

“Shattering Shame” Gay Pride Day sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry PC(USA) June 29, 2008

Texts: Psalm 13 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me for ever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul,

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,

and my enemy will say, ‘I have prevailed’;

my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

But I trusted in your steadfast love;

my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the LORD,

because he has dealt bountifully with me

Matthew 9:18-26 **18**While he was saying this, a ruler came and knelt before him and said, "My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live." **19**Jesus got up and went with him, and so did his disciples. **20**Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. **21**She said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed." **22**Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed from that moment. **23**When Jesus entered the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd, **24**he said, "Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. **25**After the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. **26**News of this spread through all that region.

Matthew 10:40-42 He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. **41**Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. **42**And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN HARD not to be thinking about Gay Pride day last week. Oh yes, there was a lot of other important business going on at the General Assembly. And there were many friends and colleagues and people from NVM. And there were many meals and programs -- along with church business and family needs.

But during all the days, I was wearing my rainbow scarf, one of hundreds that were knit by supporters across America. These were offered free of charge, with sole the request to tell the story when asked, tell the story of gay lesbian bisexual and transgender folk who are our friends, colleagues, mentors, heroes and s'heroes, pastors, helpers... People just like us who are stigmatized as God's children and ostracized as God's called servants within the church.

And during all the days, Lisa Larges' band of young TAMFS volunteers, including Heather Grantham, were all about, standing witness, demonstrating, talking with folk, being visible and compelling.

And during all the days, I was aware of the awesome work going on to promote an overture that would change the constitution of the PC(USA) from exclusive and punitive language regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender candidates for ordination, and an overture that would restore the right to “scruple” or claim exemption to the clause that now requires candidates to live in chastity in singleness or marriage between a man and a woman. I was aware of our effort to take offensive and wrongly translated homosexual language out of the Heidelberg Confession, as well as an overture to explore including the Belmar confession from South Africa in our Book of Confessions. (All of which passed, I am overjoyed to report!)

And during all the days, I was increasingly aware of how the Scripture passages for today speak directly to the relevant issues of shame, blame, courage, hope, faith, Jesus, church, witness and even hospitality.

Can you not imagine our lgbt brothers and sisters wailing this lament: “How long, O God?” “Where are you my God? Why do you hide?” In fact, is there anyone who at one time or another has not wailed this lament? Shame and despair are destructive and debilitating emotions, yet most of us have been there at one time or another. Psalm 13, the shortest of the prayers for help in the Psalter, expresses the anguish, but ends up in trust and hope. The prayer is based on the belief that the lives of those who belong to God matter to God. This is no impersonal deity, this is “my” God, a God who answers the cries of lament and despair with a persuasion of graciousness; when hope despairs, despair also hopes at the same time. We are simultaneously the anxious, fearful, dying, person who cannot find God where we want God to be; yet we are also the blessed with a life based in a knowledge and embrace of God’s goodness and steadfast faithfulness.

Can’t you also imagine the hemorrhaging woman from our Gospel story wailing this very lament? The pilgrim guide who has lived in shame for 12 years, whose faith finally has the power to reject cultural and religious taboos, is not even named. When she is written about or spoken of, it is mostly in terms of a disembodied faith, the faith -- as if we could separate her body from her spirit. To speak of this woman’s faith while ignoring her body is to miss the point of her healing. We are all sexual creatures, gay and straight. To hear this woman’s story brings us face to face with some of our own religious and cultural beliefs and how they have shared and misshaped our own understandings about human sexuality and essential personhood – our own and that of others.

Most of us have felt the power of shame in our lives. Shame and violence are the two most powerful tools of social control that exist in human communities. They are used to keep us all in line, to keep us quiet, to batter our self-esteem and defeat our sense of strength. That is why I know we can all learn something important from Gay Pride: because shame is not reserved in our culture for people who are gay. Shame is let loose on every one of us any time we are a little bit “queer”—any time we stop hiding the fact that we’re different in some way from the norms that surround us. Shame cuts people off from some intrinsic part of themselves. Shame convinces us that we have to hide and hold back and never let anyone know who we really are. And that hiding and holding

back—and especially the deep sense of inadequacy that grows from them—damages the human spirit.

I'm going to say that again, because I think it is vitally important. Shame damages the human spirit. Unlike guilt, which is attached to an action, something you did or didn't do, shame is attached to your very self, despair about who you are. It attacks people at the deepest part of their being and convinces them that they are not worthy, not important, not good enough, not acceptable as they are. Shame destroys the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

And faith shatters that shame. It is a deep faith in God that heals -- the faith that has kept our lgbt friends and our selves on the path toward equality, the faith that encompasses the knowledge, the unquestioning reassurance, that you are valued, loved, worthwhile. Jesus will always stop, just as the Good Samaritan stopped, even on his way to another urgent request, Jesus will never rush by. Jesus always has time to let the power run through him into you – whenever you need it, whenever you lament, whenever you ask.

Sometimes it takes courage to ask for help. It takes some sort of mental or moral strength to venture into the unknown, to persevere against odds, to withstand danger, fear, or difficulty. It takes a firmness of mind and , an ingrained capacity for meeting strain or difficulty with fortitude and resilience , a quality of temperament enabling one to hold one's own or keep up one's morale when opposed or threatened , stubborn persistence and unwillingness to admit defeat .

Sometimes it takes courage. And sometimes, it just takes faith,

Tony Campolo who is a professor of sociology and an evangelical Christian, tells the story of his visit to Honolulu for a Christian Conference. On his first night there, coping with a six hour time difference, he awoke sometime after 3 AM. Unable to get back to sleep, he went out to get something to eat. Eventually he found a tiny coffee shop, sat at the counter, and ordered coffee and a donut.

He was the only customer until quite suddenly, the coffee shop began to fill with women. Some sat at small tables, others at the counter near Tony. From their conversation he learned an astonishing amount about Honolulu's night life, for the women were discussing their night's work and their male clients.

Sitting next to him at the counter, one of the women declared: "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be thirty-nine."

Her friend responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday?'"

"Come on!" said the woman sitting next to Tony. "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. I don't want anything from you. I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

Well, Tony sat and waited until the women had left. Then he called over the guy behind the counter (his name was Harry) and asked, "Do they come in here every night?"

"Yeah!" Harry answered.

"The one right next to me, does she come here every night?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "That's Agnes. She comes in here every night. Why?"

"Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday," Tony told him. "What do you say you and I do something about that? What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her right here tomorrow night?"

A smile crossed Harry's cheeks and he agreed.

Tony said he would be back the next morning at about 2:30 a.m. to decorate the place and Harry, agreed to make a cake.

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony Campolo was back at the diner. He had picked up some crepe-paper decorations and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" He decorated the diner from one end to the other.

Harry who was baking the cake must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes.

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. Tony had everybody ready and when Agnes came in they all screamed, "Happy birthday!"

Agnes was flabbergasted...stunned...shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter everyone in the dinner sang "Happy Birthday" to her. As they came to the end of their singing with "happy birthday dear Agnes, happy birthday to you," her eyes moistened. When the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried.

Harry gruffly mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! Blow out the candles! If you don't blow out the candles, I'm gonna hafta blow out the candles." Agnes never moved. After an endless few seconds, Harry blew out the candles. Then he handed her a knife and told her, "Cut the cake, Agnes. Yo, Agnes, we all want some cake."

Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, "Look Harry, is it all right with you if I... I mean ...is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? I mean is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure! It's O.K. ... keep the cake. Take it home if you want to."

"Can I?" she asked. Then looking at Tony she said, "I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home, OK? I'll be right back. Honest!"

Agnes got off the stool, picked up the cake, and, carrying it like it was the Holy Grail walked slowly toward the door.

Everyone in that diner stood there motionless. When the door closed behind Agnes there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, and being an evangelical Christian, Tony eventually broke the silence by saying, "Shall we pray?"

In a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning, surrounded by prostitutes Tony prayed for Agnes. He prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her. When Tony finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he asked, "What kind of church do you belong to?"

Tony answered him: "I belong to the kind of church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."

I hope I belong to the kind of church that fights for justice and freedom with compassion and courage and patient impatience. I hope I belong to the kind of church that fosters the presence of love—and the presence of pride that allows people to love themselves and love others with integrity and honesty. I hope I belong to the kind of church that continues sowing seeds of dignity and compassion and justice and hope. I hope I belong to the kind of church that, just as in our second Gospel reading, always is ready to receive a righteous person and offer a cup of cold water to one of the least. I hope I belong to the kind of church that marches with gays and straights, for integrity, for love, and for pride.

How about you?