

Pentecost 2, Year B (Pride Sunday)

June 2, 2024

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH

I Samuel 3:1-10

Psalm 81:1-10

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

Mark 2:23-3:6

Years ago, I read an autobiography of Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop elected in the Episcopal Church. He recounted in his book how at his consecration, because of his sexuality, he had received so many death threats and threats to his well-being, that he actually wore a bullet proof vest underneath his vestments. It couldn't be seen, but it was there to protect him in case any of the threats he received came true. He talked about feeling the weight of the vest being a symbol for the weight of the moment in the Church. For the first time, the Church had said yes to God and called a queer person to lead and be a symbol of God's presence in the world as a leader in the Church. Bishop Gene was consecrated twenty years ago in 2004. A lot has happened in the last two decades, and while the road hasn't always been easy, I want to offer my thanks to God for the Episcopal Church in answering the call of God to fling wide its doors and let all who will come in. I don't think Bishop Gene would believe us if we told him twenty years ago that Episcopal churches across the world are celebrating Pride today- celebrating the full inclusion of all of God's children, no matter their sexuality, gender expression, etc. I give thanks to God for the Spirit's work in our Church, and I give thanks for the times we as a Church have been open to the Spirit's calling. Thanks be to God!

In today's first reading, we get the call story of Samuel. And while the focus is usually put on Samuel's eventual response to

God, “Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening.”, I want to focus on a different part of the story today. We hear in the first verses of the reading that “the word of the Lord was rare in those days.” I think this phrase is key because it explains why Samuel might not have heard the voice of God as the voice of God at first. God called to Samuel three times, and it took a fourth time and an admonition by Eli to listen for God’s own voice. This story made me wonder about where we hear God’s voice. Do we sometimes miss God’s voice? In this Pride month, it made me wonder how we might sometimes miss the voice of God in folks who are different from us- who look different or sound different or think differently than us. What is important here, I think, is that God kept calling Samuel. I think God would have called Samuel another 10 times if that is what it took. And God keeps calling us, too. God’s relentlessly pursuing love melts our hearts of stone, as the prophet put it, and gives us hearts of flesh- hearts that yearn for the Kingdom of God that welcomes as citizens all of God’s children. All of God’s Children.

Then in our Gospel reading today from Mark, we get a story of Jesus being Jesus. He enters the synagogue on the sabbath, and he identifies a man with a withered hand. And Jesus, knowing that Jewish law prohibits him from doing any kind of work on the sabbath, sees this man suffering. Jesus knew that within his own culture and time, this man, because of his hand, was probably not able to work. He probably had been ostracized by friends and family. He had probably been told that the condition of his hand was a punishment of God for bad deeds. And Jesus, seeing this man suffering from isolation and blame and abandonment for something out of his control, heals the man’s hand. And the healing is important. But like in the call story of Samuel, I want to focus here, too, on something that sometimes doesn’t get as much attention. This man, like all who Jesus healed, was not only healed in body, but in mind and spirit. Because he was healed, his relationships with friends and families were restored. Perhaps because of this healing,

the man was now able to obtain a job, make a living for himself. This man's dignity was restored. And let's not forget that Jesus did this work on a day when he was not supposed to work. For Jesus, caring for this man's suffering was more important. It took a priority in Jesus's mind that would not let him follow the law just to see this man suffer. Jesus looked at the law and love, and he chose love.

I came across a cartoon a while back that has stuck with me for years. In the cartoon folks are spread out on a plane, a field, with a life-sized pencil leaned against each person's shoulders. With the tip of the pencil, each person is drawing a box around themselves. Then, in the foreground of the cartoon stands Jesus with a pencil. But the pencil resting on Jesus's shoulders is flipped. It is the eraser that is on the ground, not the tip. And with the eraser, Jesus is erasing the lines that the other folks are drawing around themselves. The message in the cartoon was clear for me: Jesus calls us to be erasers of lines we draw that separate us from each other and from God. That is what the Christian life is all about, after all. To choose this way of living means a constant opening up of ourselves more and more until our hearts contain the Kingdom of God. It means that we learn to listen for God in the voices of queer folk. We look for God in those that live on the margins. It also means that we make a conscious decision to choose love every time someone is hurting. When the options of love and law stand before us, especially when someone is hurting, we choose love. We heal those who are hurting, and in that healing, we remind folks of their value. In that healing, they are restored to community and wholeness. God's love breaks through and gives new life.

To all queer people here today, I want to offer some words to you that, years ago when I first heard them, healed me. As a priest in Christ's church, I want you to hear me say this: I am sorry. I am sorry when we as the Church have refused to hear God's voice in your voices, to meet God in the beauty that you bring to us. I am sorry when your looking or sounding or identifying differently has made us

treat you as different. I am sorry when we have chosen attention to rules and the law over love. Thank you for not letting centuries of hate stand in the way of your engaging with the love of God. You are beautiful just the way you are right here, right now- the way the God created you. For you are made in the divine image of God, the creator of the universe. You bless us with your presence. Amen.