

Title: A Father's Journey from Confusion to Pride

Text: Colossians 1:11-20

A Meditation preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

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Ever since leaving seminary some 30 years ago, it has been a dream of mine to return to a seminary campus in some sort of professional role. I once had dreams of teaching, until I realized that my spiritual gift set was not that of a teacher. At one point I even considered accepting a position in the Development Office just for the chance of being close to faculty and students engaged in the learning process. The thought of being invited to preach, even though that does fit my spiritual gift set, never crossed my mind because, you see, when I was in seminary it was only the older more experienced pastors who were invited to share their gifts with the student body. So imagine my shock when Susan Minasian invited me to preach. Imagine my greater shock when I discovered for myself that with only about 10 more years to go until I reach retirement age, I am one of the older, more experienced pastors.

This morning I want to honor the request that you have made of me to be a preacher during this week when you are acknowledging the struggle of those in our society who are gay, lesbian, bi sexual and trans gender and who feel like they are not a part of the body of Christ. Before I speak of my personal experience with these sexual orientations, I want to speak as one who has done some wrestling with the text which your committee chose for me.

The reading from Colossians was the reading from the Common Lectionary for Christ the King Sunday which we celebrated just a few days ago. As you know, Christ the King Sunday is the final Sunday in the church's year. It is supposed to be the culmination of the message which we have preached for the previous 51 weeks; a summing up, if you will, of all that has gone before. Christ the King Sunday is that Sunday when we proclaim that God alone is the ruler of all that is and all that is to come. In the words of that old familiar hymn, "though the wrong

seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.”

This is the message of Paul to the Christians at Colossae. The power of God is stronger than the power of this world, and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has reconciled everything to himself. Paul does not say that he reconciled **SOME** things. Paul says **EVERYTHING**, and I am assuming here that he also means all people. I am assuming that he is making a case for the power of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ transcending the barriers of humanity and in one final act reconciling Jew and Gentile, Scythian and Roman, slave and free, man and woman, minority races with majority races, gay people and straight people--- **EVERYTHING** and **EVERYONE** is reconciled to God by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

I am particularly fond of what Leslie Weatherhead has to say about this passage. Weatherhead was the Pastor of the City Temple in London, England during WWII, and he writes: **“That God will reach at last God’s ultimate goal [a RELATIONSHIP which God desires with humankind]; that nothing of value will be lost in the process, however man may divert and damn up the stream of purpose nearest him; and that God, if he cannot use men as his willing agents, will, though with great pain to himself and themselves, use them as his willing instruments.”**

The theological concepts we are dealing with here are omnipotence and grace. We are saying is that God is in charge, not human beings, and the more that you and I struggle for control the further we move from God. However, the more we surrender ourselves to the One who has already redeemed **EVERYTHING** in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the closer we come to God.

Now let me try to relate all this to the reason why you have asked me to be your preacher for the morning. You see, I am the father of a lesbian. Let me tell you a little about Holly before I share with you the journey I have made as her father from confusion to pride.

Holly is 27 years old. She was born October 23, 1974 in Syracuse, NY, and from the

moment she entered the world, and even before she entered the world, she captured my heart. Like her mother, she is a red head with just the right amount of freckles. She has been an intense personality from the moment she was born, and she has always been interested in helping other people. I remember one day when she was about two years old a woman came to our door who was mentally ill. She was asking for help, fearing that she might harm her daughter who was about the same age as Holly. While I talked to this woman and tried to assess what I should do, Holly took charge of the little girl and began to share toys with her so that she would not be afraid. When I thanked her for looking out for this little girl, Holly said, "I like helping you, Dad."

Today Holly is still helping people. She graduates from Temple University this month with her Masters in Social Work, and she is already working as a Clinical Social Worker at Fox Chase Cancer Center in Philadelphia.

Holly lives in a committed relationship with her partner, Brenda. Brenda is a marvelously sensitive woman who works as a Pediatric Nurse on the Oncology Unit of Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. The two of them have known each other for about five years. They became room mates about four years ago, and they announced their love for one another and their desire to be defined as a couple to us three years ago on Thanksgiving Weekend.

On July 1, 2000 we honored their desire with a Ceremony of Covenant Commitment at Old First Reformed Church in Downtown Philadelphia, and as of All Saints Day a few weeks ago they honored us with our first grand child, Emma. So be careful around me! I am a proud Father and an even prouder Grandfather, and I have pictures!!

What I have shared with you may sound as though it has been an easy journey for me to embrace my daughter's sexual orientation. Trust me! The journey has been anything but easy. Professionally I had always been on the side of inclusiveness in my denominational struggles. When I was just a few years older than Holly, I worked with a Roman Catholic Deacon who became my best friend and who came out to me as a gay man in the context of our friendship.

Through my friend, Michael, I had experienced the struggle first hand in the mid 1970's of what it meant to be gay and seeking ordination, and for the last 25 years I thought I had it all worked out as I have fought for the rights of gay and lesbian people to serve my church as Elders, Deacons, and Ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

However, it is a far, far different thing to struggle with an issue which confronts our church and to struggle with the identity of a daughter which did not fit the profile that I had for her as a daughter. Beyond my natural concern for her safety in a world which is still not friendly to gay and lesbian people, I had no idea that like most fathers, I had some preconceived notions of what our life would be like as she became an adult and sought to establish a family of her own.

I expected that I would have the opportunity to get to know her boyfriends and celebrate with her the time when one of them would come home and do the traditional "asking for her hand in marriage" routine. I looked forward to helping my son in law understand his role as struggled to relate to this strong willed woman who was his wife and whom I had experienced as a daughter. I had hoped that there would be some "guy things" that we might share as they began a family together, and all that changed on Thanksgiving Weekend, 1998.

What hit me first was confusion. People sometimes ask me when I first suspected my daughter's sexual orientation, and I can honestly say I did not suspect a thing until the night that she and her partner announced their relationship to us. I was unprepared for what I had heard, and I was in shock. It is not that I was homophobic. I just did not expect to have to deal with this issue in one of my children, and I was confused as to what signs I had missed and what would happen next.

Following quickly on the heels of confusion came fear. I was fearful of what might happen to my daughter in a world that is not friendly to gay and lesbian people. I was also fearful of what the members of my church and this community might think of me. You know the question: "I wonder what went wrong in their family that their daughter turned out like she did?"

It was at this point that my wife and I made one of the best decisions we have made in our married life. We sought help. We turned to the Samaritan Counseling Center and sought a professional on the staff there who had helped other parents in similar circumstances. It was through those weekly appointments with our counselor that we talked through the myriad of feelings we were having as we grieved the loss of an image we had of our daughter and began to embrace the reality of who she was.

Months of counseling and hours of conversation with Holly and her partner, Brenda, helped my wife, Cherie, and me move from our initial reaction of fear to a desire to be supportive of them as they sought to build the kind of life any parent would be pleased to affirm. They talked of wanting a ceremony of some kind that would acknowledge publically what they felt for each other, and we helped them to plan for and pay for that ceremony. In the process preparing for that event, all four of us had to *come out* of the proverbial closet: Holly and Brenda to their friends and other family members as well as their co workers, and Cherie and I to the lay leadership of our church as well as to our friends. None of that was easy for not everyone was or is able to embrace their life, but in the end it has been worth it because none of us is leading a double life of secrecy.

So as we sat in the Sanctuary of Old First Reformed Church in downtown Philadelphia on July 1, 2000 [*the day after my own denomination had recommended an amendment to the constitution of my church that would forbid the same kind of service taking place in the Sanctuary of First Presbyterian and forbid me from participating in such a service*] I was supportive of my daughter's choice of a partner and of her sexual orientation.

However, in the midst of the sermon delivered by a Trustee of this Seminary, Dr. Geneva Butz, I had a conversion experience, and it has been my experience that the longer one is in the ministry the more difficult it is to have conversion experiences. As she spoke about Holly and Brenda's decision to publically make a covenant with one another and how difficult that was for heterosexual couples in our culture yet alone homosexual couples, it dawned on me that support

was not good enough. **I needed to be more than supportive. I needed to be proud of my daughter** for she was living out the very values and beliefs I had tried to teach her from the time she was a child. And then came the conversion. In an instant it dawned on me that if God is truly the God whom we proclaimed on Christ the King Sunday who has redeemed EVERYTHING, then God has redeemed my daughter equally as much as God has redeemed me by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Since that conversion experience I am probably as obnoxious as any new convert, for I have come to the firm conviction that if Christians spent more time witnessing to the power of God and less time deciding who was in and who was out of the Kingdom of God, that there would be a lot more people wanting to sit at this table with us today and every time we celebrate this mystery of God's power.

So thank you for helping me to fulfill the dream of contributing something to the life of a seminary community, but imagine my shock when Susan Minasian called to ask if I would be the speaker at the chapel service during a week when you are honoring the struggle of what it means for some of you to be openly gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgendered persons who are studying to serve your Lord in the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. It dawned on me that my credentials for being invited here this morning were not because I am the the Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Lancaster, PA, nor were they my 30 years of experience in the parish ministry. My credentials are simply that I am a Dad: Holly's dad--a woman of whom I am extremely proud--and who by the grace of the same God that welcomes me to partake of this sacrament, also welcomes her and others like her, as well. Amen.