

Mollie McMurray and Kate Cudlipp: God's Mountain – Bring It On Down!

Joint Sermon for Seekers Church
by Mollie McMurray and Kate Cudlipp
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God's Mountain – Bring It On Down!

God's Mountain – Mollie McMurray

I would like to begin by reading Psalm 24:

*The world and all that is in it belong to Yahweh,
The earth and all who live on it.
Yahweh built it on the deep waters,
Laid its foundations in the ocean's depths.
Who has the right to climb Yahweh's mountain?
Or stand in this holy place?
Yahweh will bless them.
God their savior will give them salvation.
Such are the people who come to God,
Who come into the presence of our God.*

I believe each person who comes to the mountain, as we fondly call the Kirkridge Retreat Center, is welcomed and accepted during the four-day annual retreat on Christian spirituality for lesbian women and gay men. As a lesbian woman, I've found a place of healing and empowerment by moving from compartmentalizing my life to a process of allowing more of my

whole self to be present within the Kirkridge community. As we gather in community, there is celebration of our individual spiritual journeys and a sharing of our common experiences of being homosexual in our daily lives.

This year we had forty-eight women and fifty men participate in the Kirkridge theme of "praise" within our spiritual journeys. There were four speakers, panel discussion, small group sharing, workshops, the "fishbowl," and shared worship on Sunday morning.

I would like to share some of my experiences at the Kirkridge retreat as a reflection upon the psalmist's lines.

"Yahweh will bless them."

There is an empowering gift of being both affirmed as individuals upon a spiritual journey and sharing wisdom in our stories during the women's gathering time. I felt affirmed last year when I read Psalm 139:

*Yahweh, you search me and know me.
You know if I am standing or sitting.
Whether I walk or lie down, you are watching;
You are familiar with all my ways,
Before a word is even on my tongue, Yahweh,
You know it completely.
You created my inmost being
And knit me together in my mother's womb.
For all these mysteries-
For the wonder of myself,
For the wonder of your works-
I thank you.*

After reading this psalm I felt a melting away of my internal fears and allowed the loving support of our women's gathering let me become more aware of a deeper self acceptance of my

sexual orientation.

This year we were asked to share what we wanted to have blessed by the women's gathering. I was deeply touched by the diversity of gifts which were blessed during our ceremony. As part of being in the lesbian and gay community t Kirkridge, I know there is a large percentage of people who were addicted to various substances. As several women shared their recovery from substance abuse, I felt safe enough to have my process of being a recovering alcoholic and coming from a dysfunctional family background of alcoholism blessed by the community.

I also asked for blessings upon my gratefulness for supportive people and God's grace in giving me gifts of clowning, healer, contemplative prayer, and painting in my healing process.

The psalmist continues with: "*God their savior will bring salvation.*"

Rainey Cheeks was one of our speakers responding to our theme of "Praise" by sharing his spiritual philosophy with the Kirkridge community. I feel a powerful message is being given in the District of Columbia when Rainey challenges his inner-city community with the question of "What would your world be like if everything you said came true?"

He proceeded to develop a model for wholeness by an invitation to become more aware of a spirit, body, and mind connectiveness within our spiritual journeys. Rainey continued in expressing his model by quoting John 1:1-5:

*In the beginning there was the divine word and wisdom.
The divine word and wisdom was there with God,
And it was what God was.
It was there with God from the beginning.
Everything came to be by means of it;
Nothing that exists came to be without its agency.
In it was life,
And this life was the light of humanity.*

*Light was shining in darkness,
And the darkness did not master it.*

As I reflected upon Rainey's question and participated in the workshop which followed his presentation, a transformation happened in emotionally connecting to how important my interior centering process is for clarifying my verbal communications within my daily activities. I feel God's salvation in participating in remembrance of Christ's presence among the Kirkridge community and in being open to God's unconditional love for us within our daily activities.

The psalmist continues with, "*Such are the people who come to God,/Who come into the presence of our God.*"

As part of my growth process at Kirkridge I chose to participate within the group which planned the Sunday communion service. As we gathered there were several issues which contributed toward our inclusive worship service on Sunday morning. I felt comfortable in coming from a community which discusses our diversity and moves toward inclusiveness of all our members. My personal growing edge within the process of planning the service came in writing the prayers for community and in meeting for the first time a Wiccan priestess which gave me a chance to learn about their theology.

I would like to close by reading the prayers for community as a way of expressing to you the common concerns of our experience of God's presence among the Kirkridge community:

*As we gather upon the mountain we are grateful
For you presence, God, within our inner being and
Your Spirit's movement within this community.
Let us pray.
For all of God's creation within the universe.
For those people who have leadership positions which affect
our lives.*

For those of us who have spiritual concerns, may we pray for others and ourselves.

For our ancestors who have contributed wisdom within our lives.

For all people who are coming to this mountain, especially for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered sisters and brothers.

May they find unconditional love within your presence, oh God, and may this community continue to bring hope within our spiritual journeys.

Amen.

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Bring It On Down! – Kate Cudlipp

The Kirkridge event was Mollie's second; it was my seventh. I went for the first time in 1991 and have attended the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered gathering annually since.

On my first trip to "the mountain" I saw as the world sees. Soon after arrival I saw a man with pearls around his neck and a pair of moose slippers on his feet. "What do I have in common with this incipient queen?" I asked myself. I saw a woman who was very heavy and had short, straight gray hair. "What do I have in common with this lesbian?" I asked myself. I heard appalling stories of what some people had suffered because of being gay and I asked myself, "What do I have in common with these people?"

I sought out people who looked most "normal" (read "straight") and "together" because I was afraid of what it would mean to identify-and be identified with-those most on the margin. I saw as the world sees.

This year-six years and six conferences later-I see differently. I see my friend Chris, whom Carole and I visited in Toronto a couple of years ago, again in his pearls and slippers, and I recognize a kindred spirit. I see Virginia with her new partner-after 18 years with Debra-and I celebrate her emergence from grief into new life. This year I am on the lookout for newcomers who might feel that they do not "fit." This year I believe fervently that everyone can find acceptance on the mountain, that we can all leave knowing we have been and are loved. This year I believe the message in a recent Old Testament lectionary reading where God tells Samuel, who is about to select Eliab as Israel's new king, "Do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance but the Lord looks on the heart."

I want to read again a portion of the psalm from today's lectionary-I am reading from the New Revised Standard Version:

*Who shall ascend the hill of God?
And who shall stand in God's holy place?
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts
who do not lift up their souls to what is false
and do not serve deceitfully.
They will receive blessing from God
and vindication from the God of their salvation.
Such is the company of those who seek God..*

In my time at the Gay/Lesbian/Christian event I feel that I am learning not to lift up my soul to what is false nor to serve deceitfully. For the first 39 years of my life I denied a most intimate part of who I am and tried to be someone I am not. In my deepest heart, I know that my relationship with Carole is true and good. It is a place for me to experience connection unlike any other connections I have; it is a place to learn about trust and risk-taking and to experience what is as close

to unconditional love as is possible in human relationships. This relationship is a gift from God, and for me could not come in the form of a relationship with a man.

But my deep knowing is constantly obscured by the resurgence of old voices that whisper-or shout-that something is wrong about this connection, that it is not as good or "natural" as a man-woman relationship. And certainly there are plenty of current voices that shout or whisper that same-sex relationships are bad, counter to God's plan, sinful, or, at the very least, not on a par with male-female ones:

- At Kirkridge this year, one lesbian couple faced the possible loss of custody the three biological children of one of the women to the father who had already been found by a court to be unfit to raise them. The reason for the possible change of a ruling of law was simply the fact that the women were together as a couple.
- Every year at Kirkridge there are ordained ministers of one denomination or another who have either lost their churches or are threatened with the loss because of being gay.
- Just this week I learned from a colleague on the Kirkridge board of directors that in a recent action in her conference of the United Methodist Church, a category of "transforming" churches was created-to "transform" gay and lesbian people into heterosexual people. This was in answer to the existence in the Methodist Church of reconciling congregations which welcome lesbians and gay men.

Kirkridge is a place where the dominant cultural voices-which often dictate the laws in our society-are seen for what they are-false; where we gather to celebrate God's gift to us of life, our human longing for connection, and, for some of us, the partners in our lives.

It is a place to experience "up close and personal"-about as

"personal" as you can get-that the majority view, the dominant culture, is not necessarily right just because it is the majority or dominant.

Jesus spent his public life challenging aspects of the dominant cultures of his time-Roman and Jewish. The Christian message is that we must not live our lives according to the values and standards of the world because to do so is to be seduced away from what we know in our hearts-what God has planted there-as true. Paul says in Romans 12: 2: *"Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern what is the will of God-what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

With respect to my sexual orientation I feel that my life has been a journey toward God's truth and away from the world's false messages. I have a strong incentive to make that journey and probably will be on it for the rest of my life. In some circumstances I still shy away from letting people know who I am; my fear can still prevail.

But the broader spiritual question for me is, "Having experienced the liberation that comes from acknowledging the truth about myself in one arena of my life, can I participate more readily in liberating myself and others from the tyrannies of this world in other arenas? Can I join Jesus in his assault on the Powers and Principalities?"

At Kirkridge we sing, "If we can find love/peace/justice on the mountain, we can bring that love/peace/justice to the world." I pray that this is so.