

Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 6, 2007

Those of you who know me, you know that I enjoy telling stories—probably a little too much. I come from a family of storytellers. So, I'd like to tell you one of my own stories this evening.

I was about 16 years old when my beloved Aunt Kathryn (my father's aunt) passed away. At the time, I was in high school and was focused on things that teenagers focus on—fitting in, girls, boys, grades, how I would do at the next track meet, and perhaps a little bit on college. At the wake, my father's cousin's husband, a man I hardly knew, began a conversation with me about college and careers. I didn't have much to say and had a hard time giving answers to his questions. He had a son the same age as me, who seemed utterly uninterested in communicating with him, and perhaps this was part of the reason.

Nevertheless, he asked me what I wanted to do as a career. I told him that I didn't really know, but that I had always thought when I was younger that I wanted to be an architect, but that when I looked into it more, I realized it would be a very tough 5 years of college, with very few prospects for making a lot of money, although I could likely make a living at it. I told him that I had thought I could be a hotel manager, with less time in college, ability to travel, and possibility of making more money—plus, I like talking to people, and that would be a large part of that career. He asked which career would truly make me happy. No one had ever asked me this before, but I thought about it for a few moments. I told him that I truly loved architecture. It was what I always thought about. I constantly sketched imaginary buildings and cities and had created entire towns out of my Legos when I was younger. He said, "Let me tell you a story". (as I said, I come from a family of storytellers). When I was in school, there was a student in my class who was always disrupting class and clowning around and telling jokes. The teacher kept on telling him that he'd never amount to anything if all he ever did was clown around and tell jokes. He would always tell the teacher, "Someday, I'm gonna be a famous comedian." My father's cousin husband said to me, "Do you know who that man is?" "Alan Alda!"

Well, his story may have been kinda hokey, and I'm not sure if it was even true, but I felt at that moment, that God was speaking directly to me, as if my father's cousin's husband, was temporarily transformed into an angel, telling me to seek in life what would make me truly happy. I have never forgotten that moment, a random conversation with someone I barely knew. It was a mini-epiphany for me.

In the long run, I went to college to become an architect, and have made architecture my career. There are many things I may have been unsure about in my life: my sexuality, relationships, places to live, and money, but one thing has remained constant. The career I chose is one that I love: truly, and every day.

I suppose that my coming-out story might have a similar theme (making a choice to live in a way that will make me truly happy), as was probably the case for many of you, but I think that will be another story for another time.

We all have our own stories—the stories of our lives and our struggles—and they are so important. It's important to tell them and re-tell them. They give knowledge and inspiration, and courage to those who listen.

Storytelling...

Storytelling is an important tradition in the Jewish religion. In some Jewish communities, it is even given an elevated status, equal with prayer and reading from the Torah. Often, these stories are told not simply to relate an idea or a moral, but to relate specifically to the listener's life. In Jewish tradition, the storyteller asks the listeners to place themselves in the minds of the characters of the stories, to relive the action of the story and to feel all the emotions and sensations of the characters. The result is meant to make the listener really feel the experience in body and mind. It also allows the listener to understand how this story might be applicable to them, in their life at that very moment.

So, I'm going to ask all of you to briefly "live" these stories we just heard again. Imagine that this message was written for you, sitting here in this church, right here, right now.

The First reading described the Beginning of the new church...

The followers of Jesus formed a new church; different from the traditions of Jews or Gentiles. It was a new kind of faith. The disciples spread the word by allowing God to work through them. The passage reads, "they called the church together and related all that God had done with them." , not what they had done on their own, or what they had done with God's help—what God had done with them.

As the disciples traveled, they encouraged and strengthened people because they knew that persecutions would be necessary to enter the kingdom. Followers were told that they would endure hardships because of who they were and what they believed. (Does this sound familiar?) Paul and Barnabas related their own experiences to give hope to these communities in exile. They let them know that despite all the hardships, more and more people were becoming followers. They saw this as a sign of God working through them.

The disciples appointed men and women as elders in the church, to continue to spread the good news. These are some of the earliest stories of ordination. People from the established communities were encouraged to come forward to become leaders—new rabbis or priests for a new kind of church.

Does this sound like any congregation we know? New kind of faith, forming a group of elders to spread the faith, enduring persecution not just from religious authorities, and the political overseers, but also from their own ethnic and social communities. Imagine for a moment that that Paul and Barnabas are here, right now, on the altar, telling us their stories of persecution, but also of success. They are here appointing elders, deacons, and priests to spread our good news--our stories of love and truth—to our community.

The reading says that “He had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles” Gary was kind enough to help me research this word “Gentiles” in this translation of the Acts of the Apostles. The word in Greek is Ethnos, Ta-Ethnay, which means “nation”, or group of people with common ancestry or backgrounds. It is a root of English words, like ethnic, and ethnicity. It would seem that the writer was saying that God opened a door of faith to the others--- those not originally considered chosen or holy. Does this mean everyone? Has God opened a door of faith for us?

These early communities were changing structures of society from within, from below, from lowly beginnings. They were willing to challenge norms. They struggled to find consensus and to find where their common faith came together. At the same time, they tried to spread their message of love far and wide, to all societies of the world.

Does this early church sound anything like our Dignity community?—forming a new kind of faith, allowing God to work through us to spread the word—not just to Catholics, or just to LGBT people, but to everyone. Our message is for all and many need to hear and want to hear it. God is telling us here and now to tell people about what we do here and to Spread the Good News!

We know what the result of these early activities was—the foundation of the new church. Could it be that what we do here at Dignity right now is the basis of a new church—a new kind of faith?

The Second reading describes the coming of the New city- the new Jerusalem- the new church –the new world

The Book of Revelation was actually a series of seven letters, written as encouragement for early Christian communities, who were persecuted.

The writer tells us that the old heaven and old earth will be more. Not only will there be a new heaven and earth; but the two will become one.

The new Jerusalem will be “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband”

Imagine for a moment that this is your dream. Imagine what this might look like-- A beautiful city, decorated and pure, and filled with light (imagine the New York

skyline from a distance at sunset, becoming more radiant and colorful as it comes closer). Imagine that this city will be joined with us, like two people joining as one in matrimony.

God is consoling and encouraging us right now. God will dwell among us: “the home of God is among mortals” God with us.
God will wipe away all the pain and hurt.

This image is meant to foretell a momentous occasion— a cause for great celebration. It describes several things-- Jesus joining us in our humanity on Earth, the coming of the Holy Spirit to be One with us at Pentecost, as well as the promise of eternal life with God, which we celebrate throughout this Easter Season.

The reading tells us that the powers of the world are subject to God—this message gave hope to a powerless community at that time. It may be giving us a message of hope right now. Are there powers of the world that hold us back, or cause us pain and mourning? Do we feel like a powerless community, persecuted by our church, our society, and sometimes even by our own LGBT community? Well, God says, “see I am making all things new”

“How do we help create this new community—the New Jerusalem?” The Gospel reading answers this question.

In this reading from the Last Supper, Jesus speaks directly to us—then as now. Again, image yourself as one of the disciples, sitting with Jesus at the table <motioning to the altar>.

Jesus calls us little children. He tells us that God has always loved His people. Then, he tells us a most important message: the new commandment:

“Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another”

This new commandment is compelling not only because it gives one simple command that summarizes the Ten 10 Commandments, but also because Jesus displayed this love to his followers. He was (and is) a mentor showing his students how to live, by His own example.

He tells us (then, as now) “Everyone will know you are one of my disciples if you have love for one another.”--Just like the song, “They will know we are Christians by our love”. This is how to be known as one of Jesus’ disciples. Loving one another is an identifying feature of the church in the world, shared among all its members.

WE ARE PART OF THE CHURCH right now BECAUSE WE LOVE, BUT WE ARE ALSO PART OF THE CHURCH TO COME—THE NEW JERUSALEM.

This was true at the time the Gospel was written, but it exemplifies our community today. Think about the force of good that our love has on each other, our church, our LGBT community, and the world. The new kind of love that we share has the ability to bring about the New Jerusalem. It is a profound change in the way society and relationships work. Could it be that our Dignity community is more like the roots of our church, than the church itself?

How will the new church, new kingdom come about? LOVE! It is in the kind of love that Jesus describes that all things will be made new.

But how can we do this? Where do we fit in? Jesus tells us that we can create a New Jerusalem on earth, by our own good deeds. Here are some practical suggestions:

Forgive. A lot of people will do awful things to in our lives. Forgiving is truly one of the most difficult human activities, yet all of us know it is necessary component of any human relationship. If we cannot learn how to forgive, it will be difficult to ever love anyone.

Be slow to criticize. Everyone deserves a chance (or two).

Live in the Light: Keeping our heads out of anger, fear, or depression will allow to think clearer and will give us the ability to love.

Allow yourself to be loved. We are not able love others if our own self-esteem is so low that we cannot love ourselves and cannot allow someone to love us. Allow yourself to be loved by your partner, family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, community, and most of all, God.

Do for others: Give your time, your emotional and mental help to those you encounter. Giving time and energy to others is a profound outward sign of love. The person you help may reciprocate, or may pass on this time, energy and love to others. Yet, even if they don't, your example to them and to others who can experience it is the same example Jesus showed us.

LOVE one another: Every day, wherever you go, with every person you encounter. It means to love your partner and your family members wholeheartedly, but it also means to love the cashier at Duane Reade, the man leaning on you in the next seat on the 6 train, the woman asking you for some change, the new recruit you're interviewing for a job with your company, people around the world you've never met, and people who live next door who you've never spoken to. Don't just love people on your Christmas card list. Love everyone on God's Christmas card list.

We have a tendency to view all of these scripture stories as written in one moment in time, with limited relevance today. In reality, these stories are fully

written for us today, here and now in this church. This is our message, written for us. This is our story, that we now write. We are the early church, we are the ones preparing and awaiting the new Jerusalem, and we are the ones following Jesus' example of love.

Sisters and Brothers, this is a time for rejoicing!