

“Great Pride”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
June 28, 2015 Ordinary 13B, Gay Pride Sunday

2 Samuel 1:1a, 17-27 2 Corinthians 7:2-4

Our church decided several months ago to celebrate Gay Pride during worship this year. So last week we put up a message on our signboard, “Join Us for Gay Pride Sunday.” And this week we got our first ever anonymous comment on the signboard. A woman called and left a message saying, “I read your signboard. I am amazed...” and then she paused, and I’m wondering, OK, is this going to be a happy comment, or a condemnation? She said, “I’m amazed... that you used the word ‘pride.’ The Bible I read says ‘Pride comes before a fall.’ That’s in Proverbs 16:18.”

It’s good to know somebody out there is paying attention to our signboard. But it’s too bad she didn’t leave a name or number so it could be a real dialogue. The actual verse in Proverbs goes like this, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.” And that’s not the only place pride is listed as a bad thing in the Bible. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus listed pride as one of the evil intentions of the heart (7:22). Pride can mean “an excessively high opinion of oneself; conceit, arrogance or self-satisfaction.” That’s the kind of pride Proverbs was referring to. A haughty spirit, feeling superior, arrogant, or overestimating your importance to the world is not a good thing. It alienates you from others, from yourself, and from God.

But pride is not always negative. The first definition of “pride” in the dictionary is “a sense of dignity or value; self-respect.” And it can also mean “pleasure or satisfaction taken in one’s work or achievements.” That’s the kind of pride Paul was talking about in the words Virginia read from his second letter to the Corinthians this morning, “I often boast about you; I have great pride in you...” That’s the kind of pride Joyce Hamlin means when she posts on Facebook, “I am so proud to be a member of this church.” You can be proud of your church. You can be proud of who we are and what we’re doing in service to God. And you can be proud of yourself, for being the person God created you to be.

Pride in this sense is the opposite of shame. Are we ashamed of who we are as people? Or do we have a sense of dignity and pride? Some people are ashamed of their looks, the color of their skin or the shape of their bodies. I used to be ashamed of my frizzy hair and my lack of a full-bodied figure. Some people are ashamed for not being as successful or smart as other people, or for having trouble in school because of learning disabilities. And some people are ashamed of their sexual orientation.

When Ellen DeGeneres came out to the public in a sitcom scene back in 1997, she had trouble getting through the rehearsals. Whenever her character was supposed to say, “I’m gay,” she would break into tears. She said later it was because of “shame, you know, self-hatred, and all those feelings that society feeds you to tell you that you’re wrong.”*

That is changing for people growing up today. We had a huge change this week in the ruling of the Supreme Court. Now all Americans have an equal right to marry. We’ve come a long way. But the culture of shame is still out there. Gay people are still victims of hate crimes and discrimination in housing and the workplace. 9 out of 10 gay

teenagers report being bullied because of their sexual orientation. LGBT youth are twice as likely to commit suicide as their peers. And 40% of homeless youth today are lesbian and gay young people who have been kicked out of their own homes because of their parents' religious beliefs. I say shame on those parents. What children need deep down, is to feel they are worth something in their parents' eyes, that they are valued and loved for who they are, for the way God made them.

Being openly gay is not a choice to reject God. It's a choice to accept yourself for who you are, and to be honest about whom you love and are attracted to. Christian parents also should accept their children for who they are, the way God made them. Hatred, prejudice and fear are never an expression of true faith. The only people Jesus ever condemned were self-righteous religious leaders, who insisted on keeping the letter of the law while neglecting the spirit of it. And what did Jesus have to say about homosexuality? Absolutely nothing!

The whole idea of homosexuality *as an orientation* is totally foreign to the Bible. There are stories of people of the same sex who loved each other deeply, and were committed to each other, such as Ruth and Naomi, or David and Jonathan. Karen read the end of the story of David and Jonathan this morning. David and Jonathan were soul mates the moment they met. After young David killed the Philistine enemy, Goliath, it says that "the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. (Jonathan's father) King Saul took (David) that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt." (1 Sam. 18:1-5)

Eventually Saul became jealous of David and tried to kill him. But it says Jonathan "took great delight in David" (19:1) and he defended him. So Saul said to Jonathan, "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen (David) to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness? For as long as (David) lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established." Then it says Jonathan rose from the table in fierce anger and ate no food ... for he was grieved for David, and because his father had disgraced him. (1 Sam. 10:30b-34).

Finally, when Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle, David sounded the lament that Karen read this morning. And it ends with "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women."

Whether that says something about David's experience with women, or the quality of his love for Jonathan, we don't know. We do know that David had many wives and children, and Jonathan had at least one son. But we also know it's an modern idea that people can have a sexual orientation and not just sexual behavior. The Bible condemns certain homosexual behavior, for example rape, which was used as a weapon of subjugation in war. It also condemns homosexual prostitution which was part of the pagan fertility rites. But it is silent about homosexual love or orientation. They just didn't understand people that way back then.

The Bible does speak clearly for justice, kindness and humility. The prophet Micah wrote, "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and

to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8). And Jesus said we are to judge people by their fruits, by the good or evil they produce in the way they live their lives. And Paul wrote the fruit of the spirit is (remember we sang it with the children last week?) love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. If a person is producing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness (or generosity), faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in his or her life and relationships, these qualities come from God. They are fruits of God’s spirit. And Paul adds, there is no law against such things (Galatians 5:22-23).

And so we give thanks for the Supreme Court ruling this week that allows all people to make commitments of love and faithfulness within the institution of marriage, and to grow in patience, kindness, gentleness, joy and self-control. And we can take great pride in being the people God created us to be, whatever our identity.

We still have a long way to go. I just read that in the last week, three black churches in South Carolina and Georgia have been destroyed, supposedly by arson.** Just because a state decides to remove the Confederate flag, does not mean that people of color no longer have to deal with fear and prejudice and hatred against them. And just because the Supreme Court rules to allow gay marriage, doesn’t mean that LGBTQ people will now be free from hate crimes, rejection and discrimination. True change happens in people’s hearts, step by step, situation by situation, moment by moment. But we can pray and work, moment by moment, for God’s kingdom to come, where no one has to hide who they are, and no one has to experience violence, oppression or hatred, but everyone is respected and loved on earth, for that’s how it is in heaven. Amen.

* “Historic Day for Gay Rights, but a Twinge of Loss for Gay Culture,” by Jodi Kantor, The New York Times, Saturday, June 27, 2015.

** www.dailykos.com/story/2015/06/26/1396786.