

Homily given at Dignity/NY Pride Liturgy on Saturday, June 27, 2009
at Judson Memorial Church by Tom McLoughlin

I missed the first night of Stonewall. I was around the corner having a drink with friends at a bar called Julius, the oldest gay bar in New York, when someone came in to say that the Stonewall Inn had been raided and that Christopher Street was filled with police.

The New York State Liquor authority had a rule not to serve the “disorderly” and homosexuals were considered disorderly. . However, in 1966, a group of men from the Mattachine society held a “sip-in” at Julius, they identified themselves as homosexuals and demanded to be served. The bartender refused them, the NYTimes covered the story with the headline “Three deviates invite exclusion by bars”. The Mattachine Society challenged the liquor rule in court and the court ruled that homosexuals had a right to assemble.

So gay bars were legal --- Not really

if you ordered a hamburger in Julius, you could not sit at a table to eat it unless there was a woman at the table. There was a sign on the mirror behind the bar that said all patrons must face the bar. If your back was turned to the bar, it might seem that you were cruising.

The police still raided gay bars. Arrests were rare. That privilege was often reserved for drag queens and others that the police considered undesirables. However, the police did enjoy humiliating patrons, pulling surprise raids on bars and demanding identification, usually under the pretense that alcohol was being sold illegally. Fearing that they would come into Julius when they were finished with the Stonewall Inn, my friend and I left the bar and took a cab to the upper eastside to another gay venue. After all, I was in my twenties, a few years out of college, teaching at a Catholic high school and living at home with my parents that summer. The last thing I needed was to be arrested or to have my picture in the papers.

The next morning the same friend called and told me that the raid at the Stonewall Inn did not go as the police had planned. The patrons did not leave willingly, but actually fought back. Bottles were thrown, the crowds who were gathered in front of the park across the street joined in the chanting and bottle throwing; they blocked the streets, so as additional police could not come through, cars were trampled, garbage bins were overturned. Order was not reestablished until the early morning.

I went down to the village that afternoon to learn more about the night before. Folks were talking about the raid and there was excitement in the streets. I spent the entire day there, listening to the rumors, the calls to action, the calls for calm. I didn't even notice the heavier than usual police presence.

By nighttime Christopher Street was filled with gay men and lesbians, most of them very young . They were jeering at and taunting the police. The crowd grew into the hundreds, some say thousands, and it became louder and rowdier. The chanting and name calling were again at times interrupted by flying objects and there were rows of riot police trying to push back and disperse the crowds.

Was I frightened, you bet. I didn't want to be hurt or arrested or photographed and identified as a gay man. This wasn't my first protest, I was a veteran of many civil rights marches and peace rallies. But this night felt different. I was actually out there as a gay man. I was loudly proclaiming my identity. I was learning new slogans, laughing at some of the chants, being part of a wall of protesters. Being surrounded by friends made it easier for me, and our being surrounded by those fabulous gay and lesbian kids made it so empowering for us.

What was happening was special, Being gay in NYC was going to be a lot more fun and I would be living here in Manhattan, full time, in less than a year.

The rioting actually continued for a third night before order was restored. I was not there on night three as I had a summer job. A political rally followed within a month and new gay organizations were founded. A year later, a march was organized to commemorate the riots and a few thousand lesbians and gays walked, some say ran, up sixth avenue into Central Park. The police gave them only one lane of traffic to hold their march.. I was living on East 43rd street in Tudor City and I walked over to sixth avenue and watched the crowds go by. My friend Tim was among the marchers and he shouted to me "Out of the closet, into the streets". I laughed and joined him and began a very long personal tradition. Tomorrow will be the 39th year that I have spent the last Sunday in June walking in a gay pride march in either New York or San Francisco. I have never missed one. And I have also done it on other Sundays in Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Diego, Long Beach, Philadelphia, Washington DC, Savannah, San Antonio, Reno, Charlotte, Montreal and Sydney, Australia. I love a parade

For me in the 70's being gay was certainly more important than being Catholic. Saturday nights ran into Sunday mornings. I needed some sleep before Brunch. There was no time for church. I was having too much fun. The church's teachings were anti-gay. The church rejected gays, the emerging gay community welcomed us in all our diversity. I knew which group I wanted to belong to.

My job transferred me to San Francisco in 1978. I didn't think it possible, but I became even gayer. What a beautiful city, what a beautiful decade, what a beautiful life. I was a totally happy camper, save for one day in November of that year when the city was brought to a halt by the horrid news that our first openly gay elected supervisor was assassinated along with the mayor. I'll never forget that night when the gay community gathered at Castro and 17th streets and walked in silence to city hall illuminating the night sky with their thousands of candles. This scene was so beautifully recreated in the movie "Milk", a film that I highly recommend for its portrayal of the growth of the LGBT political movement in the USA. How wonderful it was to see our community united in its shared grief, giving support to each other, comforting each other, reacting with calm

rather than violence. Just a few years later, though, when Harvey Milk's assassin was convicted of only a manslaughter charge and not first degree murder, our community made that same pilgrimage down Market Street filled with rage and righteous anger.

In 1981 I attended a noon time lecture at Old St Mary's church in the downtown business district. It was given by Kevin Gordon , a former member of DignityNY and a former Christian brother. We had been friend since our coming out days in New York. Kevin was compiling stories for a commission he was chairing which was to report on ministry and homosexuality in the Archdiocese of San Francisco. The report was to be delivered to the Archdiocese Commission on Social Justice.

The Archdiocese rejected the report and dissolved the Commission on Social Justice and fired its Chairman.

In the report, Kevin told of one story of a gay man who went to church on Tuesday because he didn't feel welcome in the pews on Sunday. I said to myself, "I am that man" . I could always find time during the week to make a visit to a church, yet I never would go on a Sunday. I couldn't be part of a church that hated me. Yet I couldn't give up the faith that comforted me and nurtured me so many times in my life. At the reception following that lecture Kevin told me about DignitySF and I decided to give it a try.

I was hooked. I found a church, a community, a movement, an acceptance. I found the piece of my life that was missing. I was able to worship in a space where I was comfortable, where I was accepted, where I was safe. And the music was fabulous. I was surrounded by men and women who understood my pain and my joy. Every Sunday, I saw new faces. Faces with expressions similar to mine the first time I went to Dignity. I saw faces that were apprehensive, faces that were doubtful. And eventually, I saw more and more faces that were healed of their hurt and their shame. Many of the folks who achieved the reconciliation of their spiritual and sexual selves move on , blessed by their contact with Dignity. I decided to stay. Not only because I found my family in Dignity, but I wanted

Dignity to be there for those questioning, seeking , hurting lesbians and gays who would follow me. I wanted to be sure our doors stayed open.

I think the first step a person takes coming into a Dignity meeting, is also the first step they take in coming out of the closet of emotional and religious oppression. Dignity helps people to accept themselves fully as they are and are called to become. This is true liberation, true freedom. When this closet door is open, all the other closet doors open more easily.

I hadn't realized it at first , but Dignity was founded the very same year as the Stonewall riots, by a group of Lesbian and gay people meeting in San Diego and Los Angeles. And as Stonewall fostered new organizations like GAA and NGTF, these good folks in Los Angeles spread the word of their new found community and Dignity chapters were founded all across the USA and Canada. By 1972 there were chapters in Boston, Chicago, San Francisco and, thank God, here in New York. Eventually, Dignity was in more than 110 cities across the US.

As we heard in the reading from Wisdom tonite "God fashioned all things that they might have being, and the creatures of the world are wholesome. There is no domain of the netherworld on earth, for justice is undying." As LGBT people of faith, we know in our hearts and in our bones, that these words are about us, too, and I believe, no, I know, that the holy spirit was present when the Stonewall riots occurred and Dignity was founded.. We were not created to remain the netherworld of police harassment and Vatican condemnation and second-class citizenship.

In the second reading, St. Paul urges us to give from our abundance to supply the need of those who have less, and to also to allow ourselves to be nurtured from the abundance of others. There is no doubt that we have done that to one another, by the tens of thousands, in the forty years of Dignity's existence.

I have received so much from my Dignity family. In 1986, my lover Kenny was dying of AIDS. In the last three months of his life there was always a member of DignitySF in our home. Before I left for work in the morning a Dignity member was there to be sure Kenny's breakfast was made when he awoke. Whenever I was away from home, a Dignity member was there to care for him, to feed him or just to sit nearby and read a book while he slept. And in NYC, the spiritual, emotional, practical and financial aid that the DignityNY gave to those with AIDS and in need is legendary. The story was the same in Dignity chapters all across America. I imagine I speak for many when I say that I am eternally grateful.

And in the Gospel reading from Mark, we have two amazing stories of the power of God's healing over illness of the body and soul and even over death. It was not proper of the bleeding woman to reach out and touch Jesus. It broke every social norm and taboo. In the context of the times it was outrageous. She was an outcast, seen as impure, someone who would contaminate others with her affliction. But she dared to reach out for healing and received it. "Daughter, your faith has saved you", Jesus told her. Likewise he told the grieving father of the young girl who appeared to be dead, "Do not be afraid, just have faith" I am so grateful for the faith those Stonewall rioters and Dignity founders had, for their faith in God's love, in God's protection and in God's creation of them in his own image.

Thanks to Dignity, I have been able to nurture my spirit through political activism and service to our community. I think I have come a long way since the riots of 40 years ago. And I am celebrating this anniversary by reaffirming my commitment to our Dignity community. I will continue to work for our liberation in politics, in the workplace and in the church. I want marriage equality and federal law protecting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people in the work place and in the streets.

And I want Dignity here for the next generation, And I want it to be a strong organization, ready and able to go to bat for us when our church leaders come out with their latest bit of nonsense. And I want Dignity to continue to minister to us and to speak out for us.

And I would ask you to recommit yourselves to Dignity and to continue to give your gifts of time and talent and treasure. I think that Dignity is one of the greatest gifts that God has given us As we celebrate these 40 years of Stonewall, let us give thanks for the new life of liberation and hope we have found in Dignity. And I thank you for letting me share my story. Please join me tomorrow as we bear witness in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral and then march down Fifth Avenue. As it has been in the past , It will be, I promise you, a fabulous journey.

Happy Pride.