

Unity in Reconciliation

*By Pastor Ryan J. Scott*

Scripture:

Philippians 2: 12-13 (from The Message biblical paraphrase)

<sup>12-13</sup> What I'm getting at, friends, is that you should simply keep on doing what you've done from the beginning. When I was living among you, you lived in responsive obedience. Now that I'm separated from you, keep it up. Better yet, redouble your efforts. Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is *God's* energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure

Philippians 3: 12-16 (from The Message Biblical Paraphrase)

I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back.

<sup>15-16</sup> So let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred

vision—you'll see it yet! Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it.

Sermon:

Will you pray with me?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our reconciling rock and redeemer. Amen.

When my family first started going to church my brother and I were in grade school. We attended Ebbert Memorial United Methodist Church in Springfield. My brother and I went to Sunday school, we had friends from school and scouts who also went to church there. We went to church more often than not, but by the time I was in middle school we stopped going as often. School, scouts, and sports took up a lot of our energy and I remember feeling like there wasn't anything for me at church. I went because our parents made us go. Eventually we stopped going all together.

But in July of 2007 I had a spiritual awakening. I still remember the experience well. I was working as a camp counselor for Camp Melakwa, a Boy Scout camp up in the mountains. I remember sitting on a rock bluff that overlooked the lake and the Three Sisters mountains in the distance.

Now something that you should know about this camp is that because of where it is situated in the mountains it has been used for many purposes. Before the Boy Scouts it was used as a Civilian Conservation Corps Camp. The civilian conservation corps was created during the great

depression to employ people for public works projects in our wilderness lands. Before the CCC another set of Scott brothers used the land as a place to camp while they were building the first road of the cascades from Springfield so they could deliver gold mining supplies to miners in the Bend area. Before that it was used by Pioneers, Donald McKenzie was the most notable one. He was one of the first white men to explore and map the southern Willamette valley and the McKenzie Valley. Fun Fact: He was known by his friends as Perpetual Motion because once he got going no one could stop him. Before the white pioneers the Calapoia Tribe used it as a trading ground to trade with tribes from the east side of the state. They would bring furs and food to trade. They would also use the abundance of obsidian rock to make arrowheads and knives for hunting.

So this spot up on the rocks overlooking the lake has been used by many people and has served a home away from home. What I always wondered was why this lake? There are other lakes within spitting distance. It has become pretty clear to me that there was something special about this place. Something that attracted people. There are still stories passed down in Calapoia culture that tell of the good times at Lake Melakwa where they would see long lost friends, and how no matter how long they had been away, when they went to the lake they felt as if they were embraced by the great spirit there. It was a home away from home with a deep spiritual connection.

I felt this same connection when I was sitting on that bluff and it sort of just came to me. God, in that moment felt real to me. In the past God didn't seem as close or as real, but in that fleeting moment I felt cosmically embraced. Connected to the God I was raised with, to the God the pioneers prayed to; to the Great Spirit the natives felt.

The next year or two would be more difficult for spiritually speaking. I knew I was gay, but I also knew that from pundits and prevailing religious culture that it was not okay to be gay and a Christian. Even if a church proclaimed “All are welcome” I knew that they didn’t mean me. I wanted to reconnect with my childhood church, so I googled, “United Methodist Church and homosexuality” and I read through church’s official position.

The section started by talking about how all people are of sacred worth and how gay people were welcomed into the membership of the church, It went on to explain the equal value of men and women, so far so good. The church even had an “article of inclusion” specifically welcoming people of different races, colors, national origin, status, and economic condition.” and then I got to the line:

“The Practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.”

So one thing you need to realize about my identity as a gay man, and that it is more than a sexual orientation. It is a part of who I am it is an identity marker. So when people talk about “the gays” and homosexuality I don’t hear it as discussion about a sexual orientation I hear it as a discussion about my worth as a human being.

And here I was 16 or 17 and I just read that the church I was raised in, that cared for and nurtured me saw me as incompatible to the Gospel of Jesus.

My heart sank. How could that be? That wasn’t the God that I felt on that bluff overlooking the lake. The church that proclaimed from its banners and TV commercials “Open hearts, open minds, open doors” had broken my heart, closed their minds, and shut the door on me.

But I still felt called to be part of the church. Somehow I found myself sitting in the pew at Ebbert Memorial UMC once again. After attending for a while the pastor asked to meet with me. We sat and we talked and I came out to him... we sat in silence for a brief moment before he said, "Okay cool," he then went on to discuss some projects at the church that he thought the boy scout troop could help with. Eventually our conversation returned to the subject. He lamented the United Methodist Church's position on homosexuality and he admitted it often weighed deeply on his soul.

Over the next couple years I found that he spent more time preaching on inclusion. He even spent an entire Sunday talking specifically about homosexuality.

And with that one pastor telling me that it was okay to be gay, I went from being an incompatible outsider and became a co-conspirator with Jesus to change the denomination.

For me the words open hearts, open minds, and open doors are less about the United Methodist Church and more about Jesus himself. When the church breaks hearts Jesus mends them, when the Church closes minds Jesus pries them open little by little, and when the church tries to close its doors on people Jesus puts his foot in the door to let in all who seek and yearn for something more.

The church can discriminate all they want, but I can tell you with confidence that Jesus ain't having any of that!

And as a community of Christ followers and co-creators with the spirit it is our responsibility, despite what the official church doctrine says to throw open the doors and truly welcome everyone into the fold of God's family.

So as our scripture today proclaims, “Be energetic in your salvation! Reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is *God’s* energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what is good within you.”

This God is at work in every LGBTQ+ person.

Last month we took a faithful step in an act of prophetic witness we decided overwhelmingly to throw the doors of inclusion open to everyone. In doing this we are living out what it means to be Christian. It means we are intentionally welcoming those who have been hurt or otherwise excluded from the church. We are living the literal words of Jesus himself.

Jesus said (and you can say it with me), “the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

For far too long the church has been reluctant to share the Good News with LGBTQ folk. The church for far too long has been held captive by prejudice and homophobia. For far too long the church has been blinded to the gifts and graces of LGBTQ people. For far too long the church has oppressed LGBTQ children of God working to deny them basic human rights and deny them dignity and worth as human beings. But Jesus came so that we may move beyond this place of brokenness and repent, or turn a new direction away from and towards grace.

So now as we move forward from a vote to be inclusive to truly embodying the work of being a reconciling congregation these words from Paul seem strikingly appropriate for this congregation.

“Friends, don’t get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I’ve got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I’m off and running, and I’m not turning back.

<sup>15-16</sup> So let’s keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred vision—you’ll see it yet! Now that we’re on the right track, let’s stay on it.”

Let’s keep focused on the goal. Our mission here at Trinity is to Gather in Love, Grow in Faith, and God out in Hope.

When we proclaim, in the face of opposition from others including many in our own denomination, that our hearts, minds, and doors are truly open to all we are living into that mission. It is now clear to the LGBTQ community that when we say gather in love, grow in faith and go out in hope, we mean that we want to gather our LGBTQ neighbors in love, and grow in faith with them, so that we can go out in hope to transform the world together.

Trinity United Methodist Church is on the right track. God is beckoning us onward – with Jesus. To be an expression of Christianity that defies the status quo, that welcomes everyone, and seeks to earnestly live as disciples of Christ to bring love to world. And we do so with a healthy dose of pride and with the rainbow as an enduring reminder of God’s covenant with all of humanity.

May this church continue to receive the blessing of God in our mission. And may we see the face of Jesus in each and every person we encounter. May we be jolted into action by the Holy Spirit to live a life of Joy that doesn’t exclude anyone.

May it be so. Amen.

