

Pride in the Authentic Self

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Acts 10:9-15

“What God has made clean you must not call profane.”

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- ◆ Within the Christian church it is not altogether uncommon to talk about one of Jesus' followers' coming-out story – but usually people are referring to Lazarus – not to Peter. That's not to say that I think Peter was gay, bisexual or transgendered – but that he had to “come out” about a change in his understanding of the world.
- ◆ The fact that people go through coming-out processes everyday may make it seem simple or even blasé – but when it happens to yourself it can be totally overwhelming.
- ◆ It's likely that Peter felt as though God had completely turned his world upside down when he awoke from having the vision described in this passage of Acts.
- ◆ All of his life Peter had lived by the Leviticus cleanliness laws, assuming that he was following God's wishes by doing this because his culture and his religion told him that they were God's command. It's likely that he never even considered going against these laws. But this vision opened him to a new way of being – to new things to eat that God said were NOT PROFANE and to new people with whom he could associate. Peter heard the voice in his vision say, “What God has made clean you must not call profane.”
- ◆ How clear a message could Peter receive? I'd say this was pretty clear!
- ◆ Since Jesus' death and resurrection, Peter had been wondering how he could best serve God. But what exactly was he to focus on? WHERE was he to go? What was he to say?
- ◆ Following this visions, however, he had to wonder – was this the message he'd been looking for? Was God actually calling him to follow Jesus' example to serve the Gentiles??? Peter had been taught that not only should he not eat certain animals but that he should not even appear to be associating with certain people – namely any NON-JEWS. He had been taught that they were profane! Though the passage continues on as though this was not such a big change for Peter, I want to emphasize the magnitude of this change for him. Not only did he hear this message as telling him to associate with Gentiles, but he heard it telling him to serve Gentiles as Jesus had served him. He was to touch them, wash their feet, heal them, care for them . . .
- ◆ I imagine Peter spent quite a while just sitting there when he awoke from this vision. Likely in shock. Possibly praying to God for clarification. Like, “are you sure God?” But serve the Gentiles is exactly what Peter went on to do.
- ◆ Just as Peter was taught that some groups of people were outside of “social acceptability” in the first century, similar lines are still drawn today that place some specific groups of people outside of social acceptability. Rather than lepers and Gentiles being the outsiders in our society today though, those who are gay/lesbian/ bisexual or transgendered are frequently targeted. But does this actually make any more sense now than it did 2000 years ago? I don't think so.
- ◆ God's message for Peter in that dream was that we are not to declare God's creation profane. Who are we to think that we know better than God?

- ◆ Have you, like Peter, ever felt like God completely turned your world upside down?
- ◆ I certainly have. I felt as though God turned my world upside down as my understanding of myself was totally, utterly changed. My revelation was that I am not the heterosexual woman I had grown up assuming myself to be.
- ◆ I remember arguing with literalist/fundamentalist friends at age 14 because they believed that legally stating specific rights for individuals of the LGBT community were unnecessary, ridiculous or even elitist. I simply believed that God created each of us as we are and that we deserved to be treated equally. That seemed logical to my teenage mind and actually still does today.
- ◆ Ten years later, however, I was confronted with the realization that I am one of the people I had been fighting for as a teenager. Though I firmly believed that God made people of various sexual orientations, I had no clue how it would feel when I realized that I was one of those minorities.
- ◆ Honestly, my initial response was nausea.
- ◆ It took me a lot of work to come out to myself, my family and my community. It took me years to come to a place of feeling pride in my authentic self and honestly I still struggle with it at times today. It took even more work to decipher my feelings about God as someone who had grown up called to ministry within a church that would not ordain openly gay/lesbian/bisexual or trans-gendered persons. I simply couldn't imagine being an authentic minister if I could not be authentic about who I am as a person.
- ◆ Though some forms of pride are absolutely essential for life, Christianity and American society has been teaching that pride is a four letter word for centuries. And, as a result, we're now experiencing the difficulty in turning around the "Pride is a Sin" train that has been chugging through society during this whole period. Over time, I think that we all began to realize that without any pride we all become depressed and unable to function. Thus far, a decade or two have already passed as we've begun turning around this "Pride is a Sin" train and moving toward teaching that some pride is not only acceptable but necessary. Naturally, we need to find ground in between the prideful, cocky option where the individual feels that the world revolves around him or her and the individual who has no self-esteem whatsoever. Middle ground has to be our goal.
- ◆ Further complicating the issue is the fact that individuals within certain groups of society have been told that not only should they have NO PRIDE, but that God actually hates them for who they are. They've been told that they were not welcome to the table that God has created and set for us.
- ◆ Nearly every identifiable group in society has been told this at various times in history – Jews are told this by Anti-Semites, Muslims are told this by those who fear Jihad, African Americans and Native Americans are told this by Caucasians out of fear of the unknown and today those of the LGBT community are told this by heterosexist individuals.
- ◆ Each time these groups of people are told that they are not welcome, I imagine God just cringing at the sound of humanity's ignorance. I also imagine God sending angels to surround and comfort those who've been hurt by this false message.
- ◆ But no matter what we have done, these messages of unworthiness have seeped into society and the dominant culture. This makes it more and more difficult for individuals within these groups to have pride in themselves, much less in their community.
- ◆ Coming out and becoming more of our authentic selves is important for every person, whether we are a member of a minority group or are in the majority.

- ◆ I know my parents had to go through their own coming-out process once I came out to them. They had to do some major soul searching and have since come to the understanding that sexual orientation is merely one of the many ways that God has created diversity in Her Creation. But each time that they encounter someone who doesn't already know them, they have to decide "do I come out to this person about having a lesbian daughter or not"? In the same way, I have to decide whether I come out to new people I meet.
- ◆ As any one of us here meets someone new we go through much the same decision making – we wonder how it will affect this new relationship if we tell people where we go to church? Or about our political affiliations? Our particular belief systems or the gender of the people we love? Or our own gender identity? The fact that we have two moms or two dads? That our parents are divorced? Remarried . . . or that we don't have a home right now? Some of us have a unique understanding of race or culture, understanding of self in the world, or a unique concept of peace and justice. There are closets in all of our lives. Our society teaches us that some things are supposed to be kept secret and that others are ok to share with those around us. But who draws the line in the sand???
- ◆ We all have to come out everyday . . . in one way or another.
- ◆ Formally, our church went through a coming-out process about our understanding of sexual orientation several years ago as we became an ONA church. But that process didn't end with the signing of a paper or a vote. It is a process, not a one-time thing. It would be all too easy to think that now we're officially an ONA Church and that we're done talking about LGBT issues. But, if we stop talking about those issues then we are no longer challenged and we go back in the closet. We become one of the majority who says "we've arrived, we have LGBT friends, they come to church here so we don't need to 'make it an issue' anymore".
- ◆ But what about hate crimes? What about marriage equality? What about LGBT kids getting beaten up at school and their high rate of suicide? The list goes on and on because "it" is an issue.
- ◆ In the book "Where the Edge Gathers: Building a Community of Radical Inclusion," Yvette Flunder states: *"True community – true church – comes when marginalized people take back the right to fully "be." A people must be encouraged to celebrate not in spite of who they are, but because of who their Creator has made them. The balm that heals oppression . . . is the creation of accountable, responsible, visible, celebrating communities on the margin of mainline church and dominant society."*
- ◆ This is my dream for each of us individually and for our church – that we will feel the balm that heals oppression through the development of community that celebrates each of us wherever we are – closeted, part way out or all the way out of our various closets.
- ◆ Coming out is a process that fills a lifetime. My dream is that we can find a new way up just as Peter did after the vision that turned his world upside down. And, that we can bless each other with support and acceptance as we journey this road together. Each of us coming out in our own unique ways as we find pride in our authentic selves both individually and as a community. Amen.