

"What God Counts Clean" by Pat Conover

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Sermon for DC Interreligious Pride Service, Luther Place
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Introductory Words

Scripture: Acts 10: 9b-16 (derived from REB)

Peter went up on the roof to pray. He grew hungry and wanted something to eat. While they were getting it ready, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something coming down that looked like a great sheet of sailcloth. It was slung from the four corners and being lowered to the earth. In it, he saw creatures of every kind: four footed beasts, reptiles and birds. There came a voice that said to him, "Get up

Peter. Kill and eat.” But Peter answered, “No, Lord! I have never eaten anything profane or unclean. The voice came again, a second time: It is not for you to call profane what God has called clean.” This happened three times and then the thing was taken up into heaven.

Peter got the point. He came down from the roof and immediately agreed to go and minister to a Roman Centurion named Cornelius. When he gets to Cornelius the next day, Peter says,

“I need not tell you that a Jew is forbidden by his religion to visit or associate with anyone of another race. Yet God has shown me clearly that I must not call anyone profane or unclean. That is why I came here without delay. (Acts 10:28b-29)

Peter goes on to preach to Cornelius and everyone gathered. They respond, the Holy Spirit confirms their response, and they are baptized.

A long time ago, and far away, Luke gives us a vision of unity. For Gentiles who were attracted to Jesus, this declaration that they were not profane simply because they were Gentiles was the good news of liberation and salvation. But for the original disciples and followers of Jesus, who had heard the good news preached to Jews by a Jew, who appreciated what they heard because they had lived in hope of a Jewish Messiah and who appreciated what they heard because they understood it in the context of their Holy Scripture, the visions of Daniel and Joel, it did not sound like good news. It was shocking.

We know from Paul who was writing 30 years before Luke, that

the reality of relations between Jews and Gentiles was conflict, not unity. By Luke's time, this had led the Jewish leaders of synagogues to throw the Christians out of their assemblies. Moreover, it was leading some Christians into anti-Jewishness, to proclaim that the destruction of the temple and the genocide of Jerusalem by the Romans was punishment for killing Jesus, for trying to kill God.

A major theme of the Gospel of Matthew, written about the same time as Luke-Acts, is that the Christians were right and the Jews were wrong in their understanding of Hebrew Scripture, that the Jews were wrong in their interpretation of Jewish law and Jewish hope. It is not surprising that there were sharp divisions, deeply grounded divisions, divisions that had led, and were still leading to persecution, to murder.

The Book of Acts tells stories of Peter and Paul and both stories have the theme of unity in the face of all this conflict. Paul, a Jewish persecutor of Christians, converted to Christianity in a blinding vision and becomes a leading Christian evangelist. Paul claims his upbringing as a Pharisee and as a Roman citizen. He preaches the position that is later found in the Gospel of Matthew, that Jesus fulfilled the expectations of the Jewish Messiah and that God has made a new covenant both with the Jews and with everyone.

After the death of Jesus, Peter had followed the directions of the Holy Spirit as found in Luke, had stayed behind in Jerusalem, and led the disciples in praying everyday in the temple, the power center of the Quisling King Herod and the Quisling High Priest. Moreover, at Pentecost it is Peter who preaches and interprets the beginning of the church, a story based on the power of speaking in tongues that overcame the division of languages so that Jews from around the world were

converted by the thousands. The vision of the heavenly feast simply draws out the implication that the unity that is grounded in the experience of the Holy Spirit can unite not only diverse Jews, but also Jews and Gentiles.

So what happened to the unity that Luke was so eager to proclaim in the face of conflict and division? On the one hand, it clearly fell apart. The early persecution of Christians by some Jews was more than matched in later centuries by the vicious persecution of Jews by some Christians. It is a sad and ugly story, a tragedy that so many Christians learned only revenge from their experience of persecution.

The good news of Jesus is all about forgiveness. He followed the lead of the Jewish leader, John the Baptist, who offered a baptism of forgiveness and repentance, a turning and change that opens the power of salvation, that lets grace flow as the basis for good living and good service.

The Christian Gospel to this day has held onto its Jewish grounding, is unintelligible without its Jewish grounding. Scores of later written Christian gospels and letters did not make it into the New Testament because they forgot their Jewish grounding. They forgot that Jesus was human, that the body matters, and that the Jewish law is reformed, not rejected, by Jesus.

Luke's vision of unity between Jews and Gentiles has held to this day despite all the revenge, all the horrible history. Moreover, it needs to be remembered and reaffirmed all the time to counter the still present forces of revenge and hatred. In terms of the conflict between Jews and Christians,

the only authentic beginning of any Christian sermon in an interreligious context must be must be, "I'm sorry for all that has been done to hurt you in the name of Jesus. I will do what I can to heal the old wounds so that we can live forward together in mutual respect and appreciation."

Jews and Christians alike need to say to the rest of the religious world, we treasure the special gifts we have been given, and we know that the universal God we worship has been active beyond our own history and our own stories. Hello and hello. We ask for your forgiveness for our sins against you and we hope to live forward together in more positive, more respectful ways.

As I am sure that many of you have already guessed, the story I have been telling is also a model for dealing with religious based conflicts over sex and gender.

I am a transgender person and I can report to any who do not already know it that, though we are a small community in terms of organizations and activities, we are divided on numerous issues. A bigender person like myself, who tries to claim and honor the best of all that men have carried and all that women have carried, and who tries to build an identity that expresses **all** the good gender standards and hopes, shares little of the life experience of transsexuals who have moved from one gender commitment to another, who have radically changed their bodies to express and experience this change. Sometimes it is not easy to be together.

It has not been an easy path to unity between lesbian, gay,

bisexual, asexual, intersexual, questioning, and transgender people. It hurts us when we fight each other and it does not help when we try to paper over our differences as if they do not exist. Sometimes, like Paul, we convert from one group to another. When we do that, we need to honor our past lives and bring the best parts with us into ongoing conversations.

This sermon grows out of Peter's vision of the heavenly feast. It centers on the radical insight that we must not call anyone profane because God had declared all of creation clean.

We can

respond to this message like many Gentiles did, hear the good news that we are increasingly accepted in broader circles. That is a good word, a treasured word. Therefore, I invite you to hear the good news that you are neither profane nor unclean; God made you, and God does not make mistakes.

I needed that word as a teen. I almost committed suicide. We did not even have the word transgender then, much less the phrase that transgender experience could be a good thing, an expression of personality integration rather than a mental illness to be treated by lobotomies. That is when a doctor sticks a tool like an ice pick into the frontal lobes of your brain and turns the lobes into mush, destroying the distinctive capacity to be human. That was called a cure. There are fewer lobotomies today, but it is common for feminine boys to be sentenced to behavioral therapy that amounts to attaching electrodes to their genitals and shocking them if they show signs of an erection in response to erotic pictures.

In addition to the word of liberation, I invite you to hear this good news of the heavenly feast with the kinds of challenges that the Jewish disciples of Jesus heard when this vision was first proclaimed.

Some Jews in the first century were radically emphasizing their specialness by completely withdrawing from the world into separate communities. Such groups have their place and we have the Essenes to thank for their preservation of the Dead Sea Scrolls that have been so valuable for Jewish and Christian scholarship.

The Pharisees did not withdraw physically from the world but rather emphasized the distinctiveness of their laws and ritual practices. This created a portable identity that could and did survive the destruction of the Temple and the genocide of Jerusalem. It is the heart of the Jewish religion that has worked for Jews in the worldwide and centuries long Diaspora.

Like the Pharisees, most Christians have claimed a specialness that is precious to them; the following of Jesus and the creation of relationships that make us all part of one body. Similarly, we have a wide array of LGBT support groups that help us name, and claim, and celebrate our specialness, that help us with forming and sustaining our new identities, that help us cope with the oppression we face today.

Some LGBT groups have withdrawn into tight communities, in some cases secret communities. They are thankful for having found each other and have claimed their needs for tightness and even secrecy. When they do come out into social and

political action, they bring a strength and clarity that helps us all.

Some transgender people are so successful in their changed lives that they assimilate into traditional gender roles and become invisible to the wider LGBT community. We can pray that they remember enough of their gender and sexual journeys to do some of the kinds of work that are out of reach to the rest of us.

What about the majority of us who want to celebrate our hard won, hard claimed, specialness as the kind of LGBT persons we are? Sure, we want acceptance by others. That's cool. That's easy to want. But the vision of unity, not only unity within the LGBT community, but unity in the larger society, calls us to recognize the brackets around our specialness, to recognize that common humanity is a deeper and truer grounding than any of us can know through our specific and personal paths.

I am not calling for giving up hard won identities and relationships. Neither am I calling for a vague political mega-movement based on the hope of unity. I am calling for the immediate spiritual virtue of humility and I am calling for us to seek and offer forgiveness.

Humility and forgiveness may sound like strange virtues to emphasize in a PRIDE week worship service. Nevertheless, pride without humility and forgiveness is dangerous. Without humility and forgiveness, pride in our specialness blocks the vision of common humanity, leads us into the error of thinking we have special rights because we have suffered, or because we

see sexual and gender issues more clearly, or thinking that power for our team is an end in itself.

Pride is precious, empowering, liberating, for those of us who have felt the weight of persecution and oppression, for those of us who have been publicly shamed and publicly humiliated, for those of us who have hidden in fear from our true selves and from our LGBT friends. It is still the right time to stand up and claim the goodness of our lives, the goodness of our relationships, to claim our share of universal human rights. We owe immense debts to our LGBT evangelists who spoke up when times were tough, who faced rejection and hostility without blinking, to establish some landmarks for the paths we are walking.

Claiming our own liberation is just a first step. The first step is a step of joy and celebration, of healing, of finding each other, of community. It is a discovery that our specialness is a good thing. Sadly, that first step has been the last step for too many of us.

The second step, the realization that our specialness is one path within a larger common humanity, can also be a path of joy and celebration. It requires a certain maturity, recognition, that we have other things to say and to do than just claim ourselves and claim our rights.

We have a story to share, a special part of conversations when we engage the larger society and world. However, we give our most precious gift when we recognize that the respect and generosity we need ourselves is the same respect and

generosity that others need. With that awareness, we have a chance to contribute to the transformations that are good news for everybody.

We know some things about sex and gender that others desperately need to know, even when they vigorously deny the truths that we carry. We need to hang in with the conversations even when they are tiring, even when we are misunderstood. Nevertheless, if we want to share in the heavenly feast, and not just the wonderful meals we cook for each other, we also have to celebrate all that is good in our enemies. Caring and appreciation does not make me weaker and less articulate. Caring helps me to be present in ways that invite a deeper meeting, and ultimately a deeper unity, than can ever happen just by winning an argument or emotionally defeating an opponent. The heavenly feast is a vision that the larger victory comes from turning enemies into friends.

I have had one taste of the heavenly feast that I would like to share with you. More than ten years ago, my local independent church, Seekers Church, changed its call to be explicitly welcoming of sexual minorities. They did not have me in mind. When I showed up as the transgender person I am, it was not easy. It is not perfect today. However, it is a spiritual home I treasure and that treasures me.

Two years ago, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, a denomination made up overwhelmingly of straight members, extended its welcome beyond lesbian and gay people to explicitly welcome transgender people into all the activities and ministries of the church. I have been an ordained UCC minister for 40 years, out for more than 10 years, and finally welcomed into the church.

Peter's vision of the heavenly feast has made a big difference in my life. I have been offered a place at the banquet table. For those of you who are not Christian, I invite you to remember and cherish your own visions of unity, to join me at the banquet table set for all creation, and to welcome our hungry enemies to join us.