

SERMON

Year B- Pentecost 20 – Oct. 10, 2021

The Rev. Carolyn Bradley, Dcn

So keep fightin' for freedom and justice, beloveds, but don't you forget to have fun doin' it.

Lord, let your laughter ring forth. Be outrageous, rejoice in all the oddities that freedom can produce. And when you get through kickin' ass and celebratin' the sheer joy of a good fight, be sure to tell those who come after how much fun it was.

Molly Ivins, American newspaper columnist, political commentator and humorist, 1944-2007

As many young Roman Catholic women of my generation, it was my intention to enter the convent upon graduation from HS. I wanted to be a Sister of Charity. The Charities from Convent Station, NJ had taught me in HS. They had also taught both my parents in elementary and HS. So imagine my surprise when I announced my intention and my mother gave a resounding "NO." Remember this is the mother who did daily evening prayers and scary lives of the saints' stories at bedtime. I was confused!

Mom's objection was due to her desire for grandchildren which apparently in her mind could only be provided by a daughter. She had 3 healthy, capable sons...so I was still confused. But we negotiated a compromise ... I would complete my undergrad degree and then revisit the issue. But that desire for religious life changed when I fell in love with a woman in my sophomore year. Hmm...God certainly does have a sense of humor. Coming out as a lesbian produced many changes in my life but it did not produce any children. Mom got 4 grandchildren from 2 of her sons, though.

Coming from a fairly strict religious family and coming out as a lesbian did create a crisis of faith for me. In the RC Act of Contrition, the prayer ends, “I firmly resolve with the help of your grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin. Amen.” How was I going to go to monthly Confession and pray the Act of Contrition when I had no intention of stopping my relationship with a woman and what to do with the Church’s teaching that to be G/L was to be intrinsically disordered? Did that make me a near occasion of sin? I was getting migraines over thinking this stuff!

At the College, we had a very wise and very kind Benedictine priest as our Chaplain. Several sessions with him helped me to separate the essence of what Christianity is from what the bureaucratic church was in order to survive as an institution. I think he was experiencing his own crisis of faith as at our graduation, we found out that he had left the priesthood and was to marry the president of our class. The 70’s...what an era!

Presbyterian pastor and out gay man, Chris Glaser, has suggested that coming out is a sacrament for LGBTQ+ people because it sets us on a lifelong path of manifesting God’s grace in our lives. Coming out is crucial to our spiritual life as embracing our LGBTQ+ identity is an invitation to go deeper in our spiritual journey. The process of coming out over the years has deepened my faith. It has moved me from fear to anger through acceptance. It has taught me to not shake my fists at the sky and ask why but rather to open my hands and ask for grace to live with integrity and love.

Coming out is also a radical political action as it is a step outside the dominant model of heteronormativity. But such action is not without risks as hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people

rise and not all 50 states provide legal protection against loss of employment or housing discrimination.

I started the coming out process in college...a process that LGBTQ+ people experience their entire lives. Each new job, home, church, social situation involves a decision to “pass” or be honest about who you are. The decision to disclose often depends on the importance of integrity in a relationship and the issue of personal safety. I came out to my priest and to my closest friends first. I felt pretty safe disclosing to them. The biggest coming out challenge would be my family.

Growing up in an Irish Catholic family and coming of age in the early 1970s, a daughter was expected to go from her father’s house to her husband’s house. Well that was not going to happen for me...ever. I had made plans to share a house after graduation with several of my friends. We jokingly referred to it as our lesbian commune. So it was time to come out to my family.

In the 70s, it was not uncommon to come out and be told to get out...permanently. So this decision brought some fear. My parents and I talked about my decision to stay in Morris County, to share a house with friends and then I explained why it was not practical for me to come home. My mother was very upset. My dad only asked if I thought I could be happy “living that kind of life.” The conversation ended very quietly. By the next morning, things were more along the line I had expected. I was banned from the house and concerns were expressed about my influence on my brothers. So I packed up my stuff and walked over to my Great Aunt Catherine’s house.

Mom went on a campaign to try to get the extended family to ban me as well. That did not turn out well for her. When she explained to my Great Aunt Catherine that I was gay, my aunt's response was that I had always been a happy child. When Mom explained what gay was and requested my aunt not allow me to stay in her house, Mom was told that my aunt was 80 years of age and quite capable of deciding who could stay in her house. I would always be welcome there and so would my friends.

It took 5 years for the ban to be lifted. Finally my father convinced my mother that I obviously wasn't going through a phase. Dad called me and said just remember your mother doesn't speak for both of us. He told me I was his daughter and he would always love me. He asked me to please come home. Dad was a man of few words but when he spoke his words were powerful.

I consider my initial coming out experience as fairly positive. I was very blessed to have an extended family network that loved and accepted me. When I shared my sexual orientation with my brothers who were 5 years and 9 years younger than me, they just laughed and said "Big surprise." I have always been a part of my brothers' lives and the lives of their families. I am the godmother of my 2 nieces. I am very blessed. Some of my friends remain cut off from their families today and are known only by name or a picture to their nieces and nephews.

In today's selection from Mark's Gospel, we hear the story of the rich young man. We are told that this young man has many possessions and that Jesus loved him. But despite Jesus' love for him, when asked to sell what he has, give the money to the poor and follow Jesus, the rich young man walks away from Jesus and chooses to retain his possessions.

The entirety of Mark's Gospel focuses on Jesus' call to follow Him; on a life of discipleship. In today's selection we see once again Jesus turning the dominant paradigm on its end. It is not his wealth that makes discipleship difficult for the rich young man. It is his inability to use his wealth to aid the condition of others. In telling the young man to sell what he has and give the money to the poor, Jesus calls for a radical change in the man's relationship with the poor...and with his wealth and status. The young man is to actually see the poor, identify with the conditions in which they live and aid them. Such action would mean not only an economic loss but a loss of status and power. Perhaps then this selection is meant to remind us of the "cost" of discipleship.

Authentic discipleship went against the dominant values of the culture then as it does today. It goes against our inherent need for self-preservation and security as discipleship requires the surrender of one's whole self to God. Jesus is not asking us to live as ascetics but to first trust entirely in Him and then to create caring communities in which the needs of all are acknowledged and met. In such a world, no one would be marginalized, oppressed or unknown.

This Sunday at Trinity we continue our annual Stewardship Campaign with the theme "Christ Be Our Light" from the hymn many know and love. The concepts in this hymn resonate with many LGBTQ+ people as they have lived in darkness, in secrecy, due to prejudice and ignorance on the part of the dominant society or due to shame regarding their sexual orientation, gender or non-binary identity. Our call to discipleship asks us to create communities where everyone can live in light and truth and receive the love and support of fellow disciples.

Jesus has made us His own. Let us share that Good News with all and build communities in which all are known, loved or accepted for who they truly are.

AMEN!