

Pat Conover: Coming Out Christian

Sermon: Pat Conover

Seekers Church, March 16, 1997

Coming Out Christian

Hymn: **Awakening** (tune: Stuttgart; words: Pat Conover, 1997)

*Now I see the morning breaking,
What a sight awaits my eyes,
Opening upon creation,
Seeing all the praise in skies.*

*Cloudy morning, hot or raining,
Still the light of promise glows,
Calling forth my gifts and caring.
Grace filled world that beauty shows.*

*Lighting all that's hurt and needful,
Lighting all who sit in pain,
Lighting love that's grown so weary,
Showing love can rise again.*

*Many mourning, many rising,
Spirit birth on Easter morn,
Meeting on communion morning,
Hosting all that would be born.*

Good Morning!

I usually work first with the scripture and then draw out the implications for one or another issue or concern. The Jeremiah

scripture about the new covenant written on the heart is central to this sermon but I'm going to turn to Jeremiah after sharing a piece of my story, and a piece of Seeker's story.

I have been on a long healing journey as a bigender person and Seekers has been a wonderful part of this story. I hope that opening up this story with you today will be both a healing step for me and an additional deepening of Seekers understanding of inclusiveness. If we are most likely to grow at our points of vulnerability then this may become a rich moment indeed.

Quite a few Seekers know my story through one-on-one sharing. Some of you have read my autobiographic paper and Trish's paper upon attending her first transgender event. My mission groups and the core membership have received my story as well. As a result, I have received a lot of hugs and other warm expressions of caring and concern. It is the personal caring that has mattered to me the most, but it has also mattered that Seekers took the step of formally revising its call to welcome me, even though you didn't know this part of my name at that moment. It has also mattered that Seekers has chosen to give financial support to advocacy for transgender justice issues. Such corporate acts mattered a lot to me.

The words bigender and transgender are probably not well known words for all of you. Rather than go through a lot of formal distinctions I'm going to just tell a little bit about why claiming and naming myself with these words is important to me.

I already have preached a piece of this sermon about two years ago, maybe three. I pointed out in then that the social roles, man and woman, and the cultural images, masculine and feminine, are human creations. Such social and cultural constructions are so basic we sometimes slide into thinking of them as "natural," as if this is just the way things are. One tiny example that shows the human element is that the color

pink was associated with boys rather than girls in the United States before World War I. More substantially, other cultures have made social and cultural space for people who did not fit neatly into the distinction of man or woman. Most of the Native American traditions had special places for "two-spirit" people, often as healers or as ritual leaders. Such two-spirit people were singled out for oppression and genocide by invading Europeans, indeed they reported on two-spirit people as a justification for calling Native Americans savages.

All social and cultural stereotypes, including the roles of "man" and "woman" should be evaluated in terms of Christian values. The brave leaders of women's liberation have led us through decades of education and growth to overcome patriarchal distortions and affirm equality of opportunity for women. The way I work with the concepts of masculine and feminine is to affirm all that is virtuous, whether it is named masculine or feminine, and to work and live against all that is destructive or alienating, whether it be done in the name of "being a man" or "being a woman." I've gotten a lot of support for becoming a more nurturing parent, for being a more responsible housekeeper, for example.

The harder part for some of you has been that I also want to experience, and claim my experience, that comes with claiming a distinctly feminine appearance. This may or may not be important to others, but explicitly working with my feminine appearance has opened up spiritual and psychological wellsprings that had felt locked away from me. I've tried to give some of the fruits of that work back to Seekers in several ways. The core of my story is that my experience of working with my feminine appearance, as well as working in other ways with the virtues called feminine in this culture, has very much become part of claiming my spiritual wholeness, of knowing my soul.

This journey has not been an easy one for me. When I was a teenager I thought I was the only person like this in the

world. My transgender community was so oppressed that I could find no signs of it, except in pornography. This society taught me shame and taught me to hide. I thought I was supposed to kill myself. Sometimes I thought I was supposed to maim myself. One of the reasons that sermons like this have to be preached is so that every gay boy child, every exploring lesbian, every hungry bisexual young person and every seeking transgender child will know that they are not alone, that God loves them, and that there is a welcome waiting them in the covenant of faithful Christians, including today in Seekers community. When such support is real, when it is fully visible, then fewer people like me will have to work so hard to get rid of the societal sicknesses of homophobia and transphobia that they swallowed.

Psychiatrists and preachers tried to put people like me back in the bottle. They hid us away in the back wards when we were healthier than our oppressors were. They fried our brains with electricity and chemicals to make us docile. They stuck "ice picks" through our eye sockets into our brains and turned our highest mentality and spirit to mush, and thought it was okay because it had the clinical name lobotomy. Psychiatrists said they were just trying to help us adjust to a Judeo-Christian society. Preachers said we were sinful and turned us over to the clinicians to be cured. This awful oppression began to turn around for gays and lesbians in 1973 when the official voices of psychiatry and psychology said homosexuals were not sick. It has to happen for transgender people now.

So the next time you hear that someone is bigender, transgender, transvestite, or transsexual, I hope you will think: "Oh, such a person might be like Pat, a caring and committed Christian, working away at being a good parent and a good spouse, taking up her and his share of the work of the world." And when your children ask about me, I hope it will be easy for you to say, "Pat is someone who likes to dress like a man sometimes and like a woman sometimes because he and she

wants to know and experience the best things that men and women know." And I don't care how you handle the pronouns; our language is hopelessly bipolar. Another true thing you might say is that "Pat thinks it is a lot of fun to dress up as a woman sometimes." I don't think you have to worry about the children too much because they know better than most of us about the importance of play as a way to learning and growing. And if you come upon a child for whom my witness is troubling, I hope you will be able to appreciate that something that was hidden and hurting in that child finally has a positive reference, one small standing ground for further growth and exploration. And if any of you find that you have a child who is showing inclinations towards being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, I hope this sermon will help you more easily embrace your child and to affirm the path by which love and passion is becoming manifest in your child's life.

The task of inclusion in Seekers isn't done until there is public space for me to be known. Until then, we are giving in to the shame categories in this society and culture.

To mark this moment I want to share a poem that I discovered lurking within myself as I prepared for this sermon.

Time to Stand Up

*It's time to stand up.
That is challenge enough...*

*Right out in the middle,
where I've been hiding,
where I've been strategic,
where I've managed my coming out,
...one veil at a time.*

*It's time to stand up,
to ask you to look when you would rather look away,*

*when you would rather explain me than see me,
when the chasm of shame, shames us both.*

*It's past time for settling for acceptance within limits,
to stop trading performance,
to stop protecting you when I'm really protecting me,
to stop denying my friends before the cock crows.*

*It is a time to be ok,
whether you can give that to me or not,
a time to risk your reactions,
to have a suitcase packed in the back room
with a whisk broom for my dusty shoes.*

*It's a time to be willing to seem garish,
unfinished,
with too many blind spots to keep covered,
too many things I haven't thought of,
too much the second grader calling my scrawling art,
even if it is art.*

*Nothing else needs to be different, and so,
It is time to stand up.*

*... Just one more Galilean on the hillside thinking that Jesus
is talking to me.*

And now I need to tell you why I think the Jeremiah scripture
is so important. Let me repeat verse 33 in chapter 31.

I will set my law within them and write it on their hearts.

To understand what an important spiritual break through this
is, it helps to compare Jeremiah's covenant with the covenants
of Moses, Abraham and David.

The first historical covenant was with Moses. We had it as lectionary scripture a few weeks ago. The founding event of leading the people out of Egypt came to its climax with the gathering at Sinai. As thanks for their liberation, the followers of Moses were to become keepers of the law, starting with the 10 commandments. The class of priests, scribes and lawyers that made the rule of law real in Israel, real enough to challenge the arbitrary power of kings, carried forward one of the founding events for the Judeo-Christian tradition and for Western Civilization. They also invented 641 other laws. Let me read a few from a list in the 22nd chapter of Deuteronomy.

- *When you see your fellow countryman's ass or ox lying on the road, do not ignore it; you must help him lift it to its feet again.*
- No woman shall wear an article of man's clothing, nor shall a man put on woman's dress; for those who do these things are abominable to the Lord your God.
- When you come across a bird's nest by the road, in a tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs in it and the mother bird on the nest, do not take mother and young. Let the mother bird go free, and take only the young; then you will prosper and live long.
- When you build a new house, put a parapet along the roof, or you will bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if anyone should fall from it.
- You shall not sow your vineyard with a second crop, or the full yield will be forfeit, both the yield of the seed you sow and the fruit of the vineyard.
- You shall not plow with an ox and an ass yoked together.
- You shall not wear clothes woven with two kinds of yarn, wool and flax together.
- You shall not make twisted tassels on the four corners of your cloaks which you wrap around you.

By the way, in the law about cross-dressing, the reference to

"those who do this being abominable" is probably a reference to the cross dressing priests and priestesses of Canaanite religions.

The larger point here is that the Mosaic covenant created laws written in stone, laws that were objective, and an authority to enforce them.

The covenant with Abraham was simpler, a promise to bless a blood line on the condition of circumcising males so one could tell who was in and who was not. This was a more unconditional promise of God's love, but a promise limited to a single bloodline.

The covenant with David, as found in Second Samuel, is also unconditional,

"My love shall never be withdrawn from you, as it was from Saul."

But, just a few chapters later, David messes up big time and Nathan nails him with a big punishment from God. We thus have the more sophisticated idea emerging that God's love is unconditional, but that this does not mean a ruler can act as if justice didn't matter. Thus the stage is set for the beginning of a more sophisticated theology of redemption, the idea of salvation by grace through faith, the faith measured in part by repentance.

But with Jeremiah, two more changes are added.

The first is that the law of God is unmediated and immediately knowable. It is written on the heart and not on stone.

The second change is that the covenant is directly with the people and not mediated as a hierarchical possession of a Moses, an Abraham, or a David. We no longer need a class of priests, scribes and lawyers to emphasize detailed obedience but a spiritual transformation that affirms the spirit of the

law.

Many people think of Jeremiah's understanding of covenant as the possession of the New Testament. We think of Jesus challenging the legalism of the Pharisees. Jesus did indeed make many such challenges, but he was doing so on the best scriptural authority and we are told some of his followers thought he was Jeremiah reborn.

Our task as spirit people, as Christians, is to figure out what is the spiritual guidance of God and what is just the limited framing of any particular culture. Women think nothing of breaking the law found in Deuteronomy 22:5, are at ease wearing articles of clothing defined as "men's." Most of us are probably wearing some kind of blended cloth, but I think we are doing pretty well with the tassels rule. It is easy to tease the fundamentalists for picking and choosing which laws they will obey when they say all the laws are legally binding. It is harder to see through the cultural blinders that has led the church to punish people like me so severely. Think of Joan of Arc and all the "witches" who were killed for cross-dressing.

Rather than run down my list of atrocities, I want to tell you a short story about the trial of a rooster in the 15th century at Basel, a true story. The cock was charged with laying an egg. The rooster's lawyer argued that the act was involuntary, and that animals were incapable of making pacts with the devil. The court found the cock innocent, but attributed the act of laying an egg to a sorcerer masquerading as a cock. As a result, the rooster and the egg in question were burned at the stake.

Jesus didn't speak about cross-dressing as such, but he did speak a word of liberation for another kind of transgender people, that is eunuchs. By the way, as one measure of oppression, the word eunuch appears over 60 times in Greek and Hebrew scripture but the modern translations use the word only

a dozen times, at most. In [Matthew 19:12](#), Jesus is recorded as overturning one of the 651 laws which kept eunuchs from entering the temple and instead welcoming eunuchs to the kingdom of heaven, whether they were born that way, whether they were castrated as punishment, or whether they castrated themselves for the kingdom of heaven.

I thank Jesus, or the writers who interpreted his words, for including me in the kingdom. I thank Seekers for providing the space and support for my spiritual journey, which has led me to this particular step in my journey toward liberation.

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Glossary

assigned sex

The sexual designation attached to one at birth and entered on a birth certificate.

androgyny

A person who presents an appearance that is mixed or neutral in terms of gender association. A specialized research definition is offered in terms of the BSRI.

bigender

A person who chooses to affirm and express both masculine and feminine qualities and images.

bisexual

A person who chooses partners for sexual activity for either sex. This term is used very differently for different purposes. Researchers may attach this term to people even though it makes no sense to the person so labeled. See Ruth Colker's book, *Hybrids*, for an excellent discussion of this issue.

butch

A masculine appearing female.

cross-dresser

A common term for people who like to take on an appearance associated with their non-assigned sex.

deviant

The term is used as a technical sociological term meaning a person or act that violates a social expectation.

drag queen

A male who presents a highly stylized image of a woman, often in the context of an entertainment performance.

drag king

A female who presents a highly stylized image of a man, often in the context of an entertainment performance.

dysphoria

A psychiatric term meaning upset or angry. "Gender Dysphoria" means that one is unhappy or upset about conforming to the expectations of one's gender that is supposed to be based on one's assigned sex. The word is in the realm of pathology since it is used in the context of mental disorder. Psychiatrists introduced this word to get away from the phrase mental disease or mental illness while still wanting to claim authority for transgender experience as some kind of pathology.

dystonic

Negativity toward oneself because one has introjected (accepted) negative images about oneself from the society.

f2m

Female to male.

female

A person who meets the physiological standards of a female.

femme

A feminine appearing female, usually so named because of relationship with a butch.

feminine

Cultural images and symbols usually associated with women.

gay

This term sometimes refers to the whole "homosexual" community, as in the "gay community." Sometimes it refers only to "homosexual" men, as in "gay men."

gender

The social roles of man and woman. Often misused as a synonym for sex.

gender identity disorder (GID)

A mental disorder invented by psychiatrists in the 1980's to compensate for loss of business when homosexuality was declared to not be a disease. The phrase is constantly being redefined, lacks a scientific basis, but presumably means something about transgender expression.

hermaphrodite

An older term for intersexual which is less used now because it suggests a half and half concept of intersexuality. (Derived from Hermes and Aphrodite.)

heterosexual

A clinical term referring to anyone who chooses a partner for sexual activity who is not of one's assigned sex category.

homosexual

A clinical term referring to anyone who chooses a partner for sexual activity of one's own assigned sexual category. For consideration of many definitional fine points the section on sample survey research lists several considerations. "Homosexuals" are one kind of transgender person because their choice of sexual partner does not conform to the socially traditional expectation for their assigned sex and for their presented gender.

intersexual

A person with male and female physiological characteristics.

lesbian

A term referring to "homosexual" women.

m2f

Male to female

male

A person who meets the physiological standards of a male.

man

In psychological terms, a person who thinks of himself as a man. In sociological terms, a person who interacts in social situations in the role of a man.

masculine

Cultural images and symbols usually associated with men.

paraphilia

A psychiatric term which means obtaining some kind of sexual satisfaction from an object or person in a way that

psychiatrists, echoing the culture, disapprove of. This is one of many terms that have emerged in recent decades to get away from old definitions while sustaining a psychiatric control of the agenda based on using words that are unfamiliar to the public.

pathology

This term means disease. The official brokers of the meaning of this term as it applies to transgender experience and expression are the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association.

sexual orientation

This term refers to choice of partners for sexual activity in relation to whether the partner is of the same sex or not.

transgender

An "umbrella" term referring to anyone who does not conform to one or more aspects of socially traditional expectations for men and woman presumed to be appropriate for one's assigned sex.

transsexual

A person who has completed sexual reconstructive surgery. It is common to refer to people who are planning toward, or preparing for surgery as "pre-operative transsexuals." Some refer to people who are living full time in the gender role that is not usual for their assigned sex to be "non-operative transsexuals."

transvestite

Clinical terms for someone who enjoys taking on the appearance of his or her non-assigned sex.

woman

In psychological terms, a person who thinks of herself as a woman. In sociological terms, a person who interacts in social situations in the role of a man.