

BEYOND PROUD

John 4:1-30

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
World Pride Sunday and Fiftieth Anniversary of Stonewall
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The first dawn I experienced in Africa 36 years ago was as a guest in a girl's training school in the town of Aburi in the West African nation of Ghana. I woke up to the sound of laughter and conversation. Looking out of the open window I saw some of the young women from the school, heavy buckets on their heads, returning from the half-mile hike to the village well, where they had drawn water. It was a ritual these women and girls performed three times a day, every day of the year. Three one-mile round trips every day for water. In places where water is rare and precious, acquiring it can be a demanding routine.

It is thus no wonder the Samaritan woman at the well responds eagerly when Jesus speaks to her of a "living water" that would put an end to people's thirst. Think of all the trips to Jacob's well that it could save her! And so, she is drawn into a rather strange ensuing conversation with Jesus, a conversation in which Jesus speaks to her on one level and she hears and responds at another. She speaks of water as something the body needs here and now; Jesus speaks to her of water that will forever replenish the spirit. Their words go flying past one another on parallel planes until she finally senses that there is something extraordinary about this man, then runs off as the first evangelist to tell her neighbors and friends all that she has seen and heard.

It is a strange conversation indeed. But if it is strange in its series of disconnected comments, it is also strange that they have the conversation at all. He, after all, is a Jew, and she is a Samaritan...and a woman... and no faithful Jew should have been in conversation with such a person. He asks her for a drink, even though her bucket and cup were considered unclean to a Jew. He talks with her longer than he talks to any of his disciples, longer than he talks to any of his own family. She is a woman who has been married as many times as Larry King, is living now with a man who is not her husband, and yet Jesus reveals himself to her.¹ He offers to her this living water, offers to bless this woman with such a gift despite all the social and religious walls and divisions that might have stood in the way of such a conversation.

We, of course, are not surprised that Jesus engaged this woman in conversation, not surprised that he reached out across cultural taboos to offer her his blessing or his challenge. We know that Jesus did that all the time. Think about the woman who interrupted the dinner party at the house of Simon the Pharisee in order to wash Jesus' feet with her hair, much to the Pharisees' disdain, and Jesus blessing her with his words, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Think of the leper, who should have been in strict quarantine, who yet crossed boundaries to get to hear Jesus bless him with the words, "Be made clean." Think about Jesus, sitting down at table with Zacchaeus, the despised tax collector and with other sinners. Think of Jesus, who was always crossing boundaries, always reaching out to bless those his society had counted as unclean, as

¹ Paraphrasing Barbara Brown Taylor, "Living by the Word," *Christian Century*, February 25, 1996.

unworthy, as untouchable. Think about Jesus, who seemed always to take it easier on marginalized people who came to him than he did on the self-righteous ones who criticized his ministry among them.

Such stories have been very much on my mind this month as we prepared for this day, as I have prepared to share a word of faith, hope, and encouragement on this Sabbath day we call Pride Sunday. In one sense, I could argue that I am one of the least likely candidates to preach on this Pride Sunday – an older, straight, white, cisgender man with boring pronouns who has never had to struggle for acceptance from my family, my employers, my government, or my church. On the other hand, as a pastor I have witnessed first-hand the damage and harm wrought by ignorance and fear, by civil injustice and toxic religious dogma; and so, across the years I have sought to become better at being what I can be in this ongoing struggle for acceptance and justice and standing, and that is an ally. I am still working on being a better ally. And today I invite others like me to join me in strengthening such alliances as a matter of faith and practice.

In any number of publications in recent days, people who experienced and participated in the uprising after Stonewall fifty years ago this weekend have reflected on those days in the life of this Village and this city. I was not here in 1969; I was six hundred miles and light years away – an undergraduate in a liberal arts college in the South. But the seismic aftershocks from Stonewall were felt even there, among classmates and friends who, for the first time, courageously decided not to be closeted anymore, but to challenge and rail against the prevailing paradigm of acceptable sexual identity and expression. Their anger was my first experience of Pride. In the years since, I have had the privilege – the sometimes-painful privilege – of walking alongside and providing encouragement to those who decided not to be hidden in their deep-felt love for another, and to those whose sense of their own gender did not match socially acceptable norms.

To be sure, we have come a long way since Stonewall. We have indeed seen progress, as reflected in the tone shift from the angry defiance of the first Pride marches to the more festive and celebratory marches of recent years. In some places new laws have been passed and court decisions have undergirded the extension of basic rights to those previously excluded from safeguards and protections. But that path from then to now was purchased at great cost and was littered with the corpses of those killed out of hatred, ignorance, and fear – Howard Efland in Los Angeles, Harvey Milk in San Francisco, Rebecca Wright on the Appalachian Trail, Brandon Teena in Humboldt, Nebraska, Matthew Shepard outside Laramie, Wyoming, the three trans women recently murdered in Dallas, and literally thousands of others whose names are mostly unknown and unremembered outside their immediate families and circles of friends.

When I was considering the call to serve as your interim pastor, I heard two related comments more than a few times. The first said, “We are a welcoming and inclusive church, as noted in our mission statement, and embodied within our membership.” The second, which I had heard elsewhere at other times and in other circumstances, was the comment that First Church did not want to be known as a “gay church.” By that second comment, I understood, “we don’t want to be known *only* as a gay church.” Adjectives constrict, and we want to be broader than that. I understood that our welcome was intended to be more inclusive than just for those who personally claimed initials like LGBTQ. Our welcome was also for immigrants and asylees. Our

welcome was for people of all races, especially those usually marginalized; it was for those who self-identify as “nones” on the checklist of faith commitments, for the grieving and the lost, and all those who rage against imposed definitions. “Our welcome is broad; we don’t want to be a gay church,” they said.

I understood the need for a broad. But the times may actually suggest that we need – well, if not more gay churches, then at least more active and vocal allies. You have done as good a job of that role as any church I know. You have gone beyond welcome to inclusion. You have embraced gay leadership and reached out to LGBTQ partner organizations and have served enough water at Pride water tables to hydrate a whole city. You are allies, and very good ones. But the need to continue and strengthen our role may be more pressing now than we may even realize. In the last few years the assault on and backlash against hard-won LGBTQ rights has intensified. So-called “religious freedom restoration laws” have been added to the statutes of 21 states – almost half the states! – and while such protections sound so reasonable on the surface (I mean, who isn’t for religious freedom?), they often mask a not-so-hidden intent to repress the marriage rights and adoption rights and a whole host of public accommodation laws for which so many have fought so hard. Supposedly such legislation is meant to protect sincere religious faith from being repressed by statutes, but there’s an irony there – have you noticed the lack of public outcry from the authors and supporters of those statutes when religious aid workers were charged with felonies for leaving life-saving water for immigrants crossing the desert into this country. Those water-bearers were certainly acting in faithful obedience to Christ’s imperatives. The silence of the so-called religious freedom advocates exposes the intent of “religious freedom restoration” laws for what they are – fraudulent and hateful and anything but faithful to the One who always spent more time with those at the margins – like the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well – than with those at the centers of power and privilege.

Our society seems to me to be descending into a morass of hatefulness and harm, in part because of underlying bigotry, and in part because of demagoguery of some in the political class and in some faith communities. I believe we act unfaithfully when we try to define too narrowly the intentions of God or to limit the abundant mercy and blessing of Jesus Christ. C. S. Lewis said once, “A familiar captivity is frequently more [attractive] than an unfamiliar freedom.” And so often the church of Jesus Christ finds itself in captivity to the narrower way with which we are more comfortable. Most often, I believe, it happens because we are afraid of something, maybe afraid of genuine openness to some new thing God may be trying to do among us.

How I wish we could find a way to embrace as the Christ embraced and to bless as He blessed! It is time once again to rise up and say *no*. No to hatred, no to injustice, no to ignorance and fear. In these days, when so much progress is being threatened and undone, I believe we need to stand steadily and forcefully and faithfully as allies of all those who are victimized for their perceived difference from cultural norms.

Ralph Sockman was one of the legendary preachers of the last century in this city, serving for almost 45 years as pastor of Christ Church (Methodist) up on Park Avenue, before his retirement in 1961. He told once of coming home from a speaking engagement, arriving on a train at Penn Station. He hailed a cab and told the driver, “Take me to Christ Church, please.” As the taxicab driver was weaving his way through the streets, Dr. Sockman opened his briefcase

and began looking through some papers, so he didn't sense the route they were taking. But in a few moments, the taxicab pulled to a stop in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Dr. Sockman looked out the window and said to the cab driver, "This isn't Christ Church!" To which the man replied, "Listen, Buster. If He ain't here, He ain't in town!"

The pastor-friend who shared that story noted that apparently, there are some people out there – church folks – who operate on that cabbie's assumption – that their way of being the church is the only way, that if Christ is anywhere, he's with them... and *only* with them. They try to put Christ in a box and say, "If God ain't here, then God ain't in town."² But God cannot be contained, friends. Not in any box, not in any hateful prejudice or assumptions. Jesus is not fixed forever in narrow categories, but is always out there ahead of us, always beckoning us – as he did to that woman at the well – into a future we have yet to imagine.

It is good and right to celebrate Pride today, for much has changed in the years since Stonewall, and there has been some tangible progress. But there is yet much to do, and a need to keep fighting for the shelter, protection, and valuing of all God's children. There is a need to go beyond being proud of who we are or how we welcome, and to understand the moment in which we are living. Maybe it's time to feel anger and indignation once again as demonstrations of both our faith and our care for one another, and time to engage more fully the ongoing struggle for justice and safety and kindness and welcome, toward that day when everyone – everyone! – can finally taste that "living water" that Jesus promised.

² Tom Tewell, in a sermon to Covenant Conference 2000 in Pittsburgh, November 3, 2000. The following paragraph borrows something of his take on the Sockman story.