

**Dear God, I am gay --  
*thank you!***

by

Joel R. Workin, M. Div.

Second Edition

Michael Price Nelson, Editor

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*For Betty & Ray*

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## FROM THE EDITOR

*"Being gay, as an oppressed minority, gives me a way to connect to all people who are hurting and oppressed, that I probably wouldn't have had if I had been a straight man. Being gay is the way I know about God's love. From the fear, then the faith which led me back to love. From darkness into light."*

*-- Joel R. Workin*

It's been 17 years since Joel Workin's death and almost a dozen since the printing of the first edition of *Dear God, I'm gay - thank you!* Much has happened in the Church in the intervening years regarding the standing of LGBTQ people - and of course, Joel was there at the genesis of "the movement", serving as instigator and inspiration. Rev. Erik Christensen beautifully weaves the history of this progress with Joel's own story in a moving foreword to this new edition, and I thank him for that.

Today, Joel is still an inspiration and this updated collection of his writings clearly points to the 'why' of that. This second edition includes not only the previously published writings from *The Light of Christ* (the Lutherans Concerned/LA newsletter that he edited for several years), but also features a selection of his sermons. I had long thought these sermons were non-existent and lamented for years that they were lacking from the book. But when I was contacted about updating *Dear God, I'm gay*, I began to ask questions of Joel's North Dakota family. Lo and behold, Joel's mom, Betty Workin, found a box of papers she had not opened since his death in 1995. It not only included sermons, but a video of his preaching. Some of these "long lost" sermons, then, are here in print for the first time.

The question arose: In what order do we include these sermons? After discussion with my friend Greg Egertson, I opted for a chronological order so that you, dear reader, could get as sense of his growth and sophistication as writer and preacher. The sermons document for us the impact of Lutheran Volunteer Corps on his passion for justice ministry, his first encounter with AIDS ministry as an intern, and culminate with his stirring words at the installation of Pastor Jeff Johnson upon the launch of Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministries. Heady stuff.

While there have been many changes in the Church, there has also been many changes in society, one of them being the current struggle for marriage equality. Where might Joel have stood on this, you ask? I quote from his 1988 letter to Krister Stendahl, Bishop of Sweden, two decades before the words “marriage equality” were ever uttered:

*I call upon the church to recognize and celebrate gay/lesbian sexuality as one of God's gifts and to recognize gay marriage.*

And just as we go to press, I discovered this 1991 letter he wrote to the editor of *The Los Angeles Times*:

*I was glad you carried Herb Moses' article about gay spouses. I was surprised, however, that among all the nomenclature options offered, the seemingly obvious choice that my husband Paul and I use was not mentioned. I am Paul's husband.*

If this is your first encounter with Joel, then you're in for a challenging and mind-expanding read. If you're returning to read him again, then you're about to re-discover a truly prophetic voice of the Church. Joel's discernment of scripture from an LGBTQ perspective, his sense of justice, his unswerving love for his Savior, his loyalty to the Church, his all-too-human pain, and his ironic wit are on full display

in these thought-provoking and spirit-provoking pieces that will move and challenge you.

My sincere thanks to all who assisted with this project: *Lutherans Concerned Los Angeles* and Pastor Dan Hooper for generously assigning me the original publishing rights; Bishop Emeritus Paul Wennes Egertson (a valued friend who is sorely missed) for his wonderful comments and insights on Joel's behalf; Greg Egertson for his counsel, constant friendship and hours of word-processing; my own Dale Von Seggern for his part in transcribing Joel's notes and sermons and also for putting up with me; ELM Executive Director Amalia Vagts, Rev. Jen Rude and Rev. Jeff Johnson for their counsel and encouragement; Rev. Erik Christensen and Rev. James Boline for their splendid contributions to this new edition; and Joel's amazing parents, Raydon and Betty Workin, without whom neither Joel nor this book would be possible!

Lastly, thank you, Joel. Your hand stays upon me. You are missed.

*Michael Price Nelson*  
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*Venice, California*  
*January, 2012*

## THREE GAYS CERTIFIED FOR LUTHERAN MINISTRY

*Wire Service Report*

*February 24, 1988*

In a rare and perhaps unprecedented event, three Lutheran seminarians who publicly declared their homosexuality have sought and have been given certification for the ministry, church officials said Tuesday.

The three -- all students at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley -- were certified for call and ordination to the ministry in separate actions by their respective church authorities shortly before the official creation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) on Jan. 1, 1988. All will graduate in May.

While the issue of homosexuals in the ministry has sharply divided other denominations and is expected to be the source of bitter debate when the United Methodist Church meets in General Conference in April, Lutheran officials appear to be taking the situation in stride.

"All three are highly gifted," said the Rev. Michael Cooper-White, an assistant to Bishop Lyle Miller of the Northern California-Northern Nevada Synod. "We expect to give them the same kind of support (in finding a call) as other" graduating seminarians.

Two of the seminarians are Californians -- Jeff Johnson of Lancaster and James Lancaster of Westminster -- and were members of the Lutheran Church in America before that denomination was merged into the ELCA. The third seminarian, Joel Workin of Walcott, ND, was a member of the American Lutheran Church, also a partner in the merger that formed the ELCA.

All three described themselves as "openly gay" and portrayed themselves as such when presenting themselves for certification, the first step toward ordination in Lutheranism.

Under Lutheran rules, after certification and graduation from seminary, the three must be "called" -- or offered a job -- by a local congregation. Ordination is accomplished when called by a local congregation.

Carolyn Lewis, a spokeswoman for the ELCA, headquartered in Chicago, said the new church is still studying the issue and does not have any official statement on the issue.

## FOREWORD

### “HE STILL SPEAKS”

*The Rev. Erik Christensen  
Co-Chair, Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries*

The year 2012 marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1987 March on Washington, the one historians of the LGBTQ movement sometimes call “the Great March.” In terms of the scope of its vision and number of people who gathered, it certainly was great. Half a million people assembled in the nation’s capital, calling for legal recognition of same gender relationships, repeal of sodomy laws, passage of a gay civil rights bill and an end to employment discrimination by the federal government, an end to discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS along with increased funding for AIDS-related research and education, as well as a call for reproductive freedom and an end to racism in the United States and apartheid in South Africa. It was a moment of profound naming, as hundreds of thousands of people gave voice to the policies of oppression that diminished their lives at every level of human community. It was also the first public display of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, that brilliant piece of installation art (now the largest in the world) stitched one panel at a time by lovers, friends and families in homes across the nation to preserve the names of those who had died of HIV/AIDS.

Among the half million were four whose names hold a place of privilege among the many s/heroes in the movement for full inclusion in the life and ministry of the Lutheran church: Joel Workin, Jim Lancaster, Jeff Johnson and Greg Egerston. Joel reveals the power of that gathering in his essay, “Oh, You Should Have Been There” where he writes:

*When I place my hand in the wounded side, my only response is, with Thomas: “My Lord and my God.” I have a wounded Savior, a suffering Lord. The God of the march is the God of the quilt. The God of the resurrection is the God of the cross. And when I leave that place, that place of death and new life, of scars and healing, when I leave the Quilt, the March, the memorial service, the*

*locked and darkened room, the very side of God, then I say to Tom, and to Mary, and to the world:  
“Oh, you should have been there!”*

Any promise of new life that attempted to silence or ignore the reality of suffering caused by the closet in all its incarnations was anathema to the conscience of this nascent pastor and his friends. In their afterword to the first edition of this book, published just over a decade ago now, Jeff and Greg recall flying home from the Great March to the candidacy committees waiting for three of the four at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. “On this same flight,” they write, “our joint decision to ‘come out’ as openly gay seminarians was made, largely at Joel’s insistence. Even then, Joel had a keen sense of mission: to live the *yes* of God in the face of the church’s *no*.”

In the interval between the 1987 March on Washington and the publication of the first edition of *Dear God, I am gay – thank you!*, much had already taken place in the Lutheran LGBTQ movement for full inclusion. In 1990, Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministries (LLGM) had formed to support the first extraordinary ordinations of publicly identified LGBTQ clergy in the persons of Pastors Jeff Johnson, Ruth Frost and Phyllis Zillhart. By 1993, the Extraordinary Candidacy Project (ECP) had organized to examine and credential candidates for ordained ministry unwilling to abide by the ELCA’s requirement of celibacy for gay and lesbian people. Two years later, in late November 1995, Joel Workin died.

Joel did not live to see the extraordinary ordinations of Donna Simon (2000), Craig Minich (2001) or Anita Hill (2001), which set the stage for the 2001 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Indianapolis, but in his reliably prophetic voice he spoke of those days before they had arrived. In “Doubts” he writes:

*Those once terrible words “I am Gay” now come without blinking. I, and many of us, I think, will gladly and easily stand before bishops and kings, bosses and family, and declare that Gay and Lesbian is good and God’s gift!*

Joel was right. Following the 2001 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, which delayed by almost a decade a wider welcome for LGBTQ people in the life and ministry of our denomination, many more were called to stand before bishops and ecclesial powers, to give their testimony and to make their witness. Between 2002 and 2009 another twelve extraordinary ordinations took place in cities across the country from the San Francisco Bay to Philadelphia, from Minneapolis to Houston. Surrounding each of these epiphanies was an ever-growing community of clergy and laity, congregations and organizations, working together to build support for an end to the policies of discrimination and oppression that had haunted the ELCA from its establishment.

In 2005 the ELCA's Churchwide Assembly gathered in Orlando, Florida and considered recommendations related to the church's policies regarding the blessing of same gender relationships and the rostering of publicly identified LGBTQ people for ordained ministry. In the face of moving demonstrations of non-violent resistance to both the assembly's process and eventual outcomes, the church voted to uphold the 1993 statement of the Conference of Bishops, which rejected any basis for establishing rites for the blessing of same gender relationships, and to make no alterations to ministry policies affecting LGBTQ clergy and candidates for ministry.

After a season of soul searching, Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministries withdrew from further involvement with the Lutheran Alliance for Full Participation, the coalition of organizations that had led the movement to change ELCA policies. Recognizing that our capacity to do the work for which we'd organized was suffering under the burden of the cycle of organizing between Churchwide Assemblies, LLGM returned to the work of accompanying and credentialing candidates for ministry in the interim between the church's present *no* and future *yes*. Again, we had Joel's voice in our ear;

*It is not easy to hope and to believe in a future reconciliation when a loved one says “No, period,” and blithely walks away. It is not easy to stand ready to forgive and to welcome home with open arms. Personally, I would rather be the star and squander the family fortune. That sounds like a lot more fun. The parable, however, says, “Hope, believe, wait.” There is more to be said. This show is not over yet. Just you wait. (“The Prodigal Church”)*

Soon afterwards LLGM and the Extraordinary Candidacy Project made the decision to merge both organizations in recognition of their shared work with clergy and candidates outside the ELCA’s structures of ministry. The result was the formation in 2007 of Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries (ELM).

The years from 2005 to 2009 were momentous as the pace of extraordinary ordinations accelerated. Where there had been only four such ordinations in the ten years between 1990 and 2000, the next four took place in the five years from 2001 – 2005. The four years from 2006 – 2009 saw ten more extraordinary ordinations of pastors working with ELM, which now had candidacy panels operating not only in the Bay area, but in the Twin Cities and the Northeast as well. The movement of the Holy Spirit was impossible to ignore. Across the country communities of worshipping Lutherans were reclaiming the powers made native to them by the Lutheran Confessions, embracing their Protestant heritage and calling the pastors best suited for the missional needs of the congregation, regardless of and still also by virtue of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The ELM roster had grown from a community of resistance and solidarity into a professional network of working pastors who shared with their colleague Joel a vision of the church’s mission in the world:

*My story, other’s stories, the story of the world, are all, in the last analysis, in faith’s analysis, stories of grace. These are stories of a relentless, loving God who will not take ‘no’ for an answer, not my ‘no’ nor your ‘no,’ not the church’s ‘no,’ not the world’s ‘no.’ God keeps right on justifying, reconciling, liberating, feeding, ushering in the kingdom, saying ‘yes.’ Even if it kills God (and it did, the cross), even if it kills us (it does, baptism), somehow God is going to get everybody to that big banquet feast (resurrection, the kingdom, new life). I want to continue to be a messenger and means of God’s invitation, to share the good news of God’s ‘yes,’ to live a courageous and comforting life of faith, to incarnate Christ and the kingdom for my neighbor, to die and rise daily. This is my “mission.” (“A Personal Reflective Essay”)*

In 2009, meeting as the Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis, the ELCA did finally vote to change its policies toward LGBTQ people, allowing congregations to “recognize, support and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships” and the ELCA to find “a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.” It was a step in the direction of reconciliation, perhaps not the prodigal’s confession Joel had hoped for, but a new openness that made space for the church to live into this new reality together.

In the two years that have passed since the decisions of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly the whole church has been tentatively feeling its way forward. Nearly all of those who were credentialed by ELM have now been received onto the roster of ordained clergy in the ELCA. ELM’s work providing an alternate candidacy and credentialing process drew to a close and the historic ELM roster has grown beyond itself into a professional network of publicly identified LGBTQ clergy, rostered leaders and seminarians twice the size of the former roster. As we work with more and more of the church’s emerging leaders we are challenged to find new ways to support their transition into public ministry. We know that each of these leaders, through their bold witness and faithful proclamation, is changing the culture of the church and transforming our wider society. The work is not done, but the landscape is forever changed.

In the context of a reforming church, at the end of one leg of the journey and the beginning of the next, Joel Workin’s writing remains fresh, challenging and hopeful. Even in his “Doubts” Joel cannot help but confess,

*I even admit that somewhere down deep inside, I still believe what Church, Sunday School, and home taught me: that right will prevail, that God will rend the heavens and come down, that every tear will be wiped away, that in my flesh I shall see God.*

I pray that Joel's faith, Joel's conviction, Joel's words will strengthen you who hold this book as it has so many of us who have returned to his writings again and again over the years.

*Chicago, Illinois  
January 1, 2012 – Name of Jesus*

*“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks.” (Heb. 11:1-4)*

## INTRODUCTION TO A CALLING

*The Rev. Dr. Paul Wennes Egertson, Bishop Emeritus*

*Southwest California Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*

I was elected Bishop of the Southern California West Synod on November 5, 1994, sixty years to the day after my father's Ordination as a Lutheran Pastor. Most of the people voting knew that my wife Shirley and I are advocates for the full acceptance of homosexual people in the life and ministry of the Church. Most of them knew that the oldest of our six sons is gay. Many of them knew he had graduated from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, but was not certified for ordination because he refused to vow a celibate life as the price for certification. A few of them knew he made a quartet out of the trio of seminarians God chose to lead the newly formed *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* (ELCA) into its first engagement with the reality of publicly homosexual people within its membership and ministry.

Joel Workin, Jeff Johnson and Jim Lancaster were one year ahead of our son in the Seminary. They took the first brunt of our church's response: a rapidly adopted policy requiring celibacy of homosexual candidates. Lutherans had never explicitly required that before. It disqualified all four of these young men from ordination. Since then, Jeff Johnson became one of another trio who were irregularly ordained in San Francisco by over forty Lutheran Pastors. The next day he was installed in one of the two congregations later expelled from the ELCA for installing Pastors not approved for call by the ELCA. Jim Lancaster was so violated by what he experienced as ecclesiastical duplicity, he no longer relates to the church.

Joel Workin entered into a holy union with his soul mate, Paul Jenkins, a Roman Catholic. Unknown to either of them at that stage in this century's second holocaust, Paul had AIDS and Joel soon entered into his suffering. Later, I was Pastor of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in North Hollywood, where Joel was a member and Paul attended. It was my bittersweet sorrow to watch Joel care for Paul through the long months leading down to his death.

Throughout that time, Paul's greatest concern was not for himself but for Joel. He would ask me, *Who will care for Joel during the dying days of his life?*

During Paul's last days, his father, stepmother and Joel's parents were frequently present together. On one of those occasions, as I was leaving the house after a pastoral visit, I found the hospice nurse out on the porch crying. When I asked if I could help, she said her tears were stimulated by the beauty of what she had just seen. In all her experience caring for men with AIDS, she rarely saw their parents, she said. Sometimes a mother would come, but almost never a father. Yet here, with two young men both dying from that plague, she saw not one, but two fathers, standing up like real men in loving support of their sons. It was enough to make her cry.

I shared that story in the sermon at Paul's Memorial Mass. It was held in the house where the Los Angeles Chapter of Dignity meets to provide support for gay and lesbian Catholics. It was led by a Priest who was not afraid to be the icon of Jesus among outcasts today.

After being elected Bishop, I asked Joel to be the Lector at my Installation Service. He was already getting close to the time of his own Eternal Installation. Then, as his Bishop rather than Pastor, I watched Joel's mother Betty and father Ray come repeatedly from their

home in Fargo to care for him during the long months of his passion unto death. It was the most moving demonstration of parental love I have ever witnessed.

When Betty and Ray could not be with Joel, a cadre of gay neighbors and members of St. Matthew's kept daily watch. Prominent among those angels of mercy was the editor of these pages, Michael Nelson, and his beloved, Dale Von Seggern. Through it all, I knew I was walking on holy ground with a community of people who were profoundly Christian.

When Joel died, all of us cried and I was blessed. It was one of those experiences you recall when reading lines like those in Robert Browning Hamilton's poem, *Along the Road*:

I walked a mile with Pleasure;  
She chattered all the way,  
But left me none the wiser  
For all she had to say.  
I walked a mile with Sorrow  
And ne'er a word said she;  
But oh, the things I learned from her  
When sorrow walked with me!

I may have been Joel's Pastor and Bishop, but he, his family and friends, were my teachers. Through his writings in this collection, he'll be your teacher, too. It *is* his Calling.

*Thousand Oaks, California  
April 2000*

The material above is a revised and extended portion of a longer keynote address, *Creative Approaches to Change*, delivered by the Bishop Egertson to the *Here I Stand Conference*, held at Central Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN, on Saturday, October 10, 1998.

## JOEL RAYDON WORKIN: A LIFE

*Jim Lancaster & Michael Price Nelson*

What Joel Workin's parents taught him, they didn't necessarily tell him; after all, they were Norwegian Lutherans in North Dakota. You didn't have to talk about everything. You learned to stand up for what you believed in by going to church, working the farm, and playing by the rules. So when Joel came out to his parents as a gay man in the first year of seminary, they weren't sure why he had to talk about it.

Joel grew up on a farm in Walcott, North Dakota, the oldest of three brothers. Lowell and Leon looked up to their big brother as their hero. Tall, good-looking, smart, honest, spiritual. Joel was everything they wanted to grow up to be. Betty and Ray were proud of their eldest son, especially when he sang in the church choir. He loved music. He loved reading. He wasn't wild about driving the combine at harvest, but he pulled his weight.

After college, he spent a year in the Lutheran Volunteer Corps, and while working with the poor in Wilmington, Delaware, he decided on the ministry. Betty and Ray believed in their son, and if that's what he wanted, they wanted it for him, too. There seemed to be nothing he couldn't do when he put his heart and mind to it.

Joel was an outstanding student, earning the admiration of students and professors alike. He was among the best and the brightest in the Berkeley, California seminary. His humor, incisive mind, and deep, caring spirit were evident whether in the classroom or working with poor urban children. Nobody doubted that this taciturn, able young man would become one of the church's most gifted clergy.

He came out to his parents that first year at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, and nobody knew what the consequences would be. But true to himself, Joel followed his heart toward ordination in the Lutheran church.

When he came up for his certification for ordination after four years of hard work, he was honest and forthright about being gay. The committee was so impressed by this young seminarian, that they certified him for ordination without hesitance. But when word got out that he and two other openly gay seminarians had been approved for ordination, a Lutheran firestorm ignited that made national headlines.

The Church responded swiftly to the controversy. Local bishops and church officials from Chicago convened in Berkeley, California to face down these three gay upstarts. Their agenda: force pledges of celibacy or bar the three from ever working in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Like the man his parents raised him to be, Joel stood before the bishops and told them plainly of his love and commitment to Paul Jenkins, whom he met while on internship in a church in Los Angeles. To Joel it was a simple matter of fairness. Heterosexuals were not being asked to pledge celibacy, nor were they threatened with exclusion from the clergy if they did not make one. Joel did not expect to be treated differently from everyone else. It was the Gospel. And the Church and his family had taught him that.

Joel never worked in the Lutheran church as a result of his honesty. He married Paul Jenkins on December 30, 1988 in a church service presided over by a Lutheran pastor, and in which his entire family participated. His ministry found form at the AIDS Healthcare Foundation in Los Angeles, where he was instrumental in creating Chris Brownlie Hospice, the first residential hospice in Southern California which soon became a model for AIDS hospice care worldwide.

Paul and Joel were both HIV+, and while remaining community activists, they didn't initially tell their families about their health. There were still some things you didn't always tell. But when Paul fell ill with a fatal, untreatable illness in the spring of 1993, their families had to know. Paul's father later said he didn't understand what the two men felt for each other until he watched Joel nurse his dying son. Betty admired Joel's patience and kindness, hoping she would have his strength when time came to nurse him.

Joel died November 29, 1995 at his home in Los Angeles, surrounded by family and friends who were like family. Joel's estate went to the benefit of his and Paul's nine nieces and nephews. In an ironic twist, Joel's pastor in Los Angeles became bishop in the same synod that had previously excluded him from the clergy. This bishop preached at his funeral of the legacy of courage, faith and family that Joel exemplified his whole life.

. Dear God, I am gay --

*thank you!*

## ALL THINGS

The prayer that follows is one of the first "gay" things I ever wrote. As a "keep-the-faith-all-things-are-possible" prayer, it is appropriate for all seasons, especially when the day seems long, when the journey seems unbearably difficult, when doubt and despair gain the upper hand, when the last thing that seems true is that even "with God all things are possible."

All things: a cure for AIDS, openly gay and lesbian Lutheran clergy, non-heterosexist marriage services (in the new lavender hymnal), no more gay bashing, clean air and water, no more "disappeared" in Central America, married male and female Catholic priests, no more arms race, all of God's children gathered around that great welcome table.

If my experiences and petitions are foreign to you, then please receive this as one of the many different LGBTQ voices. If you can, pray with me.

*Dear God,*

*I am Gay. I have said that to lots of other people, but never before to you.*

*I am Gay. Thank you, God.*

*I do not thank you for everything. I am not happy that I grew up and still live in a world that for the most part hates, abuses and refuses me. I am not happy that I belong to a church that for the most part ignores, condemns and rejects me, that will ordain me into a life of lying and hiding, but not a life of truth and freedom.*

*I am not happy that my parents cry over their so-called "lost" son; that other children must grow up living secret and painful lives; that the evil principalities and powers of fear, homophobia and small-mindedness dominate and infect most of society; that I myself am captive to those powers and am often quick to hate and kill.*

*I do not like everything about this world, God. I am not happy with all of it or myself, but still I thank you.*

*I thank you for calling me out of the darkness, out of the fear, out of the closet into your light and truth, into the goodness and the ambiguity of your creation. I thank you for allowing me, through my own suffering and pain, to understand and relate to the pain and suffering of others. Thank you for connecting me with my brothers and sisters who are also broken and being made whole. I thank you for the love of another human being, the joy of community, of brotherhood and sisterhood. I thank you that by your grace I am what I am.*

*God, this is my promise to you, this is what I will do with your help: I promise to live always in your light and never to return to the darkness. As much as the world may preach hatred, I will respond in love. As much as the world preaches fear and fright, I will stand fast in your peace and assurance. As much as the world may beat and oppress, I will forgive and await reconciliation. As much as I and my brothers and sisters may grow weary and despairing, yet I will trust and believe that with you all things are possible. As much as I fail and stumble, I will repent and cling to your mercy.*

*But I will not retreat to the darkness, Lord. Having seen your love enfleshed, your caring grace and compassion at work in my new family, I will not hide or cover or become embittered or unbelieving. I will hope and trust, and I will endure the blows and insults and the rejections when they come, but I will not hide and will not fear. As your child, I will be and I will love, no matter what.*

*Dear God, I am Gay.*

*Thank you.*

*Amen.*

## THE PRODIGAL CHURCH

*Luke 15:11-32*

Usually, when we hear St. Luke's story of God's grace in the parable of the "Prodigal Child," we the listeners are cast in the title role. Not a bad part, actually, since as stars of the show we get to satisfy all of our carnal desire and still have things work out back home in the end. A sort of have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too role. And that great swine scene: "I will arise and go to my father!"

The other alternative, of course, is to be cast in the villain's role and play the big bad Elder Sibling who will not cut anyone a break. Not a bad part either. Anyway, as I say, this is how it usually works out. Usually.

In the story of Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgendered people and the Church, however, the customary roles are reversed. The Church, God's understudy, which usually retains for itself the role of warm and waiting Parent, is now the one that has taken the "journey to the far country."

In this drama, with the Church off living its carnal and sinful life, LGBTQ Christians are suddenly thrust into the role of Forgiving Parent and are left standing, if I may use this rural image, by the mailbox at the end of the driveway waiting for the Prodigal to come home.

What does it mean for the church's LGBTQ people to play the part of this often overlooked, mostly inactive character of Forgiving Parent? If prodigality and hospitality have both been taken away, what is left to do? The parable answers back quite simply: *wait*.

"Imagine," says Kierkegaard, "a compound word which lacks the last word; there is only the first word and the hyphen."

What about this hyphen, this dash? What shall our attitude be toward this incomplete and broken thing? Or what shall we -- Or what shall we think of a sentence which is cut off midway, as the dash indicates? How shall we make sense of that piece of a thing? Is it a sentence fragment or an unfinished sentence? The former is dead and past, forgettable. The latter has potential and awaits completion.

"What a difference there is," says Kierkegaard, "between a fragment and an unfinished sentence!"

How, then, shall the waiting sexual minorities view their relationship with the Church? There has been a break, a resounding "No" from most of the prodigal Church to any form of partnership or familial bond. But is it "No, period" or "No -- " (No, dash)?

"No, period" means that the relationship is over. Toss that fragment of a thing away; it is history. Dead. Period. Go back inside the house and stop worrying about the ungrateful kid.

"No --," on the other hand, means that the relationship is incomplete, unfinished. It means that there is more to be said after the dash, no matter how long the intervening silence. "No -- " means believing, hoping and trusting that the relationship will one day be restored and set right, that the prodigal will come home. It means standing and waiting for the Church to "come to its senses," never giving in, never giving up, never walking back inside and shutting the door on a hopeless situation. Kierkegaard was right. "What a difference there is between a fragment and an unfinished sentence!"

Make no mistake about it, "No, period" is the answer given by many in the world *and* the Church to God's LGBTQ children. These naysayers want a complete and total break. They look forward to no re-establishment of familial ties. Loving and waiting parents,

however, do not take "No, period" for an answer even when the Church seems irretrievably lost and dead.

Love does not take "No, period" as an answer. Even after years of anguished longing, of standing by the mailbox and scanning the horizon for the prodigal's return, Love does not take "No, period" for an answer. Love, for Gay and Lesbian Christians is the power of punctuation, the power to turn "No, period" into "No -- " and to wait for the words of reconciliation which will one day follow.

Now, do not get the wrong impression. I do not think that the sole word of good news to Lesbian and Gay people is this: wait. Hardly so. Yet, "wait" is one of scripture's words. "Hope" or "believe" might sound more religious, but it all amounts to some waiting in the end. Love hopes, Love believes, Love waits. Yes, even for the Church, Love waits. For all eternity, as long as the "No -- " remains incomplete, Love waits.

It is curious to note that in the parable the Prodigal wises up without anybody's assistance or advice (save the swine's perhaps). Will the Church do the same?

But we *do* have the power of punctuation, of waiting, of hoping. We also, as the grieved party, have the power of forgiveness. But, whereas one may forgive, it takes two to be reconciled.

Childish as the Church may seem and act, it is not a child. Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual and Transgendered Christians, therefore, await a Church that comes home as an adult. Not happily perhaps, not jumping and skipping, even with some fear and concern, but of its own will and confessing with its lips and heart that "I have sinned against you and against God." A Church which is dragged home, seduced home or tricked home does not end the wait. No, we do better by waiting, waiting expectantly, lovingly and hopefully by the mailbox for a repentant return, rather than playing juvenile games about recognition, policy, and the like.

It is not easy to hope and to believe in a future reconciliation when a loved one says "No, period," and blithely walks away. It is not easy to stand ready to forgive and to welcome home with open arms. Personally, I would rather be the star and squander the family fortune. That sounds like a lot more fun. The parable, however, says, "Hope, believe, wait." There is more to be said. This show is not over yet.

Just you wait.

## OVERFLOWING

### *Further Reflections on Luke 15*

When last seen, the prodigal of Luke 15 was off gallivanting in some exotic foreign land, spending a good part of the family fortune on wine, wo/men and song. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, there sat the patient Parent, waiting, hoping, trusting in a final reconciliation. Quite a drama. Quite a story.

It is of great comfort for us all, I would imagine, to make the appropriate analogy and to rest assured that in spite of all our own ramblings and gallivanting, God, the patient Parent, is likewise awaiting our return, waiting to welcome us with open arms and to throw a wild toga party. As the old hymn goes, *"Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling, O sinner, come home."*

The reality, however, is that this story of waiting, this story of patience is not really a Christian story after all. In spite of all the analogies, all the meaning, there is something about the parable of the Prodigal that misses the very heart of Christianity, for the good news of the Easter gospel is this: God did not sit at home by the mailbox waiting for us to come back. God did not patiently sit at home with our "No, period." ringing in God's ears as we shelled peas and began to wonder what exactly we had gotten ourselves into. God did not simply say, "Come home." Home came to us.

In the fullness of time, after years of "No, period," of rambling and mumbling, of waiting for reconciliation, at last God said, "I shall arise and go to my children." And so God in Jesus came, preaching the great commonwealth, calling "come home," which really, as we know, was a homecoming to us. God's heart was, God's heart is, so full of love, of tenderness, of passion, of justice, that it spilled over into the world in the form of Jesus. If we could not come to our senses, our senses would come to us.

But still we said, "No." "No." to God in Jesus. "No." to forgiving seventy times seven. "No." to eating with "those people." "No." to such easy love. It was bad enough to have left home in the first place, please do not embarrass us by giving it back to us free. No. No. No. If it's free everybody will be there. Even them. Even me. No. And so, we said "No, period" again, and killed Jesus.

But not even death will keep God from us. That is the truth of Easter. The love that overflows from God's heart into the world as Jesus, the blood and agony of the cross, the love that overflowed from the tomb that first Easter morning, that love is ever and always "Yes, period." That love, and I say this by faith and not by fact, is the mightiest thing in all creation and nothing will keep it from us. It wells forth from God. It soaks into the cross. It floods from the tomb. It will find us. It will not rest, or be patient or idle or sit at home until "Yes" finds us.

I sometimes wonder what it is that keeps Lesbian and Gay Christians going. Why is it that after years of oppression, of hatred, of violence, of "No, period" at the hand of the Church, we still honor the Prodigal with our concern, our caring, our tireless efforts? Why do Gay & Lesbian Christians keep at it? Why after all we have been through, individually and communally, do we continue to expect something better, to continue to give the best of ourselves? Why do we continue to educate and instigate, to act as if "the Church" mattered? (And I deliberately point to Parent Church.) Why do we even waste time "bashing" it?

We do it, I suppose, because the Love that has overflowed from God's own heart continues to find a home in us, too. Easter is a love that cannot rest while the Prodigal wanders, hurts, suffers, hungers. We want one thing for the Church: that it know in its heart and preach with its voice and live in its life the overflowing love of God. And nothing,

not "No, period," not even death, will keep us, keep Easter, keep sense, keep home from the Church.

Christ has risen. *"I will arise ... "*

## DOUBTS

*"Are you, all by yourself, wiser than so many saints,  
wiser than the entire church?"*

*-- Luther's Works, Vol. 26, pg. 65*

That was the question posed to Martin Luther, whose theses-posting we celebrated recently on Reformation Sunday. As he stood alone in debates and diets, challenging the assumptions of church/society and the great weight of tradition, the question came, *"Are you, all by yourself, wiser ... ?"*

It is a question still being asked. When we LGBTQ Christians, talk of grace, of creation, of Gay is good and Lesbian a gift from God, of weddings, of coming out, of anger and pain after years of silent suffering and abuse; the question comes, *"Who are you? Are you, alone, right, and the entire church with its bishops and assemblies, wrong?"*

It is a haunting, sometimes terrifying and doubt-inducing question. And it is one that we ask ourselves, as well. Remember the first "Gay/Lesbian" thing you ever did? Remember how many times you walked around the block, back and forth past the bar, the bookstore, the church where "that gay church group" was meeting? Remember the tug of war inside your guts?

*"Am I (and those others already inside) right, and all the church, everything I was every taught and told, wrong?"*

It is not easy to stand alone against institutions and traditions. Luther was a heretic and criminal, an enemy of the empire, an outcast of both Church and state. As LGBTQ Christians we find ourselves in a similar position today. Our very existence is an offense, an affront, to the bulk of Christendom. We are jailed in society, hunted down, disciplined, or worse, by the Church for our love.

Given these realities, a few doubts now and then seem quite normal. "*Are you, all by yourself, wiser ... ?*" But if you are like me, then the focus of your doubt is perhaps shifting somewhat.

Yes, I used to wonder if Gay was okay. It was emotionally wrenching to face challenges to most everything I learned in Sunday School, at home, and in public school. I used to doubt myself, the truth that was within me, the truth that *was* me.

But I do not doubt any more. God, through various means (one of which is community of grace, which is a paradox given the "stand alone" theme of Reformation Day and this piece) has granted me the courage and surety of my convictions. Those once terrible words "I am Gay" now come without blinking. I, and many of us, I think, will gladly and easily stand before bishops and kings, bosses and family, and declare that Gay and Lesbian is good and God's gift!

No, on this point at least, I no longer doubt that I am, "wiser than so many saints, wiser even than the entire church." I do not doubt that I am right; what I doubt is that what is right will prevail.

When the leaders of the Lutheran church, whose motto is allegedly *semper reformanda*, "always reforming," start circling the wagons like white Afrikaners, I have doubts. As this goddam virus continues its rampage unimpeded, I have doubts.

Perhaps these doubts too will one day fade. And I admit that I prefer this set of doubts to the prior one. I even admit that somewhere down deep inside, I still believe what Church, Sunday School, and home taught me: that right will prevail, that God will rend the heavens and come down, that every tear will be wiped away, that in my flesh I shall see God.

## THE ORDINATION BUS

During the many years before Rosa and Martin and Malcolm, when second-class African-Americans were restricted to the back of the bus, it was small comfort to back-of-the-bus Blacks that walking is good exercise. Necessity is the mother of invention and lemons can be made into lemonade, but it is a very tortured logic that rationalizes discriminatory denial of access to the front of the bus by saying, "Well, walking is good for you, and it is also more environmentally proper and conscious. Who needs that dirty old bus, anyway?"

Yes, strange notions, not unlike these have been surfacing lately around the issue of ordination. When the Archbishop of Los Angeles said no more priests for Dignity, the Lesbian/Gay Catholic organization, suddenly there was talk in those heretofore fairly conservative Catholic circles about the importance of breaking the Word, about the glories of non-Eucharist services. When three irregular/illegal ordinations were contemplated in the Bay area, suddenly there was talk amongst law-abiding Lutherans about the necessity and value of ordination, about buying into a clerical, patriarchal system.

"What about the priesthood of all believers?!" they argue.

Indeed, what about the priesthood of all believers?

If the ordination bus is big enough and good enough to carry uncloseted heterosexual white male believers as pastors, then it is big enough and good enough for the rest of us believers, as well. Give the Lesbians of color and all the rest of us believers a window seat, up front. And don't stand in a cloud of diesel exhaust trying to explain the fine points of walking to an uppity once-back-seater-now-pedestrian who was slapped off the bus for trying to sit toward the front. If walking is so great, then why has this bus been tooling along for some 2000 years? If walking is so great, then stop the bus and we will all go for an

unordained stroll. But don't hand us LGBTQ Christians a pair of Buster Browns while the Americruiser rolls on by.

I like a brisk aerobic constitutional as much as the next person. I know that the division of labor set up between clergy and laity is much a matter of good order. I also believe in the priesthood of all believers. But these are separate issues. The Lesbian and Gay community engages in self-defeating activity when these matters are confused or muddled, especially when it is members of the community doing the muddling.

Malcolm and Martin and Rosa can each tell us of the sacrifices and hardships endured on the way to the front of the bus. They will even walk with us if we get slapped off the bus. But they will not pretend that walking is riding or that we have been duped by claiming what is rightfully and fully ours.

So, the next time God's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered children are told to settle for the back seat, or to explore the wonders of ambulating, keep in mind that the scripture does not state, "Blessed are those that make the best of things." Rather, scripture urges, "(Stay on the bus) *and turn to them the other cheek also.*"

## SINS OF OMISSION

*"We have sinned by what we have done and by what we have left undone."*

*-- Lutheran Book of Worship*

Over the course of the last sixteen centuries or so, the Christian church has become quite adept and even profound in its ability to identify sins of commission, overt and active wrongdoing. The prime example of these sins of strength is the sin of pride. The proud, bold Sinner thinks and acts like a god. For years, a few introspective, well-to-do men have expounded upon it and have made it a cornerstone of Christian theology. They have made their sin to be all of sin.

Amongst the fallout of this history is that many Christians today have an interestingly biased view of ethical behavior. For them, for us, the impression is that as bad as it is to let someone die, it is worse to kill someone. *Doing* is more suspect than *not doing*, and *doing bad* is definitely worse than *not doing good*. Why does something "active" like abortion incite rallies and campaigns, while "passive" malnutrition deaths gather far less fervor? Why do so many in the church omit to act while African Americans and increasing numbers of minorities in this country are exterminated by AIDS?

Back in confirmation classes, I first heard about another kind of sin -- sins of omission. I have not heard a lot about them since, but maybe it is worth our while to drag "what we have left undone" into the light.

It is my contention that LGBTQ people do not think too much of themselves, they think too little. The sin of poor, lesbian women of color is not that they think and act pridefully "better than," but they think and act "nothing but." This second group sins in weakness, not in strength. They, we, seek courage, not humility. Lutherans who love to talk about the Law, the hammer of God, which convicts of sin, which cuts our inflated selves

down to size, are sometimes pounding on the wrong people. What about those who need to be built up, not cut down? To claim their place, not be put in their place?

I, like you, also sin by omission. There are things, facts, realities about myself, my baptized and forgiven self, which I will not, dare not, reveal. But I, like you, also ask forgiveness for "what I have left undone." And -- and this is sheer grace -- sometimes, much as I, we, resist, that forgiveness actually works. Grace actually does abound and we, with grace unbounded, take our next step and actively "walk in Your ways."

We are not, any of us, strangers to grace. She meets us at worship. She accompanies us as we come out to our parents. She sneaks under the closet door and greets us on the other side. The fact is, we are grace, made flesh. What a sin it is to omit being grace in the world. What a grace it is when grace abounds, when she is unbound in us, as us. What a grace it is when we come out, bread broken, word spoken, wine poured, love given, grace unbounded, God made flesh.

*"We have sinned ... by what we have done and by what we have left undone ... Forgive us, renew us, and lead us ... "* to take our next step.

## FLEETING

*"We preach Christ crucified."*

*I Corinthians 1:23*

There are stories in the Buddhist sutras about devout Buddhist monks and nuns who used to sit and meditate in cemeteries, or even amidst unburied decomposing corpses. These seekers of enlightenment choose such an environment in order to be reminded of the impermanence of life. Power, position, and popularity are fleeting; things to which humans should not become attached.

These days, I usually have my lunch in the Chris Brownlie AIDS Hospice dining room where I work as Assistant Director. In the chair beside me, and in dining room chairs and wheelchairs around the room, are men and women gaunt with AIDS. Impermanence, seated across the table, oxygen tank at her side, slowly lifts the spoonful of soup to her mouth and then sets the spoon down, exhausted. Health is fleeting; a thing to which humans should not become attached.

In a few days, we shall stand with the women at the foot of the cross and watch Jesus die. So many hopes hanging there. We had attached so many dreams to this person who cried, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

"We preach," says Paul, "Christ crucified." Something about death, and by implication something about life, is central to our faith. Our God has met impermanence. Cling as we might, still Jesus is fleeting. Jesus dies. At worst, we killed. At best, we cannot save. We preach Christ crucified.

None of it really makes sense to me, all this dying. Even on the sunny side of Easter, it still does not make much sense. Why go to a cemetery seeking enlightenment? Why gaze

upon a bleeding and pain-wracked figure and proclaim, "*Surely, this was the Son of God*"? Why Christ crucified? Why this God, hanging there, buried there?

Yes, I know the theories of atonement, of bearing the sins of the world. I know about martyrdom, sacrificing one's life for the Truth. I know Easter makes a difference. But even in today's world, power is fleeting, health is fleeting. God is fleeting. Lent makes a difference, too, and the difference becomes almost frightening when Lent stops being a nice liturgical season and becomes real life.

Preach Christ crucified? I have lunch with Christ crucified. Our community is Christ crucified. This is no theory, no season clothed in purple. This is death, pain, abandonment. This is Christ crucified.

Although we know how the story ends, do not get ahead of the story. Easter makes all the difference, but Lent makes a difference, too. Ponder it, meditate upon it, drink it in, like soup. It is not far from you. Fleeting across the table, across the room, across your heart, there it is, what we preach. Christ crucified.

## EASTER PASSAGES

Officially, it is called "theodicy", the problem of evil, more particularly, God's (*theos*) defense (*dike*) in the face of evil.

Officially, it is called the Triduum, the three (*tri*) days (*dies*) of Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. From "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" to "*Christ has risen.*"

The Triduum is the closest thing Christianity has as a response to theodicy.

As we make the passage through these three days again this year, we have to figure out what God and evil have to do with each other. What are those holes doing in God's hands? What does that resurrection and the promise to us of something similar have to do with our lives?

The readings that follow are gathered together for reflection as we make this passage and as we struggle with these difficult questions. I invite you to meditate on them. May they speak to you, as they do to me.

*God has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes.  
I cry to thee and Thou dost not answer me;  
I stand, and thou dost not heed me.  
Thou has turned cruel to me: with the might of thy hand,  
Thou dost persecute me.  
Thou liftest me up on the wind, Thou makest me ride on it, and  
thou tосsest me about in the roar of the storm ...  
When I looked for good, evil came; and when I waited for light,  
darkness came.*

*Job 30:20-22, 26*

*For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

*Romans 8:38-39*

*No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you. But I have understanding as well as you: I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these? I am a laughingstock to my friends; I, who called upon God and God answered me, a just and blameless person, am a laughingstock; In the thought of one who is at ease there is contempt for misfortune; it is ready for those whose feet slip. The tents of robbers are at peace, and those who provoke God are secure, who bring their god in their hand.*

*Job 12:2-6*

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. And the Lord will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. The Lord will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the Lord will take away the reproach of the Lord's people from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken.*

*Isaiah 25:6-8*

*... Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."*

*John 20:26-29*

## OH, YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN THERE!

### *Reflections on AIDS, The Quilt, and John 20*

The question has haunted me since that Easter morning when years of deep inner fears, doubts, and crises were at last articulated: *What does it mean to proclaim that "death is swallowed up in victory" to a community that is being swallowed up in death?*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh, Tom, you should have been there!" That's what the other disciples said to Thomas when next they saw him after that first Easter. "We have seen and touched the Lord. Peace has filled our hearts. Oh, Tom, you should have been there!" And Thomas wanted to believe his friends. For all the world he wanted to believe, but he had doubts.

It is not that Thomas doubted that the dead could rise. No, he didn't ask for a pulse rate, for a respiration count, or to hear Jesus' voice. Any of those things would have proven that Jesus was alive, but Thomas did not ask about any of that. Thomas demanded, "Show me the wounds." His friends could be as excited as they wanted, but all Thomas knew was that the last time he saw Jesus, Jesus was hanging there on the tree, alone, forsaken, wounded, bleeding, dying. And now they were telling him that this one was also Lord and Savior of the world? Thomas had some doubts. Can the wounded one be Lord? What does God have to do with suffering and the cross? "Show me the wounds," said Thomas, "prove to me that I have a wounded Savior, a suffering Lord."

"Oh, Mary, you should have been there!" That's what her friends said to Mary after our March on Washington for LGBTQ Rights. "We have seen and touched the Lord. Peace, joy, and courage have filled our hearts. Oh, Mary, you should have been there!" And Mary wanted to believe her friends. For all the world she wanted to believe, but she had doubts.

It is not that Mary doubted the magnitude of the event. She did not ask for official crowd counts, or the texts of speeches in order to show that the hand of God was at work in history, enabling a people to live free. She did not question that. Mary demanded, "What about the Quilt?" Her friends could be all excited, but what about the Quilt, the AIDS Quilt she had heard about which lay there like an open wound on the Mall, as if the gathering had been pierced by a sword? That Quilt which gives silent testimony to the pain, the suffering, lesions, abandonment, and death of so many, some of them Mary's friends. And now they were telling her of a new spirit in Gay America? Mary had her doubts. What does the hand of God have to do with those panels, those scars, of suffering and death? "What about the Quilt?" asked Mary. "Prove to me that I have a wounded Savior, a suffering Lord."

Doubting Thomas and doubting Mary ask some pretty hard questions, and as far as I am concerned, some pretty good ones. I ask them, too, and have no easy answers, no theology of suffering, no theology of AIDS. All I, doubting Joel, can say is this: When I stand before the quilt, at the March, or again as it begins its national tour in Los Angeles; when I place my finger in the mark of the nails; when I am with recently diagnosed PWA's, blinded PWA's, partners of PWA's, angry and fighting PWA's, lesion-covered PWA's, parents of PWA's, gentle and ever-hopeful PWA's; when I place my hand in the wounded side, my only response is, with Thomas: My Lord and my God. I have a wounded Savior, a suffering Lord. The God of the march is the God of the quilt. The God of the resurrection is the God of the cross.

And when I leave that place, that place of death and new life, of scars and healing, when I leave the Quilt, the March, the memorial service, the locked and darkened room, the very side of God, then I say to Tom, and to Mary, and to the world: "Oh, you should have been there!"

## DAYENU!

If ever there was a meal fit for the LGBTQ community, I think it is the Seder, the feast of freedom which marks Passover.

During this recent Passover, I went to my third Seder and the resonance that the meal evoked with its symbols and images was startling: The recitation of the history of a people yearning and struggling for freedom, the recitation of a history of oppression and suffering, the bitter herbs, the cups of joy and blessing, the celebration of exodus (coming out) and freedom, the recalling of abundant blessing in the *Dayenu*.

The *Dayenu* is a sort of "it's been rough but God has always given enough" piece. Translated, *Dayenu* means "it would have been enough for us." Traditionally, it begins:

*In contrast to the plagues sent against the Egyptians --  
How many advantages did God shower upon us!*

*If you had brought us out of Egypt but had not  
executed judgment upon its people, Dayenu!"*

... and that got me to thinking.

If God had made known to us God's acceptance, love and gifts, but had left us in the closet, *Dayenu!*

If God had liberated us from our individual closets, but had not given us the fellowship of community of other graced lives, *Dayenu!*

If God had given us the trans-national fellowship, the ministry and prophetic voice of LLGM and Lutherans Concerned/North America, but had not given us a church that ordains openly Lesbian and Gay pastors, *Dayenu!*

If God had given us the Quakers, the United Church of Christ, the Metropolitan Community Church, but no status or support outside the church, *Dayenu!*

If God had given us political groups like the National Gay Rights Advocates and the Human Rights Campaign Fund, but not the embrace of family and friends, *Dayenu!*

If God had given us the big hearts of PFLAG, but not our own heroes and saints, *Dayenu!*

If God had given us the martyred life of Harvey Milk and the poetry of Gertrude Stein, but not the joys of dishing, of drag, of camp, *Dayenu!*

If God had given us dishing, drag and camp, but had not inspired the drag queens of color to say "let my people go" at Stonewall, *Dayenu!*

If God had given us a local parade of flesh and faith, but had not gathered 700,000 of us together for the March on Washington, *Dayenu!*

If God had given us the courage to face arrest and oppression, but had not given us the strength and compassion to endure AIDS, *Dayenu!*

If God had only given us a few years with our spouse/friend/sibling/parent before he/she dies of AIDS, but had not loved us with a love stronger than death, *Dayenu!*

*"How much greater, many times greater, is the good which God showered upon us, for God did each one these favors for us, and many more."*

*--Rabbinical Text*

## GRACE UNBOUNDED

My mother was there. Yes, my mother. She was there, and she said it was "nice," which is quite a compliment from a North Dakota Lutheran. She thought the music was good, and I could tell it meant a lot to see her son and his gay brothers and lesbian sisters standing proud and sure, anchored in the gospel, claiming their place, affirmed by one another and by the many openly pro-Gay people who were there. Yes, my mother was there.

And Jack was there, too. He came with his wife, who has been such a friend to him since his "coming out" after many years of marriage. They have been through a lot together, and this, this was almost too good to be true. All the people. All those Gay people, those Christian people. The bond Jack felt was almost instantaneous. And certainly it was the love of God that bound them together. The community, the connection, the family. Jack could have burst for joy. At last, peace in his heart after years of anguish. At last, light, not darkness, courage, not fear. At last, "Gay is good," giving voice to the truth of his life, "the bulk of the church is wrong" giving voice to the hurt of his life.

And Bonnie was there, another of the many straight, pro-gay persons in attendance. What happened to those three seminarians had so angered and upset her that she had come to embody a "yes" in the face of a bishop's "no." It's one thing for the church to take a stand, but at least the church could be consistent. Why did the same bishop who urged Bonnie's congregation to call an openly gay pastor just months before, now refuse to recommend for call an openly Gay seminarian? It's all so silly. "These are my friends. They already are my pastors." Bonnie was there. The love of God brought her there and her presence meant she cared, she wanted change.

And Sid was there. For him, it was like completing the circle: Growing up Lutheran; president of the Luther League, then off to California and a new life, a Gay life, president of the Gay business association, and now here: Gay and Lutheran. You *can* go home again. Sort of. You can have a single life, a whole life, an integrated life. It's not always easy but you can be Lutheran in the Gay community and Gay in the Lutheran community. Sid was there.

Dan was there. Unlike Sid, Dan never left. He stayed at home, an abused child taking care of an abusive parent. An ACC, Adult Child of the Church. Two things filled Dan's mind lately; he was mad, and, he was ready to get on with real gospel ministry. He was mad because after giving his life in service to the church, he was still treated like scum. His life, his home, his spouse, his joy and passion were covered with a shroud of silence. At nearly every official turn he and people like him were slapped, kicked, stepped on or, at best, ignored. He was angry at the church and sick and tired of waiting for it. It was time to do what needed doing. So Dan was there, ready to get on with it.

And Ruby was there. She came because I invited her, out of a sense of loyalty to me. She knew it was important to me, so she came. And she was amazed. "See how they love one another ... See how they sing and laugh and cry ... Feel the passion, the yearning to be free, the intense awareness of the great love of Christ ... Yes, you know you've been to church today." And as Ruby sat there in the pew, her full heart welled over with tears as she thought of her son, Tim, who was not there. Tim died of AIDS. He was not there. But Ruby was there.

And, of course, God was there. Smiling God's biggest smile. Belly-laughing at such a conglomeration of people. The scars on God's head, hands, side, and feet aching in empathy with the hurt of those gathered. God was there, really there; not simply in spirit

but in flesh incarnate. In the kisses, the hugs, the hands, the voice, the food, the person sitting next to me. God was there.

And where were these people? They were at a worship service commemorating National Coming Out Day.

A year ago, we were in Washington DC. Out for the world to see. The biggest thing the Capitol had ever seen.

And now, it is time to let grace abound! It's time for gay people to build worshipping communities. It's time for us to bring God's good news, and not the church's bad news, to the LGBTQ community. It's time to care for the kicked-out, the run away, the imprisoned, the friendless, the dying. It's time to celebrate what has already been done. It is time to remember that we are the church. We celebrate God's gracious gifts. We proclaim the love, the life, and the grace of God at work within us and our community. We demonstrate the gracious power and glory that is ours when we come out and take the step, saying, "We are here. We are Gay and Lesbian and Bisexual and Transgendered.. We are friends of Lesbians and Gays and Bisexuals and the Transgendered. We are God's. We are the kingdom." The most precious grace God gives us is the grace to be ourselves. And now, it is time to let grace abound.

## PONDERING CHRISTMAS

*"But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart."*

*Luke 2:10*

About nine months ago, Mary had a lot to say. "My soul magnifies the Lord." (Luke 1:46) But now she is quiet, speechless at the mystery of it all. Talk about an imminent, a touchable, a nearby God. Talk about a God who knows us, who has been there, who is like us in all things. Or if not talk about it, ponder it. There lies God, olive-skinned, fingers shorter than the length between an adult's knuckles, needing a swaddling clothes change. Mary had much to ponder.

God may be Spirit (John 4:24), but that is not how we know God. We know the God of Christmas, of the Incarnation, the God who "became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) We know the God enfleshed in a Palestinian man who called God "abba": father God. We know the God enfleshed in Mary's faithful devotion and her radical vision of justice, the God who "has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree" (Luke 1:52): sister God. We know the God enfleshed in John the Baptist, fire-breather, whose heart was aching for equality and the kingdom, brother God. We know the God enfleshed in a parent's firm and tender care, gathering in her brood, mother God. We know the God enfleshed in the diversity of the earth, showering us with the wonders of creation: creator God. We know the God enfleshed in the embrace and the anger of relationship, who as lover, husband, wife, friend, often knows us better than we want or than we know ourselves: lesbian God, gay God, straight God. We know the God enfleshed in the cruel senseless deaths of the Holy Innocents, of gas chambers, of AIDS, of the Cross, Christ crucified: crucified God.

It doesn't make much sense that we should know God this way, that of all the ways God had come to us, God should choose such an earthly, messy, indirect, human route. As it turns out, however, there is apparently nothing that cannot be a means of grace, not a single thing without the possibility of conveying God to us. All of creation, from Jewish babes to wooden beams and nails, is a sacrament. That says a lot about God. And it says a lot about all the stuff, including human stuff, around us.

*"For unto us a child is born."* (Isaiah 9:6) God is made flesh. *"Emmanuel, God with us."* (Matthew 1:23) If nothing else, it gives us, along with Mary, something to ponder.

## QUEER EPIPHANY

Queer-ly defined, "epiphany" means "coming out."

Think about it.

The day of Epiphany, January 6, celebrates the "manifestation," the "coming out" of the Christ-child to the Gentile Magi, also known as the Three Kings, those visitors from the East. The season of Epiphany celebrates the various manifestations, the comings out, of Jesus in his ministry, the healing and teaching that reveal the kind of person Jesus is. The season ends with the Transfiguration, when Jesus in full radiance comes out to a few of the disciples on the mountaintop. And finally, Epiphany leads naturally into Lent and towards the cross, for the cross is the world's usual response to coming out, to epiphany, even as it is the great manifestation, the great epiphany of God's love.

But I get ahead of the story.

Epiphany is a season of appearances, of taking note of the healing actions and teaching voices by which God in Christ is continually coming out in the world. There follows a series of quotes gathered from here and there, fit for the Epiphany season. The words indicate what God and what we as Christians and as gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered are about. They are manifestations, comings out, epiphanies of God.

*"We who are sexual minorities see in the Passion the divine paradigm that we must follow. We read in Jesus's path to Golgotha a call to come out of our closets, for we recognize in the cross -- God's self-revelation -- nothing less than God coming out of the closet. The witness of other gay brothers and lesbian sisters confirms that in coming out and "losing everything" we find our greatest power. We feel free, undominated, fully human (even though some now regard us as less than human.)"*

*-- John Linscheid, "Our Story is God's Story: Reading the Bible with Gay Eyes"*

*"Brought before a white judge in the late 1940's to explain why he planned to preach a sermon titled, 'It's Safe to Murder Negroes In Montgomery,' the Reverend Jobs replied 'Because everywhere I go in the South the Negro is forced to choose between his hide and his soul. Mostly, he chooses his hide. I'm going to tell him that his hide is not worth it.'"*

*-- Los Angeles Times, December 21, 1989*

*"Which of the contributions from gay people are you willing to give back? The art of Michelangelo or Da Vinci, the writings of Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, Gore Vidal, James Baldwin or Malcolm Boyd, who is also a priest? The music of Noel Coward, Cole Porter, Tchaikowsky, Chopin, Stephen Foster? The statesmanship of Dag Hammarskjöld? All the above mentioned persons grew up as gay children. The Church has a responsibility to these as to all members of the family of God."*

*-- Jim Tyler, Lutherans Concerned/Los Angeles*

*"He's your son. Grab him and squeeze him."*

*-- Father of Person with AIDS, KCOP-TV, December 1988*

May each of us -- Magi, Kings, Queens, Queers, whatever -- be refreshed and made whole by God's appearances among us.

## THE IRON CLOSET

It's a season of appearances, of light, of God's manifestation. And certainly one of the most amazing manifestations of God's action in the world on behalf of humanity is the wave of freedom that has crested in Europe. Light is streaming through as the "Iron Curtain" is lifted. The "Iron Closet" is opening.

Biblical parallels and images come quickly to mind: *"Arise shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and the Lord's glory will be seen upon you."* (Isaiah 60:1-2)

The parallels and images with our own lives come quickly to mind, as well. Was the freedom, the coming out of the Iron Closet, of the peoples of Poland, Hungary, of Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania any more conceivable last year than the liberation of Gay/Lesbian people seems a year from now? Will not our joy be as unbridled, will not *we* be dancing in the street like our brothers and sisters in Europe?

*"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."* (Isaiah 9:2)

Our Epiphany will come. God will one day act and God's light will shine. And we will probably be as surprised as the people in Europe when it finally happens!

On the other side of the Iron Closet are the cheers of the crowd, hugs from long-lost family. On the other side of *our* closet is often a lost job, gay-bashing, exile from family. The world is not waiting for our coming out like it was the coming out of Communist Europe.

When will we see the same *glasnost*, the same openness, that we see in the Soviet Union, in our own churches? When will the freedom that has come to John Paul's II's Poland come to John Paul II's Catholic church? To Methodists? To Presbyterians? Will the ELCA permit the same departure from its party-line policies, as Gorbachev permitted in

Hungary and Latvia? Or will the tanks of church discipline roll in and attempt to crush our Lesbian and Gay spring?<sup>1</sup> Even our zest for democracy is tempered by the realization that a majority in the Congress continues to deny us equal access, equal protection, equal standing under the law.

Still, God will one day act and God's light will shine. For now, we rejoice with our liberated East European sisters and brothers. We are buoyed by their songs, inspired by their perseverance, sobered by their sacrifice. But we know that while years of waiting have ended, they have not entered the promised land.

The uncloseted life is no nirvana. It is working, laughing, crying, celebrating, struggling. It is real life. And that is all we and the people of Eastern Europe long for: uncloseted life, real life, to be unshackled members of the human race.

*"Arise, shine; for your light has come."*

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<sup>1</sup> The ELCA later instituted proceedings against St. Francis and First United Lutheran churches in San Francisco, and eventually expelled them after the "irregular" ordinations of Pastor Jeff Johnson, Pastor Ruth Frost, and Pastor Phyllis Zillhart.

## THE COST

ITEM: *The certificate was given to three gay seminarians in appreciation of "the Gifts of Time and Talent in Outstanding Service to the Membership of Lutherans Concerned/North America as a Model of Faith, Courage, and Integrity." And with the certificate came sustained applause, wave upon wave of admiration, gratitude and respect, as 130 gay Lutherans rose to their feet, giving their version of a group hug.*

ITEM: *The news was in The Advocate (issue 514, page 20): "A Presbyterian minister who had tested positive for the HIV antibody shot himself to death in Tuscaloosa June 14." And even if all Christendom were to clap its hands, and even if the Almighty Herself were to get down on Her knees and scrub, still nothing would be able to completely clean the blood-soaked carpet of that closet, whatever the closet -- gay, HIV-positive, etc. -- where that child of God lay dead, cold and stiff, unbugged and unapplauded.*

As one of the "Berkeley Three" it has been an honor and encouragement to receive the support and even the accolades of many persons, particularly my fellow Gay and Lesbian Lutherans. The past months have been a time of *kairos*, and it seems that a great part of what angers people is a recognition of the cost, the price of being "out" in the Lutheran church. The toll, both professionally and personally, is indeed very high. Careers are ended, even before they are begun. Private life vanishes. Families are exposed to public attention. No one can pretend that being out is easy, that to follow the call to honesty and discipleship in this way is without a cross.

Yet, what is the cost of the closet? Over and over again, as people, many of them closeted, express their rage and sympathy over the price that three seminarians and many others have to pay for being out, I want to know -- what about the cost of the closet?

How does one tally up the toll of living two lives, one of fear and the other of escape, one real the other false, one of tact the other of hiding, one of deceit the other of full-blooded reveling? How much does it cost? Twice as much?

How much energy does it take to every day, every minute, run from God and God's grace and God's gift of gayness, to run from families who wonder why the weather is the only topic of conversation, to run from oneself, which is the most basic thing God has

given, and to hide out in well-constructed closets of success, excess, or numbness? How much energy does it take to keep the gospel, the Word, God's own self, our true "created good" selves, at bay?

What pound of flesh is exacted from our very flesh by the closet? How many ulcers? How many headaches? How many heartaches? How many bodies dead in a pool of blood on the closet floor? How many persons sacrificed at the altar of political indifference or religious bigotry? How much flesh, how many corpses do blood-smearred hands need to stack against the closet door to make sure it will remain shut, even as we bury ourselves inside?

Or, literally, in real life, hard earned, greenback, dollars, bucks. What are the expenses involved in buying or renting two homes and setting up two different households, one for each of the lovers, mailing things in brown paper wrappers, driving far enough away to be somewhat safe, in always being denied the "couples rate"? What is the dollar cost of the closet?

Some people think that the three seminarians were very brave and courageous. (Some people think the three were foolish or demonic, and maybe we were a bit of each, perhaps.) But let no one think that we alone are paying the cost. Let no one think that those who "pass," those who do not say anything are having an easy time of it. Let no one think that the choice is between paying the price or not paying the price. We do all have a choice, whether or not to come out, but we have no choice about the cross. We shall either take ours up on the way out of the closet or we shall be nailed, slowly and silently, to the one that hangs upon the closet wall. There is no way around it.

I do not know how we each decide which price it is we are willing to pay, which cross it is we are willing to take. In many ways, it seems that coming out is the easiest path.

The Berkeley Three were maybe not so brave after all. They were just too wimpy to face life in the closet. That cross, constructed by the church and the world, was too much for them to bear. And if that is the case, then let me encourage us all to take the easy way out and go to the One whose yoke is easy and burden light. Who knows, you may even get a certificate and a stirring round of applause to go with it.

And if you are still not convinced that the closet has a price, then I pray that God, as She kneels in your closet, trying to get the blood stains out of the carpet, may reach over and scratch your callused hide a time or two, just to make sure you are not dead.

## A PERSONAL REFLECTIVE ESSAY<sup>2</sup>

Jesus came preaching the kingdom and in Jesus the kingdom came. (Mark 1:15, Luke 11:20) The kingdom came because God was incarnate in Jesus, and the coming of God is the coming of the kingdom. It is the mission of the church, the body of Christ, the assembly of those made members of the kingdom, to witness to and embody that kingdom of God, in word and deed.

What is the kingdom? The kingdom is the destiny of the whole cosmos, the big party God is planning and to which everyone is invited. It is the fulfillment of those great scripture passages: the lion lying down with the lamb, death being swallowed up, the lame leaping, no more war anymore. The kingdom is that of which we get a proleptic glimpse of Jesus, who healed, ate with outcasts, challenged authority, died, and rose. This Jesus, says Paul, is the "first fruits." (1 Corinthians 15:20) And just as God sent Jesus into the world to be and bring the kingdom, so has Jesus sent us, the church, to be and bring, to witness to and embody, the kingdom, the kingdom which awaits full and final fruition. (John 20:21)

None of the above bears much direct resemblance to language in the Lutheran Confessions, yet, I take my position on the mission of the church to be fully in line with the Confessions and simply another way of saying that the mission of the church is to preach, in word and sacrament, visibly and verbally, the gospel, the good news that humans are justified before God by grace, through faith, on account of Christ. To be justified is to be a part of the kingdom.

Faith is new creation. Furthermore, it is apparent that preaching is to be broadly understood. Lives of service, sacraments, sermons, care for creation: all of these are

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<sup>2</sup> Joel was certified for ordination in the ELCA in December 1988 by the faculty of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. This essay was cited by Church officials in Joel's "de-certification."

preaching, all of these point to and respond to God's grace-filled presence and kingdom which comes to us as gift. The Eucharist is a fitting example. The Eucharist is a foretaste, a real taste *now*, of the great banquet feast which is to come and to which the Eucharist also points; this anticipation is true throughout the life of the church and the church's members.

The mission of the church, then, is, as it were, to be the church, much as the mission and work of Jesus Christ was to be God in the world. This mission of the church is to set at liberty those who are oppressed, preach good news to the poor, live as new creation, accept and celebrate the manifold gifts of God, name and challenge evil and sin in their personal, corporate and structural manifestations, feed the hungry, comfort the mourning, heal the sick. It sounds grandiose but it is really not. It is just living life as it was intended, in trust and faith, not being a SOMEBODY who is always 'better than,' not being a nobody who is always 'nothing but,' but being a Somebody who is 'one of,' one of the people who, along with everyone else, has received God's gracious gift of Somebody-ness and been made a member of the kingdom.

Where do I fit in all this? Well, essentially it is my task to be about the task of living and acting from my place of grace as a liberated, justified, redeemed Somebody along with all my fellow Somebody's. As a pastor, however, I look not only to the ways in which I am about the work of embodying and witnessing to the kingdom, but also to ways in which individuals in my congregation, the congregation as a whole and the church as a whole, are about this witnessing and embodying. The kingdom does not just happen. God ushers it in and God does so, in the words of the Confessions, through means or instruments, including, but not limited to, preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. My job as pastor is to be a conduit, an instrument of the kingdom. Preaching is not just talking about justification or the kingdom; preaching is making justification and the kingdom happen in

individual and corporate lives. I do not believe that only ordained pastors are the means or conduits through which the kingdom comes. Hardly so. But I do think that I, as pastor, have the special focus and responsibility of concentrating on being and making use of the means of grace, of being an instrument through which the kingdom happens. In all this very Lutheran talk of means, it must be remembered that the means are means to an end and that end, of justified and loving lives, of new creation, of kingdom Somebodies, that end is equally as, if not more, important than the means. To put it another way, good sermons are a great thing. I want to preach powerful sermons that convey Christ, but the really great thing is that through a series of, in my case, English words and the Holy Spirit, one or ten or one hundred or one thousand people are new creation, leading lives of trust and faith, loving and being Christ to their neighbors. That is great. That is my mission as pastor.

By now the alert reader will have begun to wonder, Where is the *peccator* among all this *intus*? Where is the 'not yet' amongst all this 'already'? It is here. Any clear-eyed look at racism, hypocrisy, sexism, greed, homophobia, unfaith, classism, etc., the sin, that exists with the church (never mind the 'world') will put the somewhat rosy picture painted above into proper perspective. The kingdom is not the church's pocketable possession. Sin is not suddenly eradicated once and for all. As is the case with all believers, the church, too, is *simul intus et peccator*; The kingdom is already and not yet, and often times even the 'yes' of faith, nearly blinded by the glaring realities of the latter halves of these tensions, can barely make out the dim realities of the former. Since the kingdom, grace, and justification are not, then, a static gift, easily domesticated, it is also the mission of the church to be always reforming, converted anew each day. This daily return to baptism, to dying and rising, is the 'mission' of every believer and the church as a whole. The presence and gift of the kingdom, the very thing that makes us new and right with God, simultaneously reveals the radical

nature of human distortion and sinfulness. Every Christian bears the responsibility of returning, again and again, to God, the fount of grace, of being aware of areas in her or his own life or in the life of the church where a death and resurrection are particularly necessary, of his or her or the church's need to put what is preached (for example, in Christ there is neither male nor female, or, justification by grace) into practice (women should not talk in church, or, the works righteousness that pervaded the Lutheran church and town in which I grew up). As pastor, I bear special responsibility in paying and calling attention to these things.

Finally, one last personal note in this "personal essay." Few persons within the church are fortunate to have been spared encounters, sometimes harsh ones, with the church at its most *peccator*-ful. Somehow God and the kingdom keep breaking through, but often it is in spite of 'the church' and not because of it. Often God's 'yes' is all but drowned out by a small-minded church's 'no,' a 'no' that comes because of who a person is: the wrong age, or color, or class, or intelligence level, or sex, or income level, or orientation, or "influence," or whatever, or comes because of what a person does: how she or he dresses, speaks, worships, thinks; with whom he or she eats, lives, sleeps. It is, in fact, a stinging indictment of the failure of the church that all these precious gifts of God, gifts such as color, sex, style, orientation and ability, are mentioned in connection with the church's failure and refusal, not the church's celebration and acceptance. I have heard the painful stories and experience of those who have been abused and refused, not only by the world, but by the church, not by 'them,' but by 'us.' And certainly it is true, as I say in the sermon that follows, that if God is anywhere, God is with those who so suffer, who are rejected.

As a gay person, I too, have known the church's refusal and intolerance. This makes for an interesting situation, to say the least. On the one hand, being, in my instance, white,

male, gay, middle-class American, etc., makes no difference; being God's makes all the difference and that is the central focus of my life and ministry. On the other hand, being white, male, gay, middle-class American, etc. makes all the difference, too. God does not make use of persons or means of grace 'in general'; God uses the particular, the specific. My particulars have given me a keen sense of experience of the not yet-ness of the church, a feeling for and connection with those who are not yet 'in.' I am committed to and convinced of my own and the church's need to be always reforming, daily dying and rising, on guard against too easy identification of God's obvious ways and answers. More than this, however, I am utterly committed to and have been transformed by the great 'yes' of God. My story, other's stories, the story of the world, are all, in the last analysis, in faith's analysis, stories of grace. These are stories of a relentless, loving God who will not take 'no' for an answer, not my 'no' nor your 'no,' not the church's 'no,' not the world's 'no.' God keeps right on justifying, reconciling, liberating, feeding, ushering in the kingdom, saying 'yes.' Even if it kills God (and it did, the cross), even if it kills us (it does, baptism), somehow God is going to get everybody to that big banquet feast (resurrection, the kingdom, new life). I want to continue to be a messenger and means of God's invitation, to share the good news of God's 'yes,' to live a courageous and comforting life of faith, to incarnate Christ and the kingdom for my neighbor, to die and rise daily.

This is my "mission."

*SERMONS*

## WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE?

*Wilmington, Delaware,  
August 1984*

*(In 2007, Lutheran Volunteer Corps named its newest intentional community “Joel Workin House” – the first time an LVC house has been named for an alumnus. With a mission of working for peace and justice, LVC was formative in Joel’s life and ministry. Read more about LVC and Joel Workin House at [lutheranvolunteercorps.org](http://lutheranvolunteercorps.org).)*

My year in the Lutheran Volunteer Corps (LVC) has been marked by two personal struggles, struggles which I have known before, foresaw for this year, and which are common to all Christians. These struggles relate to Micah’s question, “What does the Lord require?” and to concretely effecting in my life Micah’s answer: “to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”

The struggles for me are, first, to begin to get some sense of what the Lord requires of me in terms of vocation/occupation. Where can my gifts and talents best be used? How can I be a good steward of my life? And, secondly, the struggle has been to be a good and effective servant here in Wilmington. How can I be a channel of hope, trust, love or joy here in this place and at this time, at Hilltop Lutheran Neighborhood Center?

I mention this first struggle, concerning vocation, only because it has become very clear to me that we are not all called to the same tasks. More specifically, I am not called to a lifetime of work in a neighborhood center such as Hilltop. This is, I think, neither good nor bad, just how it is. I do not regret this year of work. On the contrary, I treasure it and the learning and growth that have occurred. But my interests, talents, my passion, that which I revel in, lie elsewhere.

Learning something of my passion and calling has been good. What has been even better, however, is to notice that God is stirring and nourishing within me a passion for

justice. This is the great Christian calling, one that transcends and encompasses vocation, to do what the Lord requires, to do justice and to love mercy.

The year has taught me much about doing justice. Justice is not so much a matter of what we do from 9 to 5 as it is a matter of values and the little and big things we do all day long. It is not limited to certain occupations. The task of direct social service work is indeed a high calling, a great expression of doing justice, but it is just as easy for the person in social service to forget his or her link with the people of the world, the people dealt with daily, as it is for the farmer, the professor or the church secretary. The good social service worker does not do that. He or she gives of him or her self, examines his or her lifestyle, and seeks to work with the rest of society to eliminate injustice. Likewise, the good lawyer, store manager, and pastor are to give of themselves, to examine their lifestyles and to work, one hopes, with the rest of society, to eliminate injustice. A person does not need to see the homeless and the hungry every day to know that he or she lives too well, too wastefully, too comfortably.

God's message to me, a white middle-class Lutheran, is that justice is a matter of lifestyle, not livelihood. We each have our own separate "what," our passion or calling, the something we revel in, be it teaching or selling or research; but the "how" of our lives is the same. We are to live justly. No matter what my vocation, I must examine my needs to discover if they are not actually extravagant luxuries. I have to give of myself, my substance, my salary, not just distribute tokens from my excess. I must clearly distinguish justice from charity, and not hide from the former in the latter. A bag of food for the destitute is fine, but if I am living and working in a society in which some people are condemned to life on the fringe, and if I live well-off at their expense, then more than some groceries are required. The situation requires a serious examination of my society's political and economic agenda.

No person, no society, no nation looks good in comparison with God's standard of justice. My failures come as no surprise. Indeed, my great surprise is to realize how easily I delude myself into thinking I am doing so well. Failure, however, is a cause for repentance, not resignation. God is merciful. God renews and forgives, and sends me back into the struggle. I know that I have no other way to walk with my God but to walk humbly.

The second struggle of the year has been to deal with the very concrete situation at Hilltop Lutheran Neighborhood Center, where I work 20 hours per week with the after-school and summer day camp programs as part of my LVC placement (the other 20 hours being spent at Zion Lutheran Church, which is another story.) What is the Center about and what can I offer to it and its work? Many times over the past year I have wished there was a simple answer to these questions, but there is not.

During the after-school program which closed at the end of May, I was with students at the Center from roughly 4 to 8 p.m. On Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday we had two hours of recreation and two hours of study session. On Tuesday we went swimming and on Friday (or sometimes Saturday) we went bowling or had some other special activity like ice skating. The Executive Director's office is the only space available in the Center until Day Care leaves at 5:30 p.m., so the gym at West End Neighborhood House was often used for recreation. Study session, held amidst the cribs, games and small chairs of Day Care, was primarily a time for school work. Many of the elementary-aged children did not receive daily homework assignments, however, and were given some type of work to do. Also, the computer's education programs were used at this time. Seven tutors from the University of Delaware's Lutheran Campus Ministry and one from Zion made an invaluable contribution to the success of study session.

There is little, if anything, which could have prepared me, a person raised on a farm in North Dakota and a graduate of Carleton College, a small, private, liberal arts school in Minnesota, for the very different culture I encountered in Wilmington. At the Center, the computer is cut on and off, not turned on and off. Kids are asked to chill out, not shut up or be quiet. More important than vocabulary, however, I met children whose lives are filled with violence, instability and insecurity and who often do not so much respect adults as fear them. These are kids whose circumstances are very, very different from my own.

Yet, I think, the needs of these kids are similar, and I think the Center does much to help meet those needs. The kids need a place to be, a group. The question is not whether they will belong to a group. The question is to *which* group they will belong. At Hilltop, the children belong to a group that stresses the importance of education, not petty theft. In talking to Jea Street, the Center's Director, on one of those occasions when I needed to be reminded and reassured of the worth of our efforts, he pointed out to me how, over the year, doing homework had become part of the routine of the children. For many of them this was a new thing and for one girl in particular, the change was from not caring about or wanting to do homework, to wanting to get it done and out of the way as soon as she got to the Center. Hilltop ingrains and reinforces the importance of homework.

It is hardly true, however, that every child can hardly wait to sit and do his or her homework. I wish. Education is part of a package; the rest of the package includes fun and recreation time, a place the children like to be, doing things they like to do: gymnastics in the gym, kickball in the yard, computer games in the office. Usually, of course, it is these things that are the reason the kids come and keep coming. But always with these activities come the other values of the Center, the stress of education, correct English, inter-racial understanding, good behavior.

With all this talk of education and fun times, the image can become a little rosier than reality. I freely admit that there are times when I, like most others who deal with groups of youngsters, seriously question the future of society. Kids are kids, and each generation worries about the next. And when I have 15 - 40 young people, ready to bust loose after school, in a place with few facilities and little space or opportunity for structure, then I often worry more than some others. There have been some absolutely terrible times and days, four hours of being abused by small children. This has not been a picnic. I can say, too, though, and hindsight makes this easier, that there were good days and moments, tickling fights, fun at the playground, homework figured out and finished, sharing of selves and lives.

It would be nice, certainly, to be able to point to some grand and sure sign of accomplishment: a life turned around or parents oozing with praise and gratitude. There is, however, none of that, and perhaps these are more the thoughts of vanity and self than of concern. We each do what we can. The "big things" and fame come to a few, but in actuality, miracles and signs happen to us all. The miracles of endurance, of one friendship made, of a life opened to new possibilities and realities.

There is much left to do at Hilltop. For me, there is the experience of Summer Camp, where I will strive to increase the better things I speak of above, to be a good role model and friend, one who is concerned, interested, firm, helpful. For the Center, there is the much needed building addition which stands as the great undertaking. Most important, however, is how to utilize the new space. We need a veritable army of tutors to give these kids the time and attention they crave and deserve. Necessary, also, is the involvement of parents, because the children are obviously getting little if any motivation or learning at home. School cooperation is also required. We need, too, those others who will say, "Yes, this is a good thing that the Center and kids are doing. I will help with money, with pencils,

with computer programs, with a day at my beach house or farm, a tour of my office or plant. I will sponsor someone to camp, sit on the Board, or buy some books.”

It is not easy to know what to do, to know what will make the most effective Neighborhood Center. Some of these kids, *my* kids, need, to be quite blunt, their butts paddled (i.e., discipline), some need a hug, most need both. Some families are working hard to make it and need help. Others need to get up and do something for themselves. But the struggle to do what is right and effective must go on; it is part of the struggle for justice. Justice demands that these kids, *my* kids, get the chance to learn and excel, even if it be in spite of home and environment. Justice demands that parents have a safe and good place to send their children.

This is what the Lord requires: to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

Amen.

## NEW BEGINNINGS

*Sermon on the First Sunday after Epiphany / January 1985*

*Texts: Psalms 45:7-9; Isaiah 42:1-7; Acts 10:34-38; Matthew 3:13-17*

Today, the Baptism of our Lord, is a day of many beginnings. Today we remember the beginning of Jesus' ministry, which was initiated, Mark tells us, with Jesus' baptism by John. Only a few weeks ago was Christmas, the beginning of Jesus' life; one week ago was Epiphany, the beginning of Jesus' appearances to the Gentiles, and in the second lesson for today we read of the beginning of the apostles' ministry to the Gentiles. The new year, 1985, began a short time ago. Today recently began, as did our service, and this sermon.

Beginnings are everywhere. You are beginning to wonder what I am going to talk about, and on this day of beginnings, I want us to reflect on our own beginnings and on the fact that we are always beginners.

On the island of Shikoku, one of the islands that make up the nation of Japan is a circular pilgrimage route, first traveled, so the story goes, by Kobo Daishi. There are eighty-some temples on the island that are markers of the pilgrim trail, and the *Henro*, the pilgrims, starting wherever they please, essentially circle the island on their pilgrimages, visiting each of the temples in turn. This pilgrimage has no end, but it is ever beginning. The pilgrim can say that he or she completed the whole route when the original starting point is reached, but even then the pilgrim has not so much arrived at an ending, but rather at a place from which to start again.

Our lives, I think, are like the Shikoku pilgrimage. Somewhere, somehow, sometime, we were baptized and this baptism sets us on a pilgrimage. From that time on we are beginners every day, every moment, as we attempt to live as baptized children of God.

Isaiah's servant prophecy, which was fulfilled in Jesus, concerns us, too; for in our baptism we have God's spirit upon us. God has called us in righteousness and has taken us by the hand.

The trouble is that we often do not really like to be beginners. On the endless journey upon which God is leading us, on that endless pilgrimage of Shikoku, being a beginner means that we won't always have all the answers. It means that we must ever be open to God and God's leading, willing to learn something. How much easier it would be to just arrive somewhere and have everything settled. No more questions, no more novelty.

Peter, in today's lesson, shows us what it is like to lead the life of a beginner. Now, Peter was not really much on being a beginner. Just as things were going well in his preaching to the Jews in various parts of Israel, Peter starts to have these strange dreams about eating animals which Jewish dietary laws clearly forbid him to eat. "Surely no, Lord," Peter replies to the very idea of his sitting down to a ham dinner, but Peter is told in the dream not to consider unclean what God created clean. It takes three times through, but Peter finally gets the message. He goes to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, and there baptizes Gentiles and thus begins the mission of the church to the entire world, Jews and Gentiles alike.

Peter's announcement that "I now perceive that God shows no partiality," is the statement of a beginner. Previously, Peter was a prisoner to old ways and old laws; old preconceptions blinded him to the light of God's teaching. But Peter became a beginner who was open to the new thing which God was speaking to him. God broke down the walls which threatened to enslave him and that same God, who sent Jesus to be a light to the Gentiles, called Peter and the early church to smash down the walls that would separate Jew from Gentile. It was, then, not only the Gentiles who needed to see the light, but Peter and

the early church as well; for they needed to realize that God indeed does not show favoritism.

The light of Christ has come to give us a new beginning and to make us beginners. Without a beginner's mind, a mind open to God's leading, Peter would have been a prisoner, and so, too, are we prisoners when we do not have beginner's minds.

For what kind of minds do we really have, what are we really like? Are we like God's servant who does not shout or cry out or raise a voice in the street? Do we have in us a mind that does not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but humbles itself? Are we open and humble before God, acknowledging our ignorance and preconceptions? Are we listening to God's call no matter how new, how seemingly strange or novel?

Or are we, instead, prisoners of past ideas and old conceptions? Do we choose the darkness because it is familiar rather than the light which is unpredictable and breaks in upon us new at every moment? Are we captives of security rather than slaves to the freedom of God?

It is so much easier to know, to know what is going on and to feel at least a bit in control. It would have been so much easier for Peter if God would have just followed the old rules. Wasn't it enough of a new thing that Christ came to the Jews? Why does God have to keep pushing and pushing? 'Round and around Shikoku we go, never an end in sight, never a place to stop and say, "Finally, we have arrived." If only we could set up a little prison of security somewhere. But every time we do, God shatters it: "Truly, I perceive that God shows no partiality." Blind eyes are opened, captives are set free. Security comes only in being led by God.

We are all prisoners, I think, to so many things, refusing and unwilling to be beginners, always trying to stay protected and secure in our dark dungeons.

It was during my freshman year at college that I remember God beginning to blast away at some of my prison walls. Before being bombarded with all the ideas that I faced at school, before the New Testament course and hearing about form criticism, text criticism, and the synoptic problem, I was fairly secure in my beliefs. Former presidents of the Walcott Luther League usually do, you know, have it pretty together religiously. But to have everything that I held dear called into question and from all sides, was a very frightening and growing experience. “So the Bible was *really* written down by human beings, people with prejudices and an editorial point of view just like I might have. So this book and my religion do not have guarantees but ask that I trust in God and in God’s workings through humanity.” Slowly and sometimes painfully, my eyes opened a bit to the power of God and God spoke to me through classes, professors and friends.

And the great paradox of this whole liberating, un-prisoning process, the process of becoming a beginner, is that just as my prison walls enslave others, so too does my freedom free others, and grant them a new beginning.

Peter and the early church’s captivity to the old law would have meant darkness for the Gentiles, but the church’s new beginning meant light to the Gentiles. My captivity to some sort of mystical view of scripture meant the imprisonment, the boxing in, of God. It was only as the walls crumbled down around me that the box into which I had placed God also began to crumble.

In our freedom, then, we set others free. By becoming beginners, we give others, also, the chance to begin.

I am a slave to white middle-class America; its values, ethic and beliefs are more a part and parcel of my being than I even know. Only when that imprisonment ends will the

oppressed, the black, the poor, the brown, the disabled find the chains which bind them loosened and be given a real beginning.

I am a slave to a male dominated-and-oriented society-and-religion and when the darkness and constriction of that system is lifted, then will women and God be freed from the darkness in which they are being held.

I am a slave to my own selfish interests, wants and desires. I kill conversation by worrying about papers I have to write or books I have to read. I blacken the accomplishments of others by my greed and envy. I am deafened to God's call by the shouts of my own passion. And until I am freed from this bondage to self, until I can live fully in the present God-given moment, my presence will not bring light but darkness to meals, friends, to any situation.

We are all slaves to something, many things, and by our enslavement, we enslave others as well. Opportunity for beginning surrounds us but we sit in our encrusted security, unwilling to begin or give others the chance to begin.

It is into this frozen situation that God, Our Beginning, Our Alpha, comes. God, who sent God's Son to enlighten our darkness and loose our chains, says, "I will take you by the hand. I will put my spirit upon you and you will begin your ministry of new beginnings, of setting prisoners free and being yourself set free."

Every day God calls us to the pilgrimage we began at baptism. We begin again each moment. Even though it seems that we have been around the island of Shikoku so many times, that we have been to all the temples before, God says, "Here, I will take you by the hand, my little beginner, and with my guidance you will see the light and will be a light. I will show you new things, and old things in a new way. Do not be a prisoner to the past, to the way you and I related to one another years ago or yesterday. I take you by the hand today,

now; follow me. You are empowered by my Spirit to be ever beginning so that you can give others new beginnings.

“Do not try to be big stuff. I am the teacher, you are the beginner. Do not expect all the answers, but be glad that I give you the strength to ask and to live the questions which so many prisoners do not dare even to ask. Do not expect security or an easy life either. You were baptized into the death of Jesus Christ and in your life you will know the suffering of that body, given for you. You have no security except to be led by me.

“Sometimes you will fail, you will choose darkness over light, the security of prison over the uncertainty of freedom and beginning, but there is no darkness which is dark to me, no prison which has walls that can keep me from you. For you were baptized into the power of Christ’s resurrection, too, not only into his death. And you share in the wholeness and hope of that resurrected body, given for you.

“I, the eternal beginning, the Alpha, have made you my eternal beginner. Everyday and every moment, I take you by the hand and whatever your darkness and whatever your dungeon, I will help you live fully and freely, open to the present, its teaching, its potential, its meaning. I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness. I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people and a light; I will open your blinded eyes and will free you, a captive, from prison; I will release from the dungeon you who sit in darkness.

“And led by my hand, strengthened by my grace, and called by my Spirit, you will do the same for others. You, my light, will be a light. You, my beginner, will give others new beginnings.”

Amen.

THE LIGHT OF LENT  
*A Lenten homily / March 1985*

The readings we have tonight for the fourth week of Lent are, of course, very familiar to us all. We have here little encapsulations of the gospel. These words, “God loves,” “God sent,” “the light has come into the world,” truly are good news. This is the stuff we Christians are all about, right? Or is it?

If this is true, if we are all about light, love and grace, then what, I wonder, is this fascination we have with Lent? You see, I have this theory that we all really love Lent much more than we admit or even know. We might have a little reservation, some uneasiness, but by and large we would find it okay if it were Lent all the time. Now this feeling has *nothing* to do with what the church is telling us about Lent, that this is a season of preparation, of repentance, that this is the church’s springtime. No, we don’t want our Lent like that.

Rather, we want a Lent of darkness and gloom. That is the way we like it, Those are the associations we usually make. There is something about the darkness, even the agony of the season that calls to us and that allows us to say, “Yes, I recognize this place, I can get along here because I know how this place works. It’s not great, but it’s home.”

We like our Lent dark and dreary because then it leaves us alone in our shadowy isolation. It gives us time to dwell on ourselves, when we don’t have to be so concerned about others, time to wallow a bit in our own darkness, to pretend that we really *do* want to get out of that darkness, which is usually a lie; and, moreover, that even if we did want out, we could do it by ourselves, an even bigger lie.

So here we sit, a people of light, grace and community who still love the darkness and isolation: a people who would rather enumerate sins than repent of them; a people who turn Lent into darkness because if we did not, if we let Lent truly be, it would kill us. It

would *kill* us. If we gave ourselves over fully to God, to Lent and the Light, it would be the death of our darkened selves. This is why we always have some reservation about Lent, why the happy, good news lesson of this evening strikes us as out of place in this supposedly morbid season, because this season and its message could change us – if we let them.

If we let it, Lent would kill our love of sinning, but think of your favorite sin and see how attractive an idea that sounds. Lent would kill all our delusions of self-worth and grandeur. If we really gave ourselves over to Lent, it would drag us, kicking and screaming, like the Israelites in the wilderness, into the promised land of light, and there we would have to leave behind our darkness. We would have to leave behind the darkness we say we hate, because as Christians we ‘ought’ to say we hate it, but really don’t. We would leave behind the darkness we already want to leave but just can’t because of its power, and we would also leave the darkness that we don’t yet know surrounds us.

It is not that we don’t love the light. That is not why we fear the Lent that might be. It is not that we have not heard the good news, that God loved the world *so much* that God sent God’s child. No, the problem is that always between us and the light, between us and Easter morning there stands Good Friday and the cross. Between us and the light, there stands a lot of dying that *we all have to do! There stands the cross upon which we must each hang our favorite sins and pretensions.*

Nailed to the cross are all my excuses about not having enough time, about being too busy, too tired; nailed there are our mumblings about being too old, too young, too middle-aged to grow, to change, to learn; nailed there is any resting place we have on the road to justice and peace. The cross strips us bare and exposes all that we are, all our failings, to the light. And hanging there, naked and afraid, there it is that we truly hear the good news.

“Clothe yourself in the light.” For the light does not demand our perfection, but our presence.

Lent calls us again to the light. Often the light is painful to our unaccustomed eyes. Lovers of the dark, we stand wincing and blinking against the light’s penetrating rays, for the light is restless; it never leaves us be; it does not allow us to pretend that our darkness is something other than darkness, that we don’t have areas in our lives that need change. It draws us out of our isolation into community and connection with our true selves.

The light unfailingly shows us where we must die. Yet beneath the pain and death the light demands in our lives – and the cross is always there – there is an underlying feeling we have of basking in the light’s warm rays, of being alive, nurtured, cared for and truly accepted. The light may never let us be, but it always takes us where we are and loves and envelops us right there.

As people of the Light we freely confess our love of darkness. But darkness is not the last word in our lives. We confess, too, the power of the light, the power to change and transform, a power so great that it makes the cross, the instrument of our death and misery, the instrument also of our healing and our wholeness.

Drawn and empowered by that light, and by that cross, we live our lives.

Amen.

PICK ME! PICK ME!

*Sermon on the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost / October 1985*

*First United Lutheran Church, San Francisco*

*Texts: Isaiah 53:7-12; Mark 10:35-45.*

*(The sermon begins by inviting some children in the congregation to come forward to talk about what it is like to pick teams for games or sporting events at school.)*

“Mark... Christopher... Justin... would you come up here and help me talk about something for a minute? *(The boys come forward and they explore together, “When do you get picked? Who usually gets picked first, and how does that feel? Who often gets picked last, and how does that feel? When do you like to get picked, and why? Did you hear the gospel story today? Does this sound like what James and John were doing?”)*

*To everyone:* I think most of us have been in situations similar to this. Even though we may not think so at first, we are all a bit like James and John. For that is what they wanted too, right? They wanted to play on the team, so they went up to Captain Jesus and started yelling, “Pick me! Pick me!” And they would settle for nothing less than being first round draft picks.

Now, of course, you and I in our “maturity” are much more coy about the whole thing than that. You are not going to catch me jumping up and down, yelling “Pick me! Pick me!” when the solos are being passed around in choir. No way. But you know full well, or at least I know full well, who wants the solo, and who over all those other pitiful singers deserves it most!

We all want to be somebody; and in our world, somebodies get picked first. They get the best seats, the largest offices, and have the power, fame, and position. So when I in my coy and discreet, yet screaming way, sit in choir yelling “Pick me!” I’m not talking about ‘pick me’ for setting up chairs for rehearsal or to be accompanist. There is no glory there.

I'm saying, 'pick me' to be the soloist (or maybe director). 'Pick me' to be the one who gets the applause and attention, the one who bows to the adoring crowd while the accompanist and other choir peons look on in awe and wonder. (Let me just say here that I am very glad this is not a choir Sunday.)

You fill in the blank yourself: "Pick me to \_\_\_\_\_ (play ball, sing, handle the account, be the one you love)." But however we do it, we all, like James and John, want to be somebodies. And so it is to us that Jesus says, if you want to be somebody, be a servant – with me, he says, and among you, as people on the way. (For that is where we are - as John reminded us last week - on the way with Jesus to Jerusalem.) As people on that way we are somebodies when we serve.

So, then, what does this call to servant-hood mean to us 'pick me' people? What keeps us from being on the way with Jesus?

There are, I think, two very different detours or roadblocks that keep us off the way of service. One wrong route is to follow James and John and yell, "Pick me for the good seats, Teacher!" This is the sin of pride, the sin of building oneself up, of inflating self, of trying to be and play God. And for those of us who excel at this sin, and I am one of them, power and position are our ways of being somebody. We want fame, honor and attention; they define who we are, and sometimes we don't wait around to be picked. We are out there pushing and shoving for what we want and need. And to us proud 'pick *ME*' people, Jesus says, "You are asking for the wrong things; you are playing the wrong game. My way is not position and prestige. My way is service, humility, suffering."

In this light, then, the passage from Isaiah gives us 'pick me' people a new vision of how to be somebody. Being somebody with Jesus may mean being a silent sheep, not top dog. It may mean selling all that you have and giving your money to the poor. It does mean

finding your worth, your someone-ness, in being a Child of God on the way with Jesus, and not in being a first round draft pick. It means forgiving the most painful and bitter hurts over and over. It means giving fully and totally of yourself for others.

But, true as all that is, and it is true, it is only half of the story. A sermon that ends urging everyone to be silent sheep is incomplete. For Jesus did not say, “If you want to be somebody, be quiet.” He said, “If you want to be somebody, keep saying ‘Pick me,’ but say ‘Pick me to serve.’”

The other roadblock, then, that I see to the way of service, is the sin of silence, of being and remaining a nobody. The error of those who take this route is not that they seek to lord it over others, but that they let themselves be lorded over. They allow themselves to be invisible nobodies, when God is calling them to be serving somebodies. And if you thought I was good at the ‘pick me’ game, you should see me play this one. “Joel, you should move around more when you preach; loosen up!” And I say, “What do you mean move around more? You mean express myself and let people really *see* who I am? You mean come down from the pulpit or out from behind the lectern – give up this security? No way. I’m staying here, safe and under control.”

David Maitland, the chaplain at my college, once said that the gospels are books for the young. When I read about James and John this morning, I tend to agree and feel very old and tired in comparison. James and John were wrong, but they were at least eager to play the game. And that is just what we sinners of this second type are not. We are hiding. Oh, we pass it off as maturity or coyness, but coy is just a mature word for fear. We say, “Oh, I really didn’t want that solo anyway,” but what we mean is, “I wanted it with all my heart, but was too afraid to ask; afraid I would be turned down or laughed at.” We don’t want to risk anything. We like our safety, security and silence.

It is very interesting, I think, to take Chaplain Maitland's statement and expound a bit upon it, take it one step further. If the sin of *young* James and John is the *youthful* gospel, is a proud 'pick *ME*'-ness, then I think the same sin is the province of straights, whites and men, in general, as well. Just look at who has been lording it over others for the past few centuries. Who are the top dogs in our society and the world? And, by the same token, who are the silent sheep? And who has been lorded over? The elderly, people of color, lesbians and gays, women? And while James and John and the young, straights, the whites and the males are out there playing the game, playing it wrong, of course, but playing, the elderly sit in rest homes, people of color in ghettos, gays and lesbians in closets, and women in the kitchen.

Now, hear what I am saying – it is not sinful to be in the rest home or kitchen, but it is evil and sinful if you fearfully hide in those places, especially in the name of service or humility, or if others fearfully hide you away there, again in the name of service or humility. Ghettos and closets serve the needs of proud, false, somebodies. They do not serve God. The great act of service to which God calls women, blacks, Asian-Americans, gays, and the elderly is to refuse to be nobodies any longer and in being somebody, to be a servant.

I don't know what being a servant will mean in your life, but I do know that Jesus is on the way to serve and calls you to join. And I don't know what sin it is you tend to, whether you play the wrong game or are too scared to play at all. God's way is somewhere in between and I guess that I am just saying what Luther once said, that not every word of God is a word of God *to me*. You know your tendencies. And whatever you do, don't hide behind these categorizations of certain sins for certain groups of people. It was sort of helpful for me, but if it's not for you, then toss it.

Most of us are such good sinners that we can play both games, take both wrong routes at the same time. We can turn our silence into the loudest “Pick *ME!*” imaginable. For all the truth in the groupings – and there is, I think, quite a bit – sin knows no special boundaries. You don’t have to be lesbian to hide in a closet, and you don’t have to be male to seek dominance. You don’t have to be black to live in a ghetto, nor do you have to be young to consider yourself just short of deity. But you can be any color or any age, any orientation or any sex and say to God, “Pick me! Pick me to be your servant.” And then, as you walk on the way of Jesus, you will be somebody.

Amen.

## THE END OF THE WORLD

*Sermon on the Sixth Sunday of Easter / May 1986*

*First United Lutheran Church, San Francisco*

*Texts: Acts 15:1-2, 22-29; Revelation 21: 10, 22-27; John 14: 23-29*

What do you think about the end of the world? Do you think about the end of the world? What will it be like when your system of patterns and habits and schedules comes to an end? We have been reading from the Book of Revelation for many weeks now, but do we really long for the end? Is it something good or something bad, something to be anticipated or dreaded? And when is this end going to come? Will it be soon, far off, or has it already happened? And if it has already happened, what does it mean for us to live after the end or the ending of the world?

“I have a vision,” said John of Patmos in the reading from Revelation, “and I see the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. And there is no temple in that city for its temple is the Lord God. Neither is there any sun there, for its light is the Lamb.” This is John of Patmos’ vision of the end. In the midst of persecution and suffering, he looked forward to a new heaven and a new earth where God will wipe away every tear and there will be no more death and suffering. Pain and hurt will be no more. One day, said John of Patmos, one day.

“I have a dream,” said Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” This is Martin Luther King’s vision of a new creation. In the midst of a nation divided, in the midst of racial strife and hatred, Dr. King yearned for a time of peace, unity and harmony. One day, said King, one day.

And we each have our own dreams and our own hopes too, which are echoed in the visions and expectations of these two men. There will come a day when persons will not die senseless and horrible deaths as a result of terrorism or the response to terrorism. There will come a day when entire nations of people, like the blacks in South Africa and Namibia, will not suffer under the sweltering heat of oppression and death. There will come a day when persons will not sit alone in dark and empty rooms, without friends, without confidence that they are of any worth. There will come a day when the young and the old will laugh and sing and when all of God's children will gather around the great banquet table.

Yes, one day... one day. Our hearts and the prophets cry out, "One day!"

And in the midst of our longing and dreaming we turn to the Gospel of John and we ask, "What is this John's vision of the end? What is this gospel's hope?" There is no holy city coming down from heaven here as there is in Revelation. There are no wars and rumors of wars here as there are in the other gospels. No, when we turn to the Gospel of John for vision and for hope, this is what we hear: "Let not your hearts be troubled. I will not leave you desolate, I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but *you* will see me. Because I live you will live also. My Father and I will come and make our homes in your hearts. And I will pray the Father and he will give you another counselor to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth."

These are the words that Jesus spoke on Maundy Thursday as he gathered together with his disciples one last time. This is Jesus' view of the end of the world, that he would go away for a little while but that the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, would come and make a home within our hearts.

And on the next day, Good Friday, Jesus did go away, to death on the cross. For three days he went the way that so many of our dreams and hopes seem to go, to failure, to a

meaningless and hopeless end, to nothingness. But after three days, the vision rose up victorious, and the risen Lord Jesus went into that locked room, full of frightened and fearful disciples, and breathing on them, said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. This is the end of the world."

Easter is the end of the world. When the Spirit comes, when it blows across your face or when it trickles across your head in the waters of baptism, then it is the end of the world. The holy city, the new Jerusalem has come down out of heaven from God and has made its home in our hearts. Our Temple is God and our light is the Lamb. Our dreams and hopes for the future have appeared in Jesus Christ. By the Spirit, we have what we hoped for.

When will the world end? The world ended on Easter when the Spirit came. It ended when we were baptized and it ends every day as those fresh and flowing waters cascade over us anew, bringing us the Spirit, the new age, the bright and beautiful Jerusalem. And how far off is the end? It is about as far away as our heart.

This is John's vision, and it jolts us. We want to tell John that there seems to be some confusion here. Easter and the Spirit are nice and all, but we are talking about that one day: big bang, Judgment Day, the end of the world. But John says no, that is not the problem. There will be no bigger bang than the coming of the Spirit, that will truly mark an end, or an end-*ing*, of our world. By your response to Jesus, you judge yourself.

Or else we want to tell John how incredible and preposterous his idea is. "Look around, John, this is not the world we have been hoping for. This doesn't match up with our visions at all." But John says, again, that no, that is not the problem. Seeing is not the problem, for faith can see. The Spirit in your heart will show you that this is indeed the end of the world.

The real problem, when it gets right down to it, is not misunderstanding or inability to see. No, the real problem is that there is a part of us that does not want the end of the world. For all our hoping and dreaming, in the face of this outlandish offer of the kingdom, now, we say, "I'd rather wait."

There is that part of each of us that loves Lent and we want to keep the doors locked and Jesus out. We love the darkness, the brooding, the introspection and the last thing that we want is Easter. Sometimes we would rather die than have Easter. For when Easter comes we have to be happy, as if that were some chore, and we would rather sit in our bitterness, pouting and self-pitying, than to let a little forgiveness and joy come in. The darkness of Lent may not be fun, but at least it is familiar. We know the rules of the game, in fact, we have set the rules of the game, and there are no surprises.

We are very much like some of those disciples in today's reading from Acts. We have life in order and know what needs to be done: be circumcised, stay away from idols, be faithful, go to church, give to the United Way, provide for the children. This is how things are to be; it's all very good and very safe and the last thing we want is someone like Paul coming and saying, "No, Easter has changed all that. God has made all things new. Jesus, in his life and rising to new life has broken all the rules. God will not be bound or constricted, for God is God of the Jews and the Gentiles, of slaves and the free, of women and of men, of dreamers and of sleepers, of light and of darkness."

There is no locked room that can keep Jesus out, there is no dark corner of your heart that he does not see, and there is no war-torn place in this world where he is not present. In all these places, Jesus offers Easter, the end of the world. He will not drag us kicking and screaming into the light, but he will break into our darkness and say, "If you die to the old you can live in the new; if you die to selfishness you can rise up to self-giving; if

you die to fear you can rise up in peace and boldness; if you die to hatred and bitterness you can rise up joyful and forgiving; if you die to unbelief you can rise up believing.

And in our believing hearts the Spirit will teach us and call to mind all that Jesus said. As much as the world may preach hatred and violence and despair we will hear the word of peace and will live lives of peace and love. Now, not one day. As much as the world may say fear and safety and security, we will live lives of boldness, risk, light and adventure. Now, not one day, but now. With God's Spirit in our hearts, we live our hopes and dreams and it is for us the end of the world.

Amen.

THOSE PEOPLE  
*Holy Trinity Lutheran Church / 1986*  
*Text: Mark 9:10-17*

"Why in the world," the Pharisees wanted to know, "why in the world, Jesus, are you eating with *those people*? Those tax collectors and sinners, those low-life, those scum of the earth, those dirty, stinky people? Why? Why, with all the fine upstanding, respectable people around, why are you eating with *those people*?"

And Jesus answers back, "Well, it is for those people that God sent me to earth. Yes, it is for those people, the sick and the well, that I came." And the answer makes us wonder: who are the sick people in this story, anyway? Is it the tax collectors and others who are sharing a meal with Jesus? Or is it the Pharisees who so easily discard and disregard *those people*? Are they the sick ones? Or is it a society that so easily refuses and abuses, which writes off others as *those people*? Is it society that's sick?

And while we are asking all of these questions, maybe we need to ask, too, what kind of people are we? Are we outcasts, or are we respectable? Are we *those people*? Who do we think *those people* are? Do *we* live in a society that refuses and abuses, that discards and disregards others as *those people*?

I'm afraid we do. Yes, I think that we do live in a sick world with a sick society, and I think that as Jesus walks about today, he still finds many of *those people* to eat with and to be with. For we live in a world where Blacks and Whites call each other *those people*. We live in a world where in Northern Ireland, Protestants and Catholics call each other *those people*. We live in a world where in Nazi Germany, the Jews, the gypsies, the gays, the lesbians were *those people*. We live in a nation in which slaves from Africa were *those people*, where during WWII

Japanese-Americans were *those people*, where racist, homophobic people still think of others as *those people*.

Our Gospel lesson for today is not an old story. It is as recent as today's news. The Pope meets with Lech Walensa and the cry goes up: "What are you meeting with *those people* for?" Andrew Young meets with Palestinians and the cry goes up: "What are you meeting with *those people* for?"

I want to share with you this morning some of my recent experiences with a group of *those people*, some modern day tax collectors and sinners, some of *those people* who are refused and abused, discarded and disregarded.

Most interns here at Holy Trinity are a part of the LA Metro Ministry program, and as part our internship year we are required to do a special project. For my project this year, I wanted an experience in hospital ministry, so with the help of the Protestant chaplain at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, I spent one day a week during March and April at CSMC as a volunteer chaplain.

It was there at the hospital that I for the first time met a PWA. As I found out, the red sign on the door that said "Blood and Fluid Precaution" was a pretty good clue of a PWA, and most every week at the hospital as I visited, I saw the red signs and talked with several PWA's. PWA's have an, as-of-yet, incurable disease. They can expect to live maybe for months, maybe a few years. Bad news. Difficult news. Many are young, in their twenties, thirties, or forties, which make the illness and dying all the more tragic. But one of the worst things about being a PWA, it seems, is not just that they are dying, but that they are made to feel like *those people*. The red signs make them out as one of *those people*. Often, members of the hospital staff would have so many caps, gowns, and gloves on when entering the room of a PWA that it would look like they were going for a moonwalk. At

times, food was left out in the hall, and I was the one who took lunch or dinner into the PWA. The PWA's are treated like they are contaminated, dirty.

Many PWA's can't tell family or friends that they're ill. How do you tell your mother, father, brother or sister that you are one of *those people*? And of those that did tell, the stories of rejection were often as frequent as the stories of acceptance. Fathers rejecting sons, couples breaking up, friends abandoning friends. So there the PWA sits, discarded and disregarded, abused and refused by society as one of *those people*.

So have you figured out yet what a PWA is? A PWA is a person with AIDS. That's what most people who have AIDS want to be called, not AIDS victims, but PWA. Persons With AIDS. And if there are any people in the world today that are outcast, that are sick, that are thought of as *those people*, it is PWAs.

I know we hear a lot about AIDS these days on TV and in the newspapers, but I want to take time to say just a few things of my own. Maybe someone will disagree with some of the things I have to say, and that's all right.

First, I want to say that God hates AIDS. God hates the suffering, the dying, the agony and loss that AIDS causes, just as God hated the disease, death and blindness and suffering of Jesus' time. God hates it. God does not cause AIDS, nor is AIDS God's judgment or punishment on anyone. There is no one in this church whose life is immune from tragedy – death, hardships, sorrows, maybe AIDS – bad and horrible things happen to us all, but this does not mean that God is punishing us with each bad thing that happens. We live in a fallen world. Bad things happen - to good and to bad people. Good things happen - to bad and to good people. God can maybe use the bad, can turn it into good, but God still hates it and does not cause it. The God who came to earth to be with the sick and

outcast, to give sight to the blind, and to set the prisoner free, who came to wipe away every tear from our eyes - this God is not up in heaven zapping *those people* with illness.

AIDS is caused by a virus, a virus which cares nothing for the sex, the color, the age, the economic status, the marital status, the moral status, the abilities, the religion, or the sexual orientation of the person it infects. I mean, if AIDS is God's judgment on gay people, like some would have us believe, then we would at least have to say that God is a pretty poor aim because there are more straight people with AIDS than gay people with AIDS. And why, I would like to know, are there so many babies dead with AIDS right here in Los Angeles? No, AIDS is not God's project. God hates AIDS. God came to earth to heal, not to hurt; to live, not to judge; to be with *those* people and to make us *all* God's people.

Let me just ask, "How many people here today know a PWA?" Well, the sad fact is that it is just a matter of time. After meeting PWAs at the hospital, I did some checking with AIDS Project Los Angeles and some of the statistics I found were amazing. It is fairly common knowledge that AIDS is decimating the gay community.

But it is also a fact that one out of every four PWAs is Black. While persons of color make up 20% of the whole US population, they make up 40% of the AIDS population. And of the 400 babies that died of AIDS in Los Angeles last year, every one of those babies was a baby of color. Nearly every woman with AIDS is a woman of color. Who - who are *those people*? This is not somebody else's problem. This is *our* problem.

A fairly common reaction to AIDS is fear. We don't want it; we don't want to be around anyone who has it. The PWAs at the hospital get that message loud and clear. But I don't want us to be afraid this morning. Oh, we better be concerned and careful, but we need not be afraid because, while anyone can get AIDS, no one need get AIDS. We know

how AIDS is transferred, and we know what things have to be done to come into contact with the AIDS virus. You get the virus only by willingly agreeing to have risky sex or sharing needles with someone. The only exception is babies, whose mothers have AIDS, or people who are infected by blood transfusion.

So what does this all mean? Well, I think it means a number of things. First, it means that we do not need to be afraid. PWAs are not people to be afraid of. PWAs are no danger to us. Only we put ourselves at risk. We don't have to be afraid at work, at school, in stores, in restaurants, or when we go to the Red Cross to give blood. We don't have to be afraid when we go the hospital and see the red sign on the door. And we don't have to be afraid if our friends tell us they have AIDS. We don't need to run away. We can, we *must* stay with them, eat with them, just as Jesus ate with *those people* in the lesson today.

Now I am going to get fairly political, but I've been here about a year, and I figure I get to say one political thing. The fact that we think we can cut the risk of AIDS by quarantining or isolating PWAs is nonsense. PWAs are not a threat and I know that in the next election we will vote on this issue - again - just as in the last election. And I am sure not a single public health official will support it. Quarantining is the over-reaction of frightened and ignorant people. Only a sick society would favor putting PWAs in quarantine. If in no other way, we will all be affected by AIDS at the voting booth and I hope we vote out of love, not out of fear.

Now I know that many people in this room know what it is like to be one of *those people*. Some of you know what it is like to be stared at in stores and restaurants because you are different. Some of you know what it is like to be discarded and disregarded at work, overlooked for a promotion because you are one of *those people*. But it seems to me many of us have also experienced that when the world rejects, God accepts. Because we know we

have the love of a God who will not refuse or abuse, discard or disregard. Others may have left us, but God is with us. Others may say no, but God says yes. Others may say, "You are one of *those people*," but God says, "You are one of *my people*."

What Jesus says is this - that God came to earth to be with *those people*, the outcasts and the discarded. And since that is so, then let us each say this: "Lord, let me be one of *those people*. Let me be one of *those people* who love too much. Let me be one of *those people* who sits with and eats with the refused and abused. Let me be one of *those people* who knows that perfect love casts out all fear. Let me be one of *those people* who knows that 'in Christ there is no east or west, no north or south, but one great fellowship of love, close binding humankind.' Yes, Lord, make me one of *those people*. I have been refused by the world, now let me be infused by your love."

Amen.

## YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN THERE

*Sermon on the Second Sunday of Easter / April 1987*

*Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Inglewood, CA*

*Texts: Acts 2:14a, 22-32; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31*

*(This sermon was given in the spring of 1987. Joel revisits the theme later in the year, after attending the National March on Washington. See "Oh, You Should Have Been There! – Reflections on AIDS, The Quilt and John 20" also contained in this collection.)*

Is there anyone here today who was not with us here at Holy Trinity last week? Could you raise your hands, all of you who were not with us a week ago, on Easter Sunday? – Oh, you should have been here. It was great! The church was filled up to the balcony. I mean at ten-thirty we had enough people here to have church, not ten-forty, not ten-fifty, but we had a church full of people on time last Sunday. And when Fred started playing the organ for the opening hymn, and when music filled the air singing "Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!", and when Tammy walked down the aisle with the new banner held high up in the air, oh, it was a sight to see and to hear.

You should have been here! It gives me goose bumps just to think of it. The choir sang, Roger sang, we all sang. The preacher preached. We received three sisters in Christ into our family. Oh, it was a fine time. You should have been here. God was here last Sunday. Yes, God was here, right in this very place. You could feel it, see it, you could almost touch it. It was something.

Oh, you should have been here!

And you know, that is just what the other disciples said to Thomas after they had seen Jesus on that first Easter evening. "Oh, Thomas, you should have been there! We have seen the Lord." Yes, I have an idea that is probably just what they said. "Thomas, you should have been there. Thomas, you have never been on time for a meeting in your life, but this time you really missed one. Jesus, the Lord, we saw the Lord. We were all there, locked

away, huddled and scared, and suddenly there he was, live and in the flesh, right there with us. We touched him, his hands and side. Oh, Thomas, you should have been there. We get goose bumps just talking about it. And he spoke to us, Thomas, he said, “Peace be with you,” and our hearts burst for joy. Before he came we had never been so scared, but after he was there, we have never been so at peace. Oh, Thomas, you should have been there.”

Yes, it seems to me that that is probably just what the other disciples said to Thomas the next time they saw him. “You should have been there. We have seen the Lord.”

And then Thomas was faced with a choice. He wanted to believe it. Yes, he wanted for all the world to believe what his friends said was true. He would have loved to have been the first person to believe without seeing, the first to come to faith on the basis of another’s story and witness. He wanted to believe that his teacher and friend, Jesus, was back, the person he loved and trusted so much. But Thomas just couldn’t do it. As much as he wanted to believe the news, as much as he wanted to believe those who told him, “You should have been there,” he had some doubts that made him hesitate. Something held him back.

And maybe those of you who were not at our church last week have some doubts too. ‘Was it really that great?’ you’d like to know. But before we get to those doubts, let’s first look a little closer at Thomas.

If we turn again to the gospel lesson for today in John 20, the question we need to answer is, “What seems to be the stumbling block for Thomas? What is it that he has doubts about? What is it that he needs further evidence of before he is convinced that the disciples really did see the Lord?”

Now, usually, I think, we assume that Thomas had doubts about whether or not a dead person could be alive again. Very often, we think that it was hard for Thomas to comprehend the fact that someone had risen from the dead. And it is an amazing thing that

someone who was dead, really dead, after three days, is alive again. And so we make Thomas out to be someone who questions the whole idea of resurrection from the dead, who doubts if this is really a possibility.

But I am not so sure that this is exactly what Thomas' problem is. You see, belief in the resurrection of the dead was not unusual during the time of Jesus. All the Pharisees believed that the dead would be raised. And if we turn back in the gospel of John to chapter 11, verse 23, we get an example of this belief. Lazarus has died and Jesus has finally come, days late, and as he talks to Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters, what does he say to them in verse 23? "Your brother will rise." Yes, there is life after death. And how does Martha respond? "Oh, I know that."

So it was a commonly held belief among some that there would be a resurrection of the dead and so it is not necessarily the case that Thomas has doubts about the possibility or concept of resurrection. When the disciples tell Thomas that they have seen Jesus, Thomas does not simply want evidence that Jesus is alive. Thomas does not say, "Unless I feel a pulse, I will not believe." He does not say, "Unless I see him breathing, exhaling and inhaling, I will not believe." He does not say, "Unless I see him eat and drink, I will not believe." "Unless I hear his voice, I will not believe." Any one of these things would be proof that Jesus was alive, but Thomas doesn't demand any of them. What is it that he asks for? "Unless I place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Thomas wanted to see the scars, the wounds. Thomas didn't need convincing that Jesus was simply alive, he didn't ask for proof of that. No, Thomas wanted proof that the wounded one was the risen one. He wanted proof that the crucified one was also Lord and Savior. Oh, his friends could say, "Thomas, you should have been there. We have seen the

Lord.” But all Thomas knew was that the last time *he* had seen Jesus, Jesus was hanging there on the tree. The last time Thomas had seen Jesus, Jesus’ body was wracked with pain; he was hanging there abandoned, alone, bleeding, forsaken, wounded and dying.

And now they were trying to tell him that this one is also Savior of the world.

Thomas had to hesitate; he had some doubts. Can that wounded one be the Lord? What does The Messiah have to do with the cross? What does the risen Savior have to do with pain, suffering and death? “Show me the wounds,” said Thomas, “prove to me that I have a wounded Savior, a suffering Lord.”

And if we have any Thomases here with us today, any Thomases who were not with us last week who hear our words, “Oh, you should have been here,” I expect that their reply back to us might be, “Here? All that great stuff happened here? I mean, you make it sound like you were at the Crystal Cathedral or something, and the last time I looked,” this is what that doubting Thomas would say, “the last time I looked, Holy Trinity was no Crystal Cathedral.”

There were not bright television lights. There were not thousands of people on the membership rolls. There was not millions of dollars in offerings coming in. No, the last time I looked, Holy Trinity was a fairly average, ordinary, human place, filled with average, ordinary, human people. The place has drains that back up, a door in the balcony that will as soon fall on top of you as open, and floors rotting away. The people get into fights, big and small. They carry grudges. They can only get one person to serve on the Service Committee. They can sometimes barely get enough people to sign up for coffee hour. They occasionally engage in a little underhanded or sly activity. They have their addictions, big and small. And you’re trying to tell me you had this great, almost heavenly experience here last week? Well, I

have my doubts about that. What does God have to do with all these ordinary, frail people? What does this average, ordinary place have to do with the risen Savior?

Yes, that is what a Thomas would want to know if he, or she, were here today and we said, “Oh, Thomas, you should have been here.”

Or maybe it's not last week that we tell Thomas about. Maybe instead someone happens to tell Thomas about the great civil rights movement of the '60's. “Oh, Thomas,” they would say, “I wish you could have been there. We could see the very hand of God at work in history, working to free entire groups of people, to lift them out of their oppression and subjugation and despair; to stand up tall and proud, with pride and dignity and hope. Oh, just to think about it gives me goose bumps. Oh, Thomas, the marches, the singing, the speeches, the feeling, you should have been there.”

And then the answer comes back from Thomas, doubting Thomas: “Well, I would like to believe you, but from what I have heard and recall of the '60s and those times, there was more attention paid to the water cannons, the burning cars and the police dogs than there was to the hand of God. There were beatings, killings, riots. That's what I recall. Much of the whole thing was led by a man who seemed to spend as much time in jail as out of jail. He was breaking laws and getting into all kinds of trouble. And I want to believe what you say, but I just have to know, what does the mighty hand of God have to do with gunshots and billy clubs? What does a criminal record have to do with being a servant of the living Lord?”

Thomas asks some pretty hard questions. And maybe we ask them sometimes, too. What does God have to do with pain and suffering? How is the living Savior connected with our community, with us human beings who are so frail and fallible? What is God's

relationship to those who are beaten, outcast, frowned upon, illegal? Sometimes the connections, the relationships, are not so clear; sometimes we hesitate and have doubts.

I remember my first communion Sunday here at Holy Trinity. We sang, as we always do, our songs during communion, and there is one (you remember it) that goes, “There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel’s veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains.” Well, by the end of the first verse, I had turned into a pretty major doubting Thomas. ‘What is this?’ I thought. “This sounds like a song for the Red Cross Blood Bank. What a really grim and gruesome picture, the fountain in front of the LA Hilton filled with blood. Hadn’t the writer of the song heard that Jesus was alive? Didn’t we all know that Jesus rose from the dead? What is all this focus on the cross, the dying, the blood? What does all this pain and suffering have to do with God? Indeed – what *does* all this pain and suffering have to do with God?”

Well, I’m still singing that hymn. And it seems to me that those of us who sing answer those questions of Thomas by saying that God has, in a sense, everything to do with pain and with suffering. Yes, we who sing of the cross, of the blood, of the wounds, we sing because we are not doubting Thomases but believing Thomases and we believe that if there is anywhere that God is revealed, if there is anywhere that the love and mercy of God are made known, it is in the suffering and agony of the cross. And if anywhere the power of God is made known and revealed, it is in the resurrection. We believing Thomases confess that Jesus is our Lord and our God, and we believe that the crucified one is the Lord and that the wounded one is God, for there is but one God and that one God bled and died for you and for me.

The cross for us is not a reason to doubt but a reason to believe. The cross, the wounds, the scars are a testimony to the endless love of God who endured all for our

salvation. How does the hymn go? “Oh, how I love Jesus, Oh, how I love Jesus, Oh, how I love Jesus,” and why? “Because he first loved me,” and the cross is testimony to that love. The wounds of Jesus are witness to his obedience and trust in God, a sign of his perfect submission to the will and way of the one he called Father. Yes, we believe that the Jesus whom we love, he is the risen one, but he is the scarred one too. He is a wounded savior. We have a suffering God.

And so, when we believing Thomases look around the world at events like the civil rights movement, we know that if God was present anywhere, it was with those people who were being beaten and hurt. We believe that the jailings, the arrests, the blows were not signs of being forsaken by God but rather of being followers of God.

And we believing Thomases know that the criminal record of Dr. Martin Luther King and the abuse and hardship which he underwent are testimony not to his having faltered, but to his having remained faithful.

Yes, and we believing Thomases, we can say that we have seen the Lord. In mighty ways and lowly ways, in the cross and in the resurrection, we have seen the Lord. And we can say to the world, “Oh, you should have been here. Yes, you should have been here. We saw Jesus. We have seen the Lord.”

And I’m so glad that those of you who weren’t at our church last Sunday are here today, because, you know what, and this is the thing I really want to tell you: Jesus is here today, too. Just like last week, Jesus is here today, too. And if you listen very carefully when we share the peace, if you listen very carefully, you will hear Jesus say, “Peace be with you.” Yes, if you pay real close attention as you hug or shake hands with the persons around you, you will feel Jesus say, “Peace be with you.”

And then, with Thomas, you can say, too, “My Lord and my God.”

And, then, we can all go from here and tell the world, “Oh, you should have been here!”

Amen.

THE INSTALLATION OF PASTOR JEFF JOHNSON  
Sermon on the Third Sunday After Epiphany / January 1990  
First United Lutheran Church, San Francisco  
Text: Matthew 4:12 – 23

*(This sermon was preached at the installation of Jeff Johnson, following his extraordinary ordination, along with Ruth Frost and Phyllis Zillbart, on the previous day. Joel preached without a manuscript. This is a transcript of his sermon with some editorial adjustments.)*

We are here today to embark on a great adventure. It is an adventure, as Lynn Siegel said to me yesterday, that's a long time coming. Centuries in coming. And as I was trying to recall - and maybe you can comment on this, Jeff - when I first heard word about these ordinations, it was last summer and the tentative date was Reformation Day. And if we had been gathered here on Reformation Day, our theme would have been courage, renewal, and we would have used phrases like "Here we stand." We would have celebrated the radical Gospel heritage that is ours as Lutherans, as heirs of Martin Luther. But the ordinations didn't happen on Reformation.

The next time that would have come around would have been Advent, the four Sundays before Christmas. If we had been gathered here on Advent, our theme would have been hope and expectation and repentance. We would have celebrated a foretaste, a little sneak preview in these events, of what the future of the Church would be like. Because what's going on here is God's future for the church. But the ordinations didn't happen in Advent.

They didn't happen during Christmas when we would have celebrated incarnation.

But yesterday - at last - on the second Saturday after Epiphany, it happened. And today, on the third Sunday after Epiphany, we are here and our theme is light and darkness. This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine!

Today we celebrate the Epiphany, the manifestation, the appearance, the coming out of God and God's light into the world. If ever there was a sign of God's love breaking in on our often dark horizons, certainly that explosion of light yesterday and the events of this whole weekend are signs of that. And if I can be allowed this paraphrase of the national anthem, what's going on here is like a bomb bursting in air, giving proof through our long dark night that our God is still there!

As we gather here, our text for today is Matthew's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the beginning of God's coming out into the world, God's light coming to us in the person and the actions of Jesus. We are here to celebrate and remember another ministry which is beginning: the ministry of Jeff at this church. That, too, is a sign, an appearance, an epiphany in anticipation of God's light into the world.

But before I go on and make grand and glorious comparisons between Jeff and Jesus - which *is* why he asked me here today - we need to take a cue from our text and start out with something a little more sobering.

"Having heard that John had been arrested..." That's how, according to Matthew, the story of Jesus and his ministry begins.

Now I will grant you that John is not a major character in this story in our Gospel text today. But he's there, and it seems for some reason that Matthew thinks it's important for us to know that while Jesus is beginning his ministry of light, John is sitting in the darkness. For some reason, Matthew thinks it's important that we know that, while the prophecies of Isaiah are being fulfilled, and while Zebulun and Naphtali are basking in God's glorious light, John has been arrested and is in prison. The significance of this is not really clear.

But let me suggest this: John, for Matthew, was the last of the great ones. And like the great prophets, like Isaiah and his prophecy of light shining in the darkness, John

pointed to someone else. He pointed beyond himself to another - to Jesus. To the Light. That's what John did. That's what all great prophets do.

But as the last of the great prophets, John was in some ways the end of an era. Something was coming to a close while something new was beginning, and the arrest of John signals for Matthew the end of the old, and a new beginning with Jesus the Light coming into the world.

Let me also suggest that for us here today, John is Matthew's reminder to us of the men and women who have gone before and pointed beyond themselves to this very day. John is a symbol for us of the men and the women, the gays and the lesbians, the clergy and the laity - and I am so bold to count Jim Lancaster and myself among them - who have pointed ahead to this day.

Having quoted from one national anthem, now let me read to you some lyrics which some have called the Black national anthem:

*We have come over a way that with tears has been watered.  
We have come treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered.  
Out from the gloomy past, till we now stand at last,  
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.*

These words bring us back to light. But remember John. He'll be back later.

So - Jesus and Jeff. (We talked about the other J, and that was John.) Now this story from Matthew - parts of it make sense, but there are parts of it that are hard for us to relate to. The stuff about the prophecy being fulfilled and the Light coming into the world, we can all sort of relate to that. We know what it's like to be in darkness and to have revelations and to have God break into that. And we know what this Gospel of the realm of the kingdom is, because that's what we preach. That's what ministry is about. That's what Jeff's ministry is about, and this congregation's ministry, and LLGM, and the ministry of all God's people. Our ministry is about preaching the Good News of the realm of heaven.

But then there is this stuff about “Follow me.” I think there’s something about that that doesn’t always jibe with our everyday experience. “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of women and men.” That’s what Jesus says to Peter, Andrew, James and John. He comes out of the desert, walks down to the Sea of Galilee, says twelve words, and they up and follow him, right? Twelve words, and they up and leave their jobs, their livelihood, their family, their friends, and up and follow Jesus! It just seems a little improbable to me. A little strange - let alone something we can relate to.

Imagine you’re out in front of your little coffee shop in the Castro sweeping the sidewalks and this guy walks by and says, “Follow me, and I will make you a sweeper of women and men.” You’d think that’s a little odd, right? I mean, if you actually dropped your broom and went after him, and left your business and your home and your family behind, I’d think you’re a little strange too! Like I said, it’s hard enough to believe, let alone relate to.

This guy, just out of seminary, comes along and says, “Follow me,” and we will establish a Lutheran ministry of, by, and for gay and lesbian people. Now I admit it’s more than twelve words later, but I stand here today in front of a congregation which has up and followed. I stand here today in front of a congregation which has left the order and the rules behind, which has left harmonious relations with fellow Lutheran congregations behind, and up and followed. I stand here today in front of a congregation which is united with people, many of them here from across the country who have committed their energies, their monies, their very lives and security to this idea, this thing which we call LLGM - people who today installed as their pastor this strangely ordained guy into this strange ministry that is going to make it by a wink and a prayer, that is tenuous at best. But here we are, and we’re doing it. And I thought that Peter, Andrew, James and John were weird!

But their story is not a strange story. Their story is *our* story. The Light has come into the world, and we, the people of Light, are addressed by the Light: "Follow me." So like Peter, Andrew, James and John, we up and we follow and we preach the Gospel of the realm of the kingdom.

A few weeks or months after John was imprisoned, he sent some of his disciples to Jesus (I told you that John would be back) and they had a question for him. They asked him this: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk. Lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear. The dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me."

Jim and I are headed back to LA tonight. But in a few weeks, or months, or a year, we'll call or we'll write or we'll come up, and we'll ask someone, "So is this the one, or should we look for another? Is this God's light breaking into the world, or should we look for another?" So tell Jim, tell Joel, tell John what you hear and see. In fact, I hear that there is a representative of the bishop's office here today, you don't have to identify yourself, but you can tell that fox, too!

Tell him that the Lutheran churches are filled to the brim. Tell him that we're preaching the Gospel to gay and lesbian people and to all God's people. Tell him that light is exploding in the Lutheran church across the country. Tell him that on Reformation Day we will stand and say, "Here we stand. We can do no other." Tell him that during Advent, we will celebrate this breaking into the world, this foretaste of God's future. Tell him that during Epiphany, we, the people of the Light, will burst forth from darkness. Tell him that during Lent we will follow that Light no matter what the cost, *no matter what the cost*. Tell

him that during Easter, we know that that Light will burst out of that closet, the tomb, and will shine stronger and brighter than ever, and nothing, nothing, *nothing* will stop that Light. Tell him that all of God's people are gathered around this great welcome table!

There's an old hymn that I learned from God's people down in Inglewood at Holy Trinity, and it goes,

*I have decided to follow Jesus!  
No turning back, no turning back!*

So you tell John, Jim, Joel, and the bishop. You tell the world that we have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back.

Amen.

## WE ARE ALL GOD'S CHILDREN

*Acts 10 & 11 (Selected Verses)*

*(Joel Workin died on November 30, 1995. The following is the sermon text delivered by Bishop Paul W. Egertson at Joel's memorial service on December 2, 1995 at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, North Hollywood, CA.)*

Joel was a good preacher and if our church had been up to the challenge of ordaining him, he would have become a great one. As I said from this pulpit one Sunday when he was here about three years ago, the sermon he preached at Jeff Johnson's installation as Pastor of First United in San Francisco was the best I had heard in ten years. The weaving together of text and context on that occasion was stunning. I wonder how he would have dealt with this occasion.

We can get some idea of what he would have done from the gospel he selected. It is not from one of the gospels, but from the book of Acts. It is the story of that odd couple, Peter and Cornelius, whose unlikely encounter with each other forms the heart and axis of the New Testament book of Acts. The gospel according to Acts focuses less on *what* the gospel is than on *who* the gospel is for. The brief summary of its message is this: *The gospel is for ALL people, specifically including those classes of people our own religious tradition has taught us to exclude.*

The gospel writer Luke, also wrote Acts. He makes his main point in a story so crucial to his message that he tells it twice in a row so that those who miss it the first time might catch it the second time around. Its main outline is familiar to most of you. Peter is laying out, getting a tan on the roof of a house in Joppa, on the Mediterranean coast. Suddenly a sheet drops down from heaven containing all kinds of animals, including those that Jews are forbidden to eat by the 11th chapter of the book of Leviticus. A voice tells

Peter to reach in, take any one of these animals and roast it for lunch. Peter just knows this is a temptation to be unfaithful to God, so he draws on a lifetime of religious training and resists, saying: *I have never eaten anything unclean.* To which the voice responded: *Don't you call unclean what I call clean.*

Now Peter may have been a good fisherman but he was a slow learner on this matter. So are the readers of Acts, even to this day. That's why the vision and its lesson are repeated three times for Peter and for us. It's called learning by rote. You remember the drill: several repetitions of *Don't you call unclean what I call clean; Don't you call unclean what I call clean; Don't you call unclean what I call clean! Get it? Got it! Good!* But Peter only got the literal half of it: *In Christ, there are no longer prohibitions about what animals you can and can't eat.*

Then the doorbell rings and when Peter opens it he finds some Roman Soldiers standing there who want him to come and share the gospel with their Captain. These are not Jews, but unclean Gentiles. Jews do not enter the houses of Gentiles or eat with them. Suddenly an explosion goes off in Peter's mind and he gets the whole point big time! God isn't changing my mind only about what *animals* I can and can't eat; God is changing my mind about what *people* I can and can't eat with! *Get it? Got it. Good!*

Now Peter may be a slow learner but he is not stupid. He is about to violate traditional ecclesiastical practices, so he takes six witnesses along with him. When he gets to the house of Cornelius, he acts in contradiction to his own religious conditioning and enters the house of a Gentile and begins sharing the gospel of Jesus. He has no more than started when the wind and the flame from his own Pentecost experience is repeated. God baptizes Cornelius with the Holy Spirit. What can this mean? Only the unthinkable. *God shows no partiality between peoples.* All are accepted into the church. Even those our own religion has taught us not to accept. The question is clear: If God has baptized Gentiles with the Holy

Spirit, what is there to prohibit us from baptizing them with water and thereby admitting them into the church? Answer: *Nothing! Get it? Got it! Good!* So Cornelius and his whole household are baptized and the rest, as they say, is history.

Or is it? Is the acceptance of everyone into the full fellowship and service of the church a done deed? Or are there still classes of people our religious training teaches us to exclude, unless they become different from who they are? That was the second question Peter and those first Christians had to face. After gulping hard, the church could swallow the baptism of Gentiles so long as they became Jews as well as Christians. In other words, you couldn't be Christian and remain Gentile. You were welcome to be Christian, but if you were Gentile you had to change. Or at least try! It was that second question they fought out at the first Council of the Church in Jerusalem. The decision was that you *could* be both Christian and Gentile at the same time. *Get it? Got it! Good!*

I've taken time to spell this out because this message is at the center of the legacy Joel leaves us. I know that for three reasons. First, as already indicated, I know it from the text he chose for our reading. But second, I know it from an incident that happened during the night before he died. I'm told that Carmen, his hospice nurse, was sitting up with him while he slept through the night. Suddenly he spoke aloud, saying: *We are all God's children, aren't we?* Then after a period of silence, he said: *Can I hear a Yes or Amen to that?* It was vintage Joel, in both content and form. That is his message to us.

I also know this is his message for a third reason. Joel carried the burden of this news in his heart because he knew so many needed to hear it. Gay and lesbian people like himself, who feel excluded by the church because of our own religious traditions, need to know that another part of that tradition includes the recognition that God's voice is sometimes heard in contradiction to the church's voice. On the other hand, the church

needs to hear that too, so that it might respond to what it regularly prays God to do for the church: *where it is in error, correct it.*

His concern for this message was clear in a devotional he wrote in 1988 on the parable of the Prodigal child. When the church relates that story to the gay/lesbian population, it usually understands it to mean that homosexuals are those who have left their heterosexual homes for a life in the far country of deviance. The church, like the waiting father, is eager for them to come home and will welcome them if they come to their senses and return to heterosexuality. Joel read the story in a quite different way.

For him, the church has left its gospel home-position of accepting *all* people and wandered into the far country of homophobia. But that does not mean we should give up on this church. He sees gay/lesbian Christians as the loving ones, waiting to welcome a wandering church home when it comes to its senses. He writes to encourage us to do so. He says,

*How shall waiting lesbians and gays view their relationship with the church? There has been a break, a resounding “no” from much of the prodigal church to any form of partnership or familial bond, but is it No. (period) or “No- (dash)? No. period means that the relationship is over. It is dead, period. Go back inside the house and stop worrying about the ungrateful kid. No- dash, on the other hand, means the relationship is incomplete. There is more to be said after the dash, no matter how long the intervening silence. No- dash means believing, hoping and trusting that the prodigal will come home. It means waiting for the church to “come to its senses.”*

This was a courageous thing for a young man to say who, at the hands of the church, had just been denied ordination into the ministry to which he was called by God and for which he had educationally prepared himself. But even though the church hasn't got it yet, he still encourages us to wait in love. I quote: *Love puts a dash behind every NO. period and waits.*

*For gay Christians, God's love is the power of punctuation, the power to turn NO. period into NO- dash and to wait expectantly for words of reconciliation. The parable . . . says "Hope, believe, wait, love. There is more to be said. This show is not over yet. Just you wait."*

We can hear in these words, even in the midst of personal hurt, the sense of mission Joel lived out in his life and that is what we celebrate here today. The God of grace we know in the gospel had captured his heart and his mind in a way even personal hurt could not take away. It flowed out of the vision he had of a God who accepts all as children in the household of faith. In his Certification for Ordination Exam he wrote this:

*The kingdom is the destiny of the whole cosmos, the big party God is planning and to which everyone is invited. It is the fulfillment of all those great scripture passages: the lion laying down with the lamb; death being swallowed up; the lame leaping; no more war anymore. Even if it kills God (and it did, the cross), even if it kills us (and it does, baptism), somehow God is going to get everybody to that big banquet feast (resurrection, the kingdom, new life). I want to continue to be a messenger and means of God's invitation, to share the good news of God's "Yes," to live a courageous and comforting life of faith, to incarnate Christ and the kingdom, for my neighbor, to die and rise daily. This is my "mission".*

Some years ago Joel quoted those words in a letter to a friend. Two weeks ago, the friend quoted them back to Joel in a good-bye letter, saying: *"I thank you for these inspiring words. May you find satisfaction now in having accomplished that mission in a significant way . . . May your leave-taking now itself be a part of the mission."* In this message Joel has left us, his leave-taking has been a part of his mission. Let us let him say it to us again: *Hope, believe, wait, love. There is more to be said. This show is not over yet. Just you wait.* The only thing left for us to do is answer his rhetorical question with a loud *Amen*. So let's do it. *We are all God's children, aren't we?* And all the people said: *Amen!*

## LEGACY STATEMENT

*Rev. James E Boline  
St. Paul's, ELCA, Santa Monica, CA*

*This life, therefore,  
is not health but getting well,  
not being but becoming,  
not rest but exercise.*

*We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way.  
- Martin Luther*

Like God's Word for us, Joel Workin's journey was a lamp to my feet and a light for my path as I came out on the voting floor of the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in August of 2005. Although I never had the privilege of crossing paths with Joel, we had journeyed in some common places: upper midwest roots, a move to Hollywood, involvement in Lutherans Concerned/Los Angeles, and the Southwest California Synod. I learned only recently that Joel even taught some adult education classes and preached some sermons right here at St. Paul's in Santa Monica! By the time I felt the Spirit's shove to come out in that national setting, Joel's earthly sojourn had ended. Nonetheless, I like to think he was cheering me on from the heaven's grandstands or, as Joel's friends say elsewhere in this book, that, via the blest communion of saints, "his hand was upon me." I also have a hunch he might have asked, "What took you so long, Boline?" To which I might have replied, "Because I lacked your courage, Joel" and in Sinatra style, "I did it my way."

Growing up Workin and growing up Boline, I imagine, were in many ways similar: both dutiful sons of our parents and of mother church, both born and bred Dakotan (Joel from North, and me from South), both trying to figure out what being gay meant in a time when (1970s) and a place where (rural America) that was going to have to be covert at best. In my case, it was unthinkable until after I had been ordained (1989) served my first parish in

the Southeastern Minnesota Synod (1989-92) and headed to Yale University Divinity School's Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts to quietly discern whether I was called to be a musical pastor or a pastoral musician. My intention was to do this in a good Lutheran manner: quietly and methodically.

But it got messy. After being out and proud at Yale, I went back "in" (to a degree) in order to secure a call in the ELCA again. Did I hear the rooster crow? A number of times. However we did it, we all paid a price. Joel did. I did. The church did. Fast forward: secure a call I did; two, in fact. But not without the Holy Spirit working through an errant church and one bold bishop, Joel's former pastor at St. Matthew's, North Hollywood, The Rev. Dr. Paul Wennes Egertson. Without Bishop Egertson's vision of a church that lived its own theology and his strategy of "plausible deniability" (there's that old rooster crowing again), I could not have served the ELCA as a pastor during those intervening years.

Then, in the summer of 2005, five years into the call at St. Paul's, Santa Monica and after having seen the Broadway musical "Wicked," I was ready to "defy gravity" in the ELCA. It was a "Queer Epiphany," as Joel describes the liturgical season of the continual comings out of God in Christ to the world. Leave it to a gay man to find divine revelation in a Broadway musical, but that's exactly how it happened – just ask my husband Christopher who sat beside me as I wept through the entire second half of the show. As I sat and watched this modern morality play of perception and insider-/outsiderness unfold, it was no longer the rooster's crow I heard but instead the profound voice of the Holy One thundering through the medium of theater.

And so I came out -- before the entire ELCA Churchwide Assembly on a hot August afternoon in Orlando, with the support of my beloved congregation, my remarkable

bishop The Rev. Dean Wesley Nelson, and the majority of my fellow voting members from the Southwest California Synod. As we gathered in a quiet space for a holy huddle of prayer just before the “quasi-committee of the whole” plenary session where I would come out that Thursday afternoon, it felt like a new ordination day. My bishop’s hands were upon me, three of his assistants’ hands were upon me, a number of friends’ and colleagues’ hands were upon me, and yes, Joel’s hands were upon me.

As Joel pondered the messiness of the incarnation, he wrote “It doesn’t make sense that we should know God this way, that of all the ways God had come to us, God should choose such an earthly, messy, indirect, human route. As it turns out, however, there is apparently nothing that cannot be a means of grace, not a single thing without the possibility of conveying God to us.”

My indirect and messy journey might not have made much sense to Joel, even as I can’t imagine having gone down the road as he did. But *Soli Deo Gloria* - all praise and thanks to God: we shared the journey, we fought the fight, and we are on the way.

*Santa Monica,  
January 6, 2012  
The Epiphany of Our Lord*

## AFTERWORD

*Greg Egertson, M. Div., Former LLGM Co-Chair*



*Rev. Jeff Johnson, University Lutheran Chapel, Berkeley, CA*

The year was 1987. We were winging back to the Bay Area from the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, and each of us (Joel Workin, Jim Lancaster, Jeff Johnson, Greg Egertson) was filled with a passion for justice and a determination to slam the closet door behind us. The march had taken place the very weekend Jeff, Joel, and Jim were scheduled to meet with the candidacy committee at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary for their final interviews. On this same flight, our joint-decision to ‘come out’ as openly gay seminarians was made, largely at Joel’s insistence. Even then, Joel had a keen sense of mission: to live the ‘*yes!*’ of God in the face of the church’s ‘*no!*’ Even then, Joel had a profound awareness of his calling “to be and bring, to witness to and embody, the Kingdom.”<sup>3</sup>

As we write this, the year is 2001, and we are winging our way back to the Bay Area from Indianapolis where the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has just concluded its seventh biennial assembly. It was the first church-wide gathering of the new millennium, and history will remember it for:

- The eloquence of former presiding bishop Herbert W. Chilstrom who publicly endorsed the blessing of same-sex relationships and urged the assembly to rescind the celibacy rule that was instituted in 1988 at the beginning of his tenure; the same rule that precluded Joel from ordination;

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<sup>3</sup> p. 54, "Personal Reflective Essay"

- The witness of Pr. Anita Hill (who was irregularly ordained four months prior) whose powerful testimony as a voting member from the St. Paul Area Synod called the ELCA to account for its teachings against LGBTQ persons;
- The presence of Soulforce, an interfaith organization which stood vigil with us during the assembly, providing non-violent resistance training and leading us in civil disobedience to protest the ELCA's policy of discrimination and spiritual violence;
- The extraordinary work of The Lutheran Alliance for Full Participation, a coalition of five advocacy groups (Lutheran Lesbian & Gay Ministries, The Extraordinary Candidacy Project, Wingspan Ministry, The Lutheran Network for Inclusive Vision and Lutherans Concerned North America) who organized a significant effort to 'lift the ban' against ordination at the assembly;
- The vision and prophetic voices of ELCA youth leaders, who repeatedly implored the ELCA to honor its promise to welcome LGBTQ persons to "full participation" in the life of the church by extending that invitation to the pulpit, as well as the pew.

Despite this momentum, however, history will unfortunately remember the ELCA 2001 assembly for its sins of omission, for its failure to enact justice for LGBTQ persons. By an overwhelming majority, the voting members called for yet another study to determine the proper role of LGBTQ persons in the life of the ELCA. Faced with its first real opportunity to say "YES!" to sexual minority persons, the ELCA instead issued a resounding "NO!"

Such action would have caused Joel to weep with sorrow and rage. In one breath, we know he would have insisted on holding these voting members accountable for their inaction; yet in the next, without letting them off the hook, we are sure he would have loved them and forgiven them.

Today, when we consider Joel's legacy, we look at the movement of his spirit, as it remains with us, guiding us and empowering us daily. How often we ask ourselves, "What would Joel do in this situation?" Or, "What would Joel say in answer to that question?" It is a testimony to the depth of Joel's faith, the integrity of Joel's witness, and the intimacy of our friendship that we are never unsure of Joel's response. *We always know* what Joel would say or do if he were with us today. And it is through this certainty that Joel continues to abide with us as a loyal and faithful friend. His commitment to justice, his unfailing honesty, his obedience to the way of the cross and his eagerness to forgive others — all of these are Joel's legacy to us.

If Joel had lived, he most certainly would have been in \* and serving on the roster of the Extraordinary Candidacy Project. No doubt he would have stood vigil with us in the assembly hall and been among those arrested by the Indianapolis police following our civil disobedience action outside the convention center. And he surely would have cheered as his parents, inspired by their son's witness, received a special "Courageous Couples" award for their advocacy on behalf of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) in Fargo, North Dakota.

In many ways, Joel for us has been the inspiration behind the justice movement on behalf of sexual minority people in the ELCA. For at his core, Joel was a man of action. Like the epistle writer, he believed that "faith, without works, is dead." (*James 2:17 RSV*) As long as we proceed with our work, Joel's mission will continue to be fulfilled, until all of God's children know that they are invited to both serve the meal and receive its blessing at "the big party God is planning and to which everyone is invited."<sup>4</sup>

*San Francisco, California 2001*

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<sup>4</sup> p. 51, "Personal Reflective Essay"

## DEDICATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to dedicate this book to Michael Price Nelson & Dale Von Seggern for all the hours of what they call “loving labor” to get this second edition published. That they could decipher Joel’s handwriting is almost a miracle! Without their hard work, there would be no second edition. Thank you, thank you!

Thanks, too, to others who made this second edition possible: Greg Egertson and ELM Workin Committee Members Amalia Vagts, Rev. Jeff Johnson and Rev. Jen Rude; L. Bower for designing the new cover; Rev. Erik Christensen and Rev. James Boline for their kind comments about Joel’s life and legacy.

It has been a joy to be called “Mom and Dad” by so many of you. Thank you for the love and support we still receive from our “gay family.”

We praise God that Joel’s life has been such a blessing for so many.

May God bless Joel’s memory!

*Raydon & Betty Workin  
Proud Parents of Joel Workin  
Fargo, North Dakota  
January 2012*

## THE JOEL R. WORKIN MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP FUND

In the last weeks of his life, Joel gave his friends and family permission to sponsor an endowed memorial fund in his name. The Joel R. Workin Memorial Scholarship Fund was established upon Joel's death on November 29, 1995. The scholarship is managed by Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries through the Lutheran Community Foundation.

The Joel R. Workin Memorial Scholar is a Lutheran seminarian who publicly identifies as LGBTQ and who embodies Joel's passion for justice and faith in their lives and ministry. The Scholar receives a cash scholarship for their spiritual development and is involved throughout the year with various ELM activities. Recipients have so far included:

Emily Ewing and Laura Kuntz (2011)

Matthew James (2008)

Julie Boleyn (2009)

Jen Rude (2005)

Please consider making a planned gift from your estate to this fund. If you would like to make a gift designated for the Joel R. Workin Endowment Fund, please contact Amalia Vagts, ELM Executive Director, at [director@elm.org](mailto:director@elm.org) or 563-382-6277.

