

Proper 21
Amos 6:1-7
1 Timothy 16:11-19
Luke 16:19-31

Learning to See

I got married in December of my last year in seminary. Skip and I had planned to get married in June right before I was ordained but when we realized that my health insurance policy was going to expire at the end of the year and it would be considerably more expensive for me to purchase my own insurance than to be placed on his policy at work, we decided to get married in December. So, even though he was living in San Diego and I was in New York, when I returned to San Diego for Christmas, we had a small, and I think very lovely, ceremony, at a friend's house which my sister-in-law later dubbed the HMO wedding.

After the New Year, I flew back to New York to finish my last semester and one afternoon shortly after I had gotten back I ran into a friend from school who asked how the wedding was, and how I was doing, especially with Skip being so far away. And I told him that even though I was sad about the distance, I loved being married to Skip—it made me happy.

And this man, who was already ordained, and married, smiled and said, “You know it’s good that you took your marriage vows before your ordination vows because that will always help you keep what is important in perspective.”

In the years since then, I have found his comment to be really helpful. While there certainly are times when life with my husband is rather challenging, in part because of the demands of church work, it is also the great blessing of my life. It still makes me happy.

After Mayor Jerry Sanders’ surprising, in light of his earlier comments, and very moving, press conference two weeks ago in which he talked about his support for overturning California’s ban on same-sex marriage, I have been thinking a lot not only about my own marriage but also the nature of making that type of commitment to another person and what it is that makes it so important.

As theologian Frederick Buechner says, the vows made at a marriage “could hardly be more extravagant.”¹ And it’s true: To pledge to have and to hold, in the good times and bad, whether or not you feel like it, whether or not you even like the person at any given point in time, is really kind of a crazy thing to do. We give up a portion of our autonomy in the hopes that together our lives will ultimately be better—richer, fuller and more secure in the very best sense.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark, A Doubter’s Dictionary* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 86.

And as people of faith, it takes on additional meaning because it is our belief and proclamation that all people are created out of love, to love, and that to be united to someone else in this way is a gift from God. It is a belief and proclamation that is not only spoken but lived out as well through the witness of our lives.

And it is from that perspective of a lived out belief and proclamation that Mayor Sanders' comments are particularly noteworthy, because he came to his decision based his experience of the lives of people he knew and loved. Specifically gay and lesbian people, including his own daughter, who changed his heart by their capacity to love and be loved.

But that is how change often does occur—through relationships and direct experiences that cause us to confront our comfort levels with the way things are and show us the way things can be. One of the most profound ways that God reaches us is through those kinds of relationships and experiences that shake up our view of what the world is like.

But the problem of course is that comfort is very seductive. It can blind us to the ways that God tries to reach us. And so the challenge for all of us, is to learn to see God in people and places we might not think to look or perhaps even want to.

In the Gospel of the rich man and Lazarus that we just heard, it is easy to imagine that the rich man while he was still alive, believed that he knew, and saw all that he needed to. Life was good. He was dressed in “purple and fine linen” and “feasted sumptuously every day.”

But perhaps because he was so comfortable, he missed the biggest message God was trying to show him, which was Lazarus who was there in plain view right outside his gate. Perhaps he so used to Lazarus being there, he no longer really noticed him; perhaps he *did* notice him but didn't want to be bothered; perhaps he just didn't know what to do. At any rate, he did nothing.

Of course, it is easy to look at the story of the rich man and Lazarus and feel disdain for the rich man. How could he not have done anything? How could he have left that poor suffering man in the cold without giving any food or comfort?

And yet if we are honest with ourselves, the rich man's story is in many ways our story as well. We all see suffering and injustice around us and not do anything about it. There is so much to be done, it can feel overwhelming but in the midst of it all, if we allow God to help us learn how to see, things that once seemed unthinkable or even impossible, suddenly appear doable.

And while we may sacrifice some comfort along the way, we will also find as Paul says in his letter to Timothy that God “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.”

Mayor Sanders certainly gave up a comfortable political position, and very likely a personal one as well, but in doing so, in opening himself to see the hopes and desires of the gay and lesbian people he knew, people who wanted nothing more than the kind of life he shares with his own wife, I can't help but think he came to understand the breadth and depth of love in a whole new way.

Of course, as many of you know, this is also a major point of discussion and debate within our own church as well. In an interesting bit of timing, especially for those of us here in San Diego, the House of Bishops meeting in New Orleans last week issued “a response to Questions and Concerns Raised by our Anglican Communion Partners” which states among other things, that they will not as a body authorize public rites for the blessing of same-sex unions in dioceses “until a broader consensus emerges in the Anglican Communion or until the General Convention of the Episcopal Church takes further action.”

It was a disappointing outcome for many of us here, for it seems far too often the Church doesn't see, and fully appreciate the lives and witness of faithful, committed gay and lesbian Episcopalians. There are many among them,

including people here that believe they are continually being asked to shoulder a disproportionate burden in holding the Church together, when all they want to do is live their lives in ways those of us who aren't gay or lesbian take for granted, including being able to get married and have our relationships blessed in a church by a priest.

And I think that's true.

But I am not here to criticize the House of Bishops. There are many among them that are people of great integrity that I trust and admire, including our own bishop James Mathes, and the former dean of this Cathedral, John Chane, who now serves as Bishop of Washington, both of whom signed the response. No doubt there were a myriad of considerations that went into crafting the document not the least of which was a heartfelt desire to hold the Anglican Communion together for important reasons of mission, for there is a world of need out there, as well as our own spiritual health as a Church. We each other's voices.

But while the House of Bishops had their work to do together, that is not the whole of our story as a Church. For we have ours as well, especially as we go forth to General Convention.

As we go forward, we must do so by being authentically ourselves. We are an Incarnational people and because of that, our very essence, our very being is one of the most tangible ways that God is made known to the world. And one of the ways we can make God known is by doing all we can to teach, empower, model and advocate for Christ-filled relationships.

Indeed our GLBT brothers and sisters have a particularly important story to tell because their witness, not just to the church but to the world, is a testament to the fact that love does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, only people do. And it is in the listening to those stories, taking them in, and walking together in the journey of faith that we all learn to see and experience more fully the blessing of God's overwhelming love. It is not only a matter of justice, it is being faithful to the spirit of Jesus who continually challenged the barriers we put up against one another.

This kind of authenticity can be uncomfortable, at times difficult and at others heartbreaking. But it is also grace filled holy work that we do together—out of love for each other and the One who gave his life so that we all might know God face to face.