

BREAKING THE RULES

A sermon preached at
Plymouth Congregational Church
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Text: Luke 17: 11–19

Last Sunday afternoon a few hundred of us gathered for an old-fashioned hymn sing led by Garrison Keillor. I suspect that most of us came here because we were drawn by a promise to sing hymns together—and an assumption that we would hear some good stories too. We got all that, but also we got something we didn't anticipate. The hymns were mostly gospel songs, the tent-revival kind of gospel songs. Hymns like "Would you be free from the burden of sin? There's power in the blood, power in the blood." And the old lilting favorite of the Evangelical churches, "There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins," which always has seemed to me a strangely carefree tune for such a gory image. It goes on cheerfully, "And sinners, plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains." It is something like a jingle for OxiClean paired with a graphic depiction of the sacrificial atonement, and that's a lot to think about on a Sunday afternoon.

They were unfamiliar to many and maybe even a little ridiculous to some, but I was given strength in singing those old hymns and I needed it. There were recent events that had disturbed me more than I had admitted. I'll get to what was unsettling me in a moment. First, I want to tell you about how when I was a teenager, I used to love those old gospel hymns. It is a little strange, I know, but I loved those songs from the hymnal I had borrowed from the Evangelical Free Church in my little hometown. I needed the hymnal because I filled in at the piano there a few Sundays now and then. Our Lutheran hymns were much more like the ones we sing here at Plymouth—quite traditional and poetic, stately and sophisticated. If a hymn were a theologian, the hymns at my home church were something like Reinhold Niebuhr—with his high professorial forehead and thin lips that were certain to speak always and only in grammatically correct sentences and in words we only sort of understood. But the hymns at the Free Church would have been a Southern preacher with a wild head of hair, a beard and a floppy Bible. The kind who is folksy, common. If he is well educated, he hides his degree behind down-home syntax so as not to seem separate from the everyday lives of the ordinary folks.

But why would a teenage boy love those old hymns? Why would I sing them to myself at the piano when I was alone when I was 14 and 15 and 16?

*Sometimes on the mount where the sun shines so bright,
God leads us, dear children, along;
Sometimes in the valley, in darkest of night,
God leads us, dear children, along.*

*Though sorrows befall us and evils oppose,
God leads us, dear children, along;
Through grace we can conquer, defeat all our foes,
God leads us, dear children, along.*

Why would a teenage boy be entertaining such serious thoughts about dark valleys, sorrow befalling and evil opposing when he should be thinking about football games and dances and friends and clothes and dreaming about getting a driver's license or going to college? There were thoughts in my head that were very gloomy—desperate even—because I knew something about myself I did not want to know. I knew something about myself I did not have words to express, and when I did learn the words, I learned them from the teasing and ridicule I received daily in school, and they were ugly and cruel words. I tried with all my might not believe this about myself. It was this agony that turned me to these hymns. No song on the radio could touch the soul-pain I felt. Those songs might have been okay for your run-of-the-mill adolescent struggles, but when you were considering life and death, you needed something more.

Of course we grow out of adolescent angst, thank God. I need to say *most* of us grow out of it—not *all* of us. It takes the lives of some. That is what was unsettling me when I sat to sing those hymns last Sunday afternoon. If it were not for those hymns and the faith they gave me, together with the support of my family, my pastor and my church—my story might very well have ended like the children and young men you have heard about in the news in the last month: Raymond Chase, age 19; Asher Brown, 13; Billy Lucas, 15; Tyler Clementi, 18; Seth Walsh, 13; Justin Aaberg, 15, from Anoka—so close to home.

When I first read and heard the stories, I shut the paper on them and changed the radio station. It was too painful. The self-hatred gay children and young adults suffer is exacerbated by teasing and bullying, and that is what drives them to a fatal level of despair.

It is not only other children or young adults who do the bullying. There are many sources of the message that comes bashing in upon them daily—that they are defective, and that there is no hope for any pure and acceptable expression of their deep longing and their strong desire for intimacy with someone of their same gender. Tragically the church is among the abusers.

For me my church was a haven. I was lucky. That is not the case for most children. More than 400,000 Roman Catholics in Minnesota have received a DVD from their bishops in recent weeks, and I want to underscore that this is not from their priests, it is from their bishops. Do not assume all the priests support it, and certainly we know many Catholics are angered and heartbroken by it. The purpose of the DVD is to rally support for a constitutional amendment in Minnesota to ban gay marriage. In it Archbishop Nienstedt says we should feel love and concern for gay people, and then he points them to a ministry called Courage, which is about giving gay Catholics support as they learn to live celibate lives. It sounds very pastoral, but it is a devastating message, a message that kills the souls of these tender young people so filled with potential. The DVD says that gay marriage, if it were legal, would destroy society as we know it, cripple the church and that the good world would become a chaotic, scary place. I've watched this DVD and I am trying to represent it fairly.

Let me speak honestly to what it means as a gay child to hear that message. It says that when you wake up in the morning and the first thoughts of the day that rush into your

mind—you know the thoughts I mean when one is 14 and 15 years old—those unbidden thoughts you have are evil. It says that when you walk to school next to a classmate and you notice the curve of his neck or the way his hair falls across his forehead and you are totally infatuated, you learn that something is terribly wrong with you, so wrong that if you express it the powers of hell will be unleashed on the world. When you pray for the thoughts to go away so you can be like your friends, like everyone you know, and nothing changes, then you feel abandoned by God as well. And if you are truly courageous and you go to someone to tell them about this horrifying experience—a teacher, counselor, pastor—if that person does anything other than grasp you by the shoulders, look you straight in the eye and tell you that you are going to be okay, and that there is a life for you, that someday you will be happy, and it is ignorance and fear that is motivating those who tell you anything else—if the person you have trusted says anything other than that, then you fall into true despair. If you notice that teachers or other adults have overheard you being tormented and they don't do anything, say anything...if they overhear this torture and bullying and do not at least pull you aside and tell you the teasing is absolutely wrong...if not one person puts themselves between you and your tormentors, then you know that somewhere deep in their own hearts even your role models think you are wrong, that you are all the horrible things others have said about you. That is when you feel your options for a happy life slipping away from you, and the only option left is the one Raymond, Billy, Asher, Tyler, Seth, Justin and so many others believed was left.

Those young men were wrong, of course. There were other options, but how were they supposed to know?

As members of a church, we are accountable and bear the weight of a tremendous responsibility. We know we welcome all people, but those who are outside our doors too often see only that we are “Church” and so we get painted with a broad brush of suspicion and fear.

To try to address this problem a few years ago I worked with several members of the church to draft our welcome statement that appears in the bulletin and to obtain the “Open and Affirming” designation for our church. At that time someone warned me that if we adopted that statement, we would become complacent—and I'm afraid we have. Our presence at the Twin Cities Pride Parade has dwindled to a dedicated few. Our ads in *Lavender* magazine have decreased in size and impact because of budget cuts. Our GLBT/straight alliance and our Rainbow Group have become defunct. Perhaps all those expressions have done what they can do, but I worry when it seems nothing has taken their place.

That's quite a sermon to preach, especially without even getting to the Bible, so let's do that.

Ten lepers shouted out to Jesus as he passed by with his entourage. Ten outcasts raised their voices and said, “Have mercy on us.” Jesus gave them clear instructions. I want to get this right now; I think if Jesus is setting out the rules you should pay attention. Jesus said, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” That seems pretty clear...or so you would think. The scripture says, “As they went they were made clean.” But one of these lepers was so overcome with the miracle that he couldn't keep track of the simplest instructions. He lost his head, he broke the rules, he forgot about the priests, turned on his heels, ran back to Jesus, fell down at his feet and thanked him. Now, Jesus seems to have a short-term memory problem: Jesus says, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” He just told them to go to the priests. Now he is asking where they are? That seems

odd. They were doing what was asked and expected of them, the right and good thing, just as he told them. Jesus says, “Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to the Samaritan, “Get up and go your way, your faith has made you well.”

Here is what that means to me today. The rules and protocols we have established might be sufficient for a moral and righteous life. Following the rules and doing just what is asked of us, that might be enough to appease our conscience, but is it joyful? Is it the kind of authentic spiritual life we want? I don’t know about you, but I want to be like the one who lost his head with gratitude and grace. I want to be like the one who is so overcome by the goodness of his life that the rules he has been told to follow no longer seem important. I want to be like the one whose joy was so contagious and overwhelming that even Jesus forgot what he told the others to do when he experienced it.

We have become complacent in our welcome to the GLBT community, and I believe it is time to ask ourselves: Should we follow our own unwritten rules and be appropriately reserved about the welcome of this church? Should we remain quietly satisfied, consoling ourselves with the notion that while other Christians might be culpable in the deaths of young gay men and women, we have done our part for good? Should we stand quietly by and let some bishops of the Roman Catholic Church and others define the Christian perspective on gay marriage in the public sphere?

Or, dear church, should we throw ourselves wholeheartedly between those who need us and their tormentors, striving vigilantly to be known as fervent supporters, individually and collectively, far and wide, gladly announcing in every way possible—loudly, irreverently, publicly and even politically that we are Christians who joyfully break the rules? Let God show us the way forward, to regain our passion, to be role models—throwing our very lives between desperate, tender souls and anyone who would say Christianity means anything other than a full embrace for all. There are a hundred ways we could do that, a thousand ways, and I trust we will find them in the days ahead. If fear and misunderstanding can result in 400,000 DVDs sent to households across Minnesota, couldn’t love and acceptance result in a million? I don’t know what exactly what God will show us to do, but for Christ’s sake and the sake of dear and desperate children, we certainly must be called to do something. Amen.