

Introductory comments preceding adult workshop at United Memorial Methodist Church,
October 24, 2004

Good morning:

Thank you for welcoming me this morning on behalf of the Empire State Pride Agenda and Pride in the Pulpit.

My name is Ray Bagnuolo, and I am here today to congratulate you for the work you have done in making the United Memorial Methodist Church a welcoming and affirming place for all people, including those like me who are gay and others who are lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

Actually, I am not a stranger to this church. I am the beneficiary of your radical hospitality in another way. Some twenty years ago, I began attending meetings here in the evening that literally saved my life. God brings me here this morning, again, in a time of great turmoil in our homes and hearts, our government and those who would govern, and, yes, our religious institutions – trying to decide how much to include persons who are LGBT into the fullness of our society and our churches.

To me, I should say, such consideration or legislation “governing bodies” is like a distant entity deciding for me how much oxygen I should be given to breathe. God has already decided that for me; I need no executive group inside or outside of the church to tell me I belong. That was already affirmed in a sacred place a long time ago.

I also want to acknowledge that there may not be full agreement among all those sitting here today on just “how much” much LGBT persons should be included and accepted, but there are times when the mystery of God calls us together in spite of our questions and misgivings. One of those times is now - in the face of great violence caused by marginalization and distraction.

The marginalization of LGBT persons in any way, from epithets tossed in schools to denial for civil marriage rights, to churches deciding that LGBT persons are not fit to serve – all these and more feed the sickness of homophobia in our world. In the most extreme of ways, such exclusionary practices lead directly to a fencepost in Wyoming with a young Matthew Shepherd dying as a result of wounds received simply because he was gay, to any number of acts of dehumanization and exclusion along the continuum that begins innocently enough with “Oh, how gay!”

The God I know, perhaps like the God you know, would never trade in the lives of those God created. There is so much more in what we don't know about God than in what we do know of God – that I have come to believe there is enough space in that sacred mystery for all of us to exist and welcome one another, regardless of all our differences.

That welcoming, from my point of view, involves the ministry you have created here in working with estranged groups. It involves becoming active in the governmental process of our society – and voting, as we all will have a chance to do in a few short days. And it means taking risks based on what we believe. Christianity, for me, is a theology based on great risk. The life of Jesus clearly teaches us that true ministry involves the willingness to lay down our lives for one another, not just a particular group with whom we agree or feel comfortable.

I believe our churches have a special role in bringing this world together in the name of the One who calls us here. And, I believe that One, has many names, indeed.

As an elder in the PC(USA) and an openly gay candidate who has been cleared to seek a call as Minister of the Word and Sacrament, I am often asked why I stay in a church that includes those who will probably bring me up on charges immediately following my ordination, challenging my right to serve as a person who is gay, citing Amendment B, which is more commonly referred to as the “fidelity and chastity” amendment. This amendment in our constitution basically states that you must be practicing fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness in order to be considered eligible to serve, clearly excluding any non-traditional relationships.

There are many reasons I do stay. Chief among them is that I believe that we can change the church in finding a way to come together and welcome LGBT persons to the full work and worship of the church. In the process of working toward that, I also believe that hearts will become softened to see their brothers and sisters not as someone to be excluded, but as family to be fully welcomed, if only out of the gratitude for the grace and welcoming we have been given in our own lives.

Think with me for a second. If churches were to fully welcome LGBT persons, who would they exclude? When it happens that a mainstream denomination stands up and in the strongest voice possible tells the world that its violence is not their violence, and makes it clear that LGBT persons are fully included in the faith they are called to practice – who would be left to be excluded?

Such truth and prophetic witnessing and practice can create a wind upon which the Holy Spirit, by whichever name you know its presence, can change the world.

It is clear to me that recognition of the Other among us - is alive and well, here, at Meumorial United Methodist Church. Your willingness to have me here this morning as a representative of Pride in the Pulpit, as well as your welcoming of others who have come before, and those who will follow -- speaks to your commitment to justice and compassion, even in the midst of uncertainty.

It takes courage to change, and you have made it clear you have the strength to live into the mystery of this faith we share. Thank God for you and for those you will influence with your faith, your hearts, and your lives.

Let us pray.

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