became Jews first. It must have been shocking for Paul to say that any difference between Jew and Christian was irrelevant! And it must also have been shocking when they realized that when he said there was no longer Jew or Greek, he did not mean that either one had to assimilate to the other one’s way of life. Gentiles didn’t have to become Jews, and Jews also did not have to give up their Jewishness. God’s kingdom is wide!

Paul would have liked Pride Day. Oh I know. He had a streak of social conservatism in him that wanted women to be appropriate in garb and behavior, that wanted family systems to remain in tact, that wanted protection for the vulnerable, that urged a social order. He wanted a healthy society, as best could be understood within his culture. But he never wanted a hierarchical one that judged and discriminated.

Christ came with arms open to all. Paul probably would be wondering why the world would not have learned this already. We have given it voice. Our own constitution wrote "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all people are created equal ." Abraham Lincoln took these words and thought it was possible that there might be no slave nor free. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream, a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. And Harvey Milk believed in every political voice and Janie Spahr and Lisa Larges demonstrate God's gift of ministry to every called disciple. Paul would have aligned with each of these, because he understood the power of the law to cripple and punish.

Our reading from Galatians begins with Paul's assertion that the Law of Moses, once responsible for directing behavior toward God, now functioned to enslave. Until the time the Hebrew people were mature enough to respond freely in faith to the living God, they were carefully surrounded and protected by the Mosaic Law. The law was like to those Greek slaves, tutors who escorted children to school keeping them from danger or distraction, making sure they really get to the place they set out for. But he says, now we have arrived at our destination: By a New Testament understanding, by Christ's advent, we are in direct relationship with God. In God's family are all equal.

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Do you know how Pride day started? Early in the morning of June 28, 1969, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer persons rioted following a police raid on the Stonewall Inn — a gay bar that was heavily patronized by people of color, including a high percentage of drag queens — in the Greenwich Village section of New York City. On the one-year anniversary of the riots, the Gay Liberation Front organized a march , in New York City in commemoration of the Stonewall riots. On the same weekend gay activists on the West Coast of the United States held a march in Los Angeles and a march and 'Gay-in' in San Francisco.

In New York and Atlanta the marches were called 'Gay Liberation Marches', in San Francisco and Los Angeles they became known as 'Gay Freedom Marches.' In recent decades they have become "Gay Pride" marches.

A good working definition of pride is proper, reasonable and justified self-respect. A pride that is justifiable and reasonable, because it is based on god's widely inclusive love. Pride helps gay people feel they are not a tiny, powerless minority group. Through pride, many glbt's find a sense of belonging, a sense of being worthwhile.

Paul would say, by taking pride in who they are in Christ, glbt people can start the long process of overcoming self-hate. Standing side-by-side with God, rainbow people are an accepted, loved, connected and powerful force.

Further, Paul would say, that goes for all of us. All of us who feel either superior or inferior, on the inside track or scrambling to catch up, arrogant and prideful or full of fear and worry.

All of us need to be right-sized – proud of ourselves, forgiving and uncondemning of others. All of us deserve to have a sense of belonging, a sense of worth and acceptance. Paul says that is already true, if we understand God’s love and God’s grace.

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Listen to these words from a recent interview with Michael Hopkins, President of Integrity, the Episcopal equivalent to More Light: "As we continue to proclaim our message of full inclusion and work toward its reality in our Church, let us not forget that it is simply the message of the Gospel. Let us not allow ourselves to be marginalized by talk about "issues that distract us from the real work of the Church" or "why can't we talk about mission instead of sex." We are talking about the "real work" of the Church, which is the proclamation of the Gospel. We are talking about the Church's fundamental mission. The full inclusion of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the life of the Church is not about sex or even about "an issue": it is about the Gospel of Jesus Christ." The same gospel -- same good news – is what we hear in Paul.

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But it’s hard. Any social justice struggle is hard. Paul gave his life to this effort, and like Moses who led his people to the promised land but was not allowed to cross over into it, Lincoln had a dream, that all people would be equal. Indeed, slavery was abolished, but equality was still a dream in 1963 when Martin Luther King had a dream where his four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin (or by their sexual orientation) but by the content of their character. Segregation is illegal, gay rights are on the rise, but brotherhood/ sisterhood is still a dream.

We cry, one more time, justice delayed is justice denied. And we agonize at the injustices continued within our own church. And we wonder, are we struggling in vain?

Do you hear yourself in the prophet Elijah as he cried out to God, “take away my life, it is enough”? And can you imagine God answering your own cry, with the words, “What are you doing here?” As Verna Dozier, the African American Anglican theologian says: "Don't tell me what you believe: tell me what difference it makes that you believe." Some of you will be marching in the Parade today, and along the Pride parade route, it will make a difference that you believe. It will make a difference in the lives of those we may never see again or know that your witness has touched.

Can you relate to Elijah as he wails, “I am the only one left, God, the only one left in Israel who cares.” If so, do you remember that God called him a liar. He showed him 7,000 persons who had not bowed down to Baal. Good people. Concerned people. Dedicated people.

So God simply repeats, “What are you doing, standing there?”

If we look at our world, if we look at our church, if we look at our lives, and we are honest with ourselves, we will see that we are broken. We can see that things are not the way God intends for them to be. And as we look at the sea of brokenness, it is hard to figure out where to begin. We hear God calling for us to help make this world a better place. But how? The hurts are so deep, so many and we are so few.

But there are people who care: good people, concerned people, dedicated people. So we keep on keeping on.

Yes we are different. Differences are not supposed to go away. Rather we are called to view the differences through new eyes.

There is a story of a rabbi who asked his students how one could recognize the time when night ends and day begins. One student responded, “Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a dog from a sheep?” “No”, the rabbi said. Another said, “Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a date palm from a fig tree?” Again, the rabbi, said “No”. Then, when is it?” a third student asked. And the rabbi said, “It is when you look into the face of any human creature and see your brother or sister there. Until then, night is still with us.”