

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

December 30, 2007

Text: Isaiah 63:7-9; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

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The First Sunday of Christmas

The Feast of the Expulsion

Seminal events are those unexpected experiences that dramatically change our direction in life. So we hear about the corporate executive who went sailing for the first time with some friends and the next day chucked it all, sold everything, bought a boat and sailed around the world. Or the much-respected scholar, who, after attending a weekend retreat on meditation, resigned her tenured faculty position and moved to the Alaska wilderness. While most of us have not experienced seminal events that dramatic, many of us do have stories to tell.

One of my seminal event stories relates to today's observance of the Feast of the Expulsion. Nearly 30 years ago I attended a conference here in San Francisco on "Religion and the Homosexual." One of the planners of that conference was the recently ordained co-pastor of this congregation, Nan Hirleman, who some of you met last December when we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the dedication of our church building. I was invited to this invitation-only conference because at the time I was serving as the Executive Secretary of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. Our small church body was the major catalyst in moving the two larger Lutheran church bodies toward merger. Part of my job was to show up at every inter-Lutheran meeting in the western United States and advocate for the creation of a new united Lutheran Church. It took ten years, but in 1988, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America came into being. The first time in the history of the Lutheran Church in this country that we have had a truly national church and not just regional churches. But I digress. I just wanted you to know how I happened to be at this conference on Religion and the Homosexual.

At this two-day conference, I gained a lot of new information about what life was like for gay and lesbian people in a majority heterosexual world that disdained them. Frankly, in my then 43 years, I had never given it much thought. The seminal moment for me at this conference came when we saw one of the early documentaries about gay life entitled, "The Word is Out." The film was just a series of head shot vignettes of a variety of individuals telling their stories. But one story is seared forever in my memory. This middle-aged man was telling about gay life in San Francisco in the 50's. You could go into the bars, but you couldn't touch for fear of being arrested. However, one of the gay entertainers of the time, José Sarria who later became famous as the Widow Norton and the founder of the Imperial Court – Jose at 85 is still hale and hearty by the way and living in Palm Springs – anyway, Jose did a drag show at a club in North Beach called the Black Cat. And as this man in the documentary told the story of 20 years earlier he started to tear up. As he told it, at the end of every show, Jose would call all the patrons in the club to join hands and to the tune of "God Bless America", sing at the top of their voices, "God Bless us Nelly Queens." Many would be in tears. And at that moment I realized: "This is the only church gay people have." And almost at that same moment I recognized that gay liberation was different from all other liberation movements. Coming of age during the civil rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, I knew that historically, minorities were able to turn to their churches to get them through the tough times. Gays did not have that option. They only had each other. But the need

to keep silence prevented them from finding each other. For the most part, they were utterly and completely alone.

How awful! Here I was a pastor of the Church of Jesus Christ, a Lutheran pastor founded on a theology of grace, and we were telling a whole segment of the human family, "The Gospel, the sacraments and community are not available to you!" That was a seminal event in my life. Through totally unrelated circumstances, three-and-a-half years later I became the pastor of St. Francis Lutheran Church, who had already taken some steps to reach out to the LGBT community that surrounded them.

We hear seminal event stories all the time in church. The Christmas story is such a story. So is today's Gospel, which on the church calendar used to be called The Slaughter of the Innocents. The writer of Matthew's gospel, writing some 70 years after these events happened, wanted his Jewish hearers to know that just as Moses' infant contemporaries were killed by Pharaoh's police and Moses was saved when his mother put him in a basket and floated him down the Nile, soon to be discovered by Pharaoh's daughter who raised him in the Egyptian court, so also Jesus was saved from Herod's police as his parents fled...where? into Egypt. It was also a reminder that Jesus life was like Moses' life from birth, a narrative beset by danger, by risk, conspiracy, treachery and violence. To Matthew's Jewish readers, Jesus is the new Moses, who three chapters later delivers a sermon on a mountain that, does not begin with "Thou Shalt Not", but with "Blessed Are You." "Blessed are you who are persecuted, who are poor in spirit, for yours is the Kingdom of God."

It is a reminder that he who shares our flesh and blood came to help us – to free those who all their lives were held in the slavery of fear. Not only the fear of death, but the fear of discovery. Matthew is saying to the early Christians who never knew when the next wave of police raids and arrest was going to come, "Don't be afraid of being found out! Remember Jesus narrative of oppression and suffering. That even with death comes resurrection!"

And that is why we must never be afraid when seminal events come into our lives. These seminal events do not define who we are, but they do define what we will do – or won't do. You can flee from what is in front of you as Jesus was tempted to do in the Garden of Gethsemane or you can embrace it like he did, knowing that this is a seminal moment in your life. You can say, I am an addict, but I am a human being embraced by God's grace. Today is a new day so I won't drink or use. I will drown yesterday in my baptism, embrace God's grace and look for ways to thank God by serving others. You can say, I am a person with the gifts of health, education and love. But I am first and foremost a human being embraced by God's grace. Today is a new day, so I will drown any impulses of self-congratulation in my baptism, embrace God's grace and look for ways to thank God by serving others. Every one of us can say, "I am a Christian, called by God. This is who I am and this is what I must do."

You see, the pulse of living by the grace of God is not fixed, but rather taken daily, existentially and from various vantage points. Luther said we should drown the old self in our baptism daily, that a new self might daily arise to do God's work free of fear, enabling us to take chances even if that means we sin boldly in trying to do the will of God.

That is why 18 years ago we decided to sin boldly and challenge the church's policies toward LGBT people. In December of 1987, three senior seminarians, Jeff Johnson, Joel Workin and Jim Lancaster came out to their fellow students and faculty at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley. They also came out to their candidacy committees who were in a position to approve or disapprove them for

ordination. To everyone's surprise, they were approved. However, the 66 bishops of the newly formed Evangelical Lutheran Church in America were not pleased. Meeting the following month, they swung into action to reverse the decision of the candidacy committees. The three seminarians saw their certifications for ordination put on hold. For the next 15 months a group of Bay Area pastors met regularly to plan a strategy for getting one of the candidates, Jeff Johnson, a call and ordination. What emerged was the creation of Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministry, a ministry to let LGBT people know that there was a large group of Lutherans who were out and proud and ready to minister to their needs, be it counseling, holy unions, and with programming that would affirm the connection between sexuality and spirituality. Remember this was also the height of the AIDS epidemic and fear was in the air. Walking through the Castro, you could feel it. If ever the church was needed it was at this time.

In November of 1989, St. Francis issued a call to Ruth Frost and Phyllis Zillhart, a lesbian couple, both of whom were graduates of one of our ELCA seminaries, but had been denied certification because they refused to lie about themselves or about their love and commitment to each other. The next month First United Lutheran Church called Jeff Johnson. In the months leading up to the vote to issue the calls, the leadership of the ELCA, including the Presiding Bishop, came out to meet with us. They pleaded, threatened and cautioned us that by our actions we would jeopardize the unity of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and yes, even put in danger the Lutheran churches in the then Soviet Union who were just emerging from 70 years of hiding.

We responded by saying that people who have been crushed by the cruelty and hypocrisy of our time, should not be cast aside in order to preserve the unity of the church. Especially at this time when death from AIDS is claiming hundreds of people every week. We said this is the time when gay and lesbian people need to be offered bread, not a stone. We said it is our calling to subpoena the conscience of the church so that our leaders can do the right thing.

On January 20, 1990, before a congregation of nearly 1,000 at St. Paulus Lutheran Church, Jeff Johnson, Ruth Frost and Phyllis Zillhart were ordained by the laying on of hands of some 25 Lutheran pastors. As Dean of the Conference of the Lutheran Churches in San Francisco, I led the group and the next day I installed Jeff Johnson at First United and Ruth and Phyllis here at St. Francis. It was a seminal event for them and it certainly was for these two congregations.

That summer the two congregations were put on trial. We defended our actions vociferously, using the ELCA constitution as the basis of our defense. It was a fair trial. We were heard. The committee came out with a report that chastised the ELCA for its policies and told them to get to work, educate the church about LGBT issues and change the rules. 18 years later the ELCA is still working on it, although they didn't get started until five years ago. Our two congregations were suspended from membership for five years, and by a 7-5 majority we were told that unless the ELCA changed its policies, we had to fire our pastors before December 31, 1995 or we would be expelled from the roster of congregations of the ELCA. Thus the last Sunday in December became The Feast of The Expulsion. Twelve years later we are still observing it. We do not celebrate it. We observe it as a day of shame for the church to which we are still connected in many ways.

December 31, 1995 was quite a day. People came from around the country to support us. The local bishop was here. He was supportive. I preached. Ruth and Phyllis and Michael Hiller and Jim Lokken preached. It was a long service.

At the close of the service, a white banner was carried down the aisle to lead the recession. When it stopped at the center, Pr. Hiller ripped it apart. It was a poignant moment. It has become part of the narrative of this congregation that this tearing away from the larger Lutheran church has yet to be repaired. And it won't be repaired until, in my opinion, the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America stands before this congregation and apologizes and asks for forgiveness. Not only to the current members, but also to those who were hurt by the actions of the church, some of whom rest in our Memorial Terrace.

But St. Francis cannot live off of January 20, 1990 forever any more than the entire Lutheran Church can live off of October 31, 1517. As a Giants fan said to Barry Bonds, "It's a great record, but what have you done for us lately?" And while St. Francis may not be a part of the ELCA, we are still part of the Church catholic. As such, our mission is to carry out God's mission in this place today, not simply trumpet our glorious past and rest on our laurels. As part of the Church of Jesus Christ, we are to be about the constant task of discernment: What does God want us to do at this time, in this place with these resources? That is the continuing task of ministry – a ministry that belongs to the whole people of God - church members and leaders alike. That is why it is so important that each of us – long time members and new members make an ongoing commitment to enrich and enlarge the ministry of this church with our gifts of time, ability and money. I, who first stood in this pulpit twenty-six years ago, stood on the shoulders of the many pastors who stood here before me. They led their congregations to discern their moment in ministry at that time. Likewise, you who recently came to this special place stand on the shoulders of the members who have gone before you.

On this last Sunday in December three years ago on the Feast of the Expulsion, when we got to the place in the liturgy where prayers were being offered from the congregation, Paul Johnson offered a brief prayer for the victims of the Tsunami in South Asia. At that moment, few of us knew about what had happened, none of us knew of its scope. Over a quarter of a million people died on that terrible day. As the week wore on and news of the terrible tragedy descended upon all of us, I was reminded of Paul's agonizing prayer and how the importance of our congregation's observance of the Feast of the Expulsion paled in comparison to what had happened to millions on that terrible day. It was a reminder to me as a Christian, that God loved the whole world and sent someone to save us, to participate in our life of grief, of joy, of suffering, of celebration, of death, of resurrection. The whole world, every last one of us. The cross and resurrection are the seminal events to which all of us can latch on to – that tell us who we are and what we are to do. Everything else we do is commentary.

Amen.

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