

Take Up the Mantle

Pride Sunday

A Sermon by Rev. Joann H. Lee
June 30, 2019



Scripture: 2 Kings 2:1-2, 8-14

Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, 'Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel.' But Elisha said, 'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So they went down to Bethel.

... Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, 'Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.' Elisha said, 'Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.' He responded, 'You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.' As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, 'Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, 'Where is the Lrd, the God of Elijah?' When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

ON TUESDAY, MAY 10, 2011, I was a voting, minister member at the meeting of the Presbytery of Twin Cities Area. Now, I don't usually remember the dates or even the content of most presbytery meetings (a presbytery meeting is a regional gathering of Presbyterian churches in any given area; they happen about once a month, sometimes less). But I do remember this one. You see, the previous summer, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) (which is our denomination), had voted to remove the language that barred the ordination of those who identify as LGBTQ and to replace it with language that allowed each congregation and presbytery to decide whether someone was fit for ordination, regardless of their sexuality. Basically, this change would grant permission for any church, if they so chose, to ordain those who are LGBTQ. When a change to our Book of Order (that's one part of our constitution) is passed by a majority vote at the General Assembly, it then gets sent back to the presbyteries, and a majority of presbyteries have to vote in favor of that

amendment to make the change actually happen. It's a lot of process, I know. But hang in there, change is possible. So on May 10, 2011, **if** the Presbytery of Twin Cities Area voted "YES" to this amendment, Amendment 10A, we would make it a majority of presbyteries voting yes; thereby changing the exclusionary policy of the church that had been in place since 1996.

I WON'T SAY ALL EYES WERE ON THIS VOTE because I know better. But newspapers were there, even the secular ones. And anyone who had done the work for the full inclusion (or the exclusion) of our LGBTQ siblings were standing by. I offered my live-tweeting services to my other millennial Presbyterian-nerd friends, so that they could keep up with what was happening at the meeting. (If you don't know what live-tweeting is, it just means I was telling folks what was happening, *as* it was happening through Twitter.) I was given the privilege to speak at that meeting. And because I am never one to just "wing it," I actually found my written statement in my archived files this week. I won't share it with you this morning.

BUT THAT EVENING, THE PRESBYTERY did in fact vote in favor of the amendment, changing the Book of Order, and I got to take part, in a small way, in that history. That night, with our vote, we made room for more grace and love to flourish in our pews and in the chancels; in our seminaries and in the world. Now, this church, Calvary, had been ordaining those who identify as LGBTQ long before 2011. And this congregation didn't let the 1996 ruling prevent it from continuing to ordain whomever they saw fit. In fact, the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, which was formed in 1996 to specifically overturn this exclusionary language was housed in Calvary's basement, and Laird Stuart, who was pastor of Calvary at that time, was one of its founding members. So this congregation has a long history of choosing inclusion over exclusion and grace over legalism. And perhaps that's why, for some of you, hanging a rainbow flag outside of the church seems unnecessary. That kind of welcome is so embedded in the DNA of this church, I can see why it would almost feel redundant.

BUT IN 1996, I WAS A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IN HOUSTON, TX, and I so-wanted to be a good Christian. I wanted to love God and to show the world that I loved God. All my t-shirts had all these Jesus-y sayings on them. I think I had one that looked like the "GAP" logo; you know GAP, the clothing store? And on the back it said, "God Answers Prayers." OK? So I was that kind of Christian. And in Texas, at that time, it seemed like to love God and to be a Christian meant some very, specific things, at least in my world. I'm sure I knew people who were gay and lesbian and transgender, but I didn't know they were gay or lesbian or transgender. I actually made it all the way through college and into seminary before someone came out to me.

J.C. AND I STARTED AT MCCORMICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY in Chicago the same year. Here I was, this 23 year old, sheltered and conservative Christian from Texas thrown into one of the most progressive seminaries in the country. I was still grappling with whether women should be ordained let alone anyone who identified as LGBTQ! But I wanted to learn, and I wanted to challenge myself. So I took a class called "Queer Fear and Faithful Dissent." This class lifted up some of the ways this country and the church have excluded and denied justice to those in the LGBTQIA community. It shared the stories and voices of those harmed by this exclusion. It examined passages in the Bible that were used to hurt and justify hate. And we put these scriptures into context and read them in their original biblical languages. And I began to be open and more sympathetic, but I was really still not quite sure what I thought or believed. But then J.C. befriended me. And I learned that she wanted to serve God and the church as a Minister of Word and Sacrament. She felt this call more strongly than even I did. That's why she had started seminary; whereas I had started seminary because I had just quit law school, and I needed to do something with my time. But J.C., even though she felt called, wasn't sure if she *could* get ordained; she wasn't sure the church would allow it because she was a lesbian. And J.C. came out to me at a time when it may not have been safe to do so. I may have rejected her, condemned her, or even tried to convert her. But her risk changed the trajectory of my faith. All of a sudden, this "issue" of "gay ordination" wasn't an issue anymore for me. It was about people, about my friends, about faithful followers of Jesus who loved God and who loved the church but were being denied the ability to serve the church simply because of their sexuality and gender identity.

THE FIRST PERSON I CALLED on my way home from that Presbytery meeting on May 10, 2011 was J.C. She and I cried with joy on the phone together. My personal transformation of becoming an ally to my

LGBTQIA siblings didn't even start until 2006. 2006! In the grand scheme of history, do you know how late that is? That's long after Calvary ordained its first gay deacon or elder or even pastor. It's long after the first march that would become Pride, long after Stonewall. You know, this year, we mark the 50th anniversary of Stonewall. Back in 1969, the Stonewall Inn was considered a place where those in the LGBTQIA community could gather and just be themselves. One night, the police raided the bar, beating and arresting people simply for their sexuality and gender identity, and this was not an uncommon occurrence at the time. But on this night, the patrons were not having it. They were tired of being criminalized simply for who they were, and so they fought back, led by two transgender women of color. The community stood up and spoke up and created a movement that led to the first march in 1970 that would eventually become the Pride movement.

PRIDE IS A POSITIVE STANCE AGAINST DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and gender-fluid people. Pride is also a chance to promote self-affirmation, dignity, equality, and fundamental human rights, and to celebrate that in a safe environment. Pride is a liberation movement. Rev. Shanea D. Leonard of the PC(USA) says, "the reality is Pride has always been an act of intersectional defiance started by proud, queer trans women of color in an effort to normalize our pride in ourselves as the individuals God created us to be." Stonewall, Pride Parades, Calvary's own inclusive stance, all of that has shaped the conversation of this country and the church to be more inclusive and to celebrate the diversity of all God's beloved people. But there are so many people still today who are like me in 2006, who don't know the full story, who don't know the history, who still hold to exclusionary understandings of scripture, believing it is the right way, even the only way to love and follow God.

IN FACT, THIS YEAR, Boston is set to hold its first Straight Pride Parade. Yep, you heard me right. In 2019, there are people who believe it is necessary to hold a Straight Pride Parade. Brittany Dare, a UCC minister says, "When you've been brought up in a society in which you've always had the power and the privilege, even a little bit of equality feels oppressive. When you've been led to believe that you are more holy because of your normalized sexual orientation, you're going to feel mighty offended when those LGBTQ+ folks start claiming they are just as holy as you. Equality is offensive to those who used to have the upper hand." And we are seeing that in play this summer. The reality, however is that, as a straight woman, I have never had to fight for my right to marry my husband; I didn't have to wonder if my sexuality would discount me from ordination; I've never worried about showing affection to my partner in public; I've never been called a slur or feared for my life because of my sexuality. I never worried if my family might disown me because of who I love. And I am grateful for those privileges. I should be grateful. But I don't need a parade to celebrate something that's always been normalized and accepted and just handed to me on a silver platter. It is utterly unnecessary and quite honestly, it's offensive.

BETWEEN STRAIGHT PRIDE PARADES, attempted bans in the military against the transgender community, wildly hateful cults like Westboro Baptist Church, and even the well-meaning and clueless person wrapped in their own heterosexual privilege, like me in 2006 (and, let's be honest, still today), it is all the more important, to stand up, to speak out, to fly a rainbow flag of welcome, and to take up the mantle left for us by those who've gone before us:
like Harvey Milk,
like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera,
like Laird Stuart and those first members of the Covenant Network and More Light Presbyterians, and That All May Freely Serve,
like all those who have said no to oppression,
no to marginalization,
no to injustice.

JUST AS ELIJAH, in today's scripture, left his mantle to Elisha, we have been given the mantle, and we must choose to take it up. This mantle was not the source of Elijah's power; it was the symbol of it. And it held within it the history and the story of the liberation of the Israelite people; it parts the waters of the Jordan River, just as Moses did at the Red Sea. And yet Elijah even with the great gifts and powers given to him by God, couldn't

finish the work of God on his own, so he left that work, to Elisha. Elisha took up the mantle, and it is said that Elisha didn't do this work alone, but that he shared that mantle of responsibility and ministry with others. We are all Elisha. The Elijahs who've gone before us have left us work to do. But we do not have to do it alone. We do not carry the mantle by ourselves. We can share this work together. In fact, we must share our work, because just as we are all Elisha, we are also all Elijah, called to mentor and teach and bring others along behind us. We need to risk passing the mantle to generations that will follow; we have to risk sharing the mantle today with those who might just be on the cusp of being ready.

GLORIA STEINEM HAS SAID: "You know, people often ask me, at this age, who am I passing the torch to?" The torch she speaks of here is the mantle in today's scripture lesson, isn't it? And here's how she replies, "...I always say, first of all, that I'm not giving up my torch, thank you very much ... I'm using my torch to light other people's torches. Because the idea that there's one torch-passer is part of the bonkers hierarchical idea—and if we each have a torch, there's a lot more light." I love that concept, that there's not just one torch being passed from one person to the next. But that we all each have a torch, and we share the light from that torch with others. And that way, if one of us falls, if one of us gets exhausted or our flame burns out, there are so many others who can help us relight our torch. Friends, I know we are living in oppressive times. Human rights violations bombard us daily. There are children dying on our southern border; there are young, gay youth who are taking their lives; black, transgender women are being murdered at alarming rates; and any steps we've made towards progress and inclusion seem to be getting rolled back and challenged. But we run this race with perseverance, with hope, with conviction because we remember those who've gone before us, who have paved the way, who gave their mantle to us to pick up, who have shared their light and lit our torches. And we run this race with perseverance, with hope, with conviction because we do not run it alone. We have each other.

INSTALLING AMY HOCKMAN as elder today is a perfect example of how we share this work as a church community; how we step in as we are called; and how even on our boards of leadership, like session, we have term limits of three years, so that other people can then step in and share this ministry and work. And since I'm mixing all kinds of metaphors this morning any way, here's just one more; this time from music. Michael Moore shares this one. He says:

"This morning I have been pondering a nearly forgotten lesson I learned in high school music. Sometimes in band or choir, music requires players or singers to hold a note longer than they actually can hold a note. In those cases, we were taught to mindfully stagger when we took a breath, so the sound appeared uninterrupted. Everyone got to breathe, and the music stayed strong and vibrant."

He continues:

"Yesterday, I read an article that suggested the administration's litany of bad executive orders is a way of giving us "protest fatigue" – we will literally lose our will to continue the fight in the face of the onslaught of negative action.

Let's remember MUSIC. Take a breath. The rest of the chorus will sing.

The rest of the band will play. Rejoin so others can breathe.

Together, we can sustain a very long, beautiful song for a very, very long time. You don't have to do it all, but you must add your voice to the song."

FRIENDS, THE WORK OF JUSTICE is on-going and will go on for a long, long time. But we are called to it. And the God who created us is co-creating a new and different world where justice, and peace, and love reign.

So take up the mantle. And let others hold it, too.

Light your torch; And share your light with someone else.

Sing. And breathe. And sing again.

Amen.