

Staunton Pride Eucharist; October 6, 2018  
Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Staunton, Virginia  
Marion E. Kanour

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

It's a privilege and honor to be here this evening to offer the homily. I'm grateful for everyone here this evening, with particular thanks for the support of our straight allies. You make our world kinder and gentler.

Emily Sproul, thank you for your vision to include this service in the lineup of events for this historic weekend. And, Shelby Owen, particular thanks to you and Emmanuel's Vestry, for your willingness to host Staunton's first annual Pride Eucharist. Your welcoming parish makes my heart glad.

My heart hasn't always been glad as a gay member of the Christian tradition. I'm 65. So, back in the day, when I was growing up in the Southern Baptist Church, it was clear all gay folks were going to hell, unless we repented of our wickedness and pretended to be straight. Because that's what Jesus would want, of course.

I thought there might be more air to breathe in the Episcopal Church, but being an out-of-the-closet-married-to-my-wife priest for the past 26 years, it hasn't always felt that way.

I'm sure I don't have to remind anyone here this evening of the wearisome role the Christian Church as a whole has played in responding to the teachings found in the Beatitudes, from which we just heard this verse, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Through the ages, and even until now in certain quarters, Christianity has joined certain quarters in the

other two Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Islam, in insisting those who are created by God as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender should continue to hunger and thirst for righteousness, because....wait for it...we're not worthy the way God credited us. That response fills us in a variety of ways. Some of us have left organized religion behind entirely, to distance ourselves from its forked tongue and exclusive judgments. Others have remained within the walls, working for change, hoping the Church will one day embrace its own best teachings. Either path can be filled with anger, despair, hopelessness and a sense of rejection. On some days, the path can fill us with pain and sadness to overflowing. If we allow it to be so. We can choose otherwise.

Maybe because I'm a slow learner, or maybe because my Scots-Irish heritage flows fiercely at times, that choice—to choose otherwise—isn't always obvious to me. And sometimes, when even when it **is** obvious, I choose to ignore it, preferring not always to turn the other cheek, after so much bruising. But that, more times than not, simply makes me intolerant of intolerance.

Permit me to remind you of what you already know: You can't fight hate with hate. You just can't. As tempting as it may be to resort to that childhood taunt, "Yeah, well the same to you, but more of it!", it only serves to fill our whole being with more hate. We break the cycle of hate by making a different choice. As Jesus did. Even unto the Cross.

I'll not forget the man who made this truth vividly apparent to me. I met John when I was a chaplain at Grady Hospice in Atlanta. John eventually died with complications from AIDS. But it's the mercy he taught my soul to feel that

palpably lives on...and for which I'm grateful whenever that mercy comes to mind.

John's lover, Paul, predeceased him. John's mother told me what beautiful care her son took of Paul when he was dying. She vowed to do the same for her son, since there was no one else to care for him. While she did take exemplary care of him physically, she never lost her judgment. She was ashamed her son was gay and did nothing to stop the preacher from her Pentecostal-Holiness church from visiting John each week to preach repentance at him. The preacher said John was going to burn in hell if he didn't repent of being gay. John's mama thought so, too.

My own anger welled up within me the day I was present for that unholy diatribe, which the preacher had the gall to put into the form of a prayer. I interrupted him, asking if we might pray without malice and contempt. The preacher sputtered and retreated to the living room to visit with John's mother. John asked me to close the door and then said in a gentle voice, "Next time, let him have his say." I asked why he'd tolerate such an intentional affront. Why not refuse to meet with the judgmental preacher; or, if his mother insisted, then why not oppose the hateful message? **Why** let him have his say? John responded slowly and thoughtfully, saying, "First of all, just because the preacher says it's so, doesn't make it so. I'm comfortable with who I am. Nothing the preacher or my mama say can change that. More importantly, his hate hurts his own soul, not mine. So while he's praying his anger out, I'm praying a prayer of forgiveness for him. The way I figure it, he's actually doing me a favor. Mercy heals the soul."

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Filled with what? With the pain of uneven justice? With invectives uttered by the likes of Westboro Baptist Church or of televangelist, Pat Robertson? With thoughts of suicide or self-harm? What if instead, when they go low, we go high, to quote a woman who knows whereof she speaks. What if, instead, we embrace who we’re created to be—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, genderfluid or straight—with all the love and tenderness we can manage? Would it change those who judge us? Likely not. They’ll have to do that for themselves. What we can change, regardless of who’s President or who’s a Supreme Court Justice, is our own self-perception. We can choose our friends and our faith communities wisely. We can “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.” We can show, by our refusal to be defined by hate, that love is love, regardless.

Perhaps a fitting conclusion is found in the Benedictine fourfold blessing. It says May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really CAN make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

May it so, in our hearts and in our world. Amen.

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