

Looking for America,
Psalm 49:1-9 (Nan C. Merrill) Mark 6:1-13
July 5, 2015, Sonoma UCC
Rev. Alan Claassen

Last Sunday, the Sunday after Father's Day, I did something completely different. Along with 21 members of this congregation,

Rev. Matthew Pearson from First Methodist Church in Sonoma,

and a member of Santa Rosa United Church of Christ

I marched in the San Francisco Pride Parade.

This is the fourth year that First Congregational Church in Sonoma has participated in the Pride Parade and, with the recent Supreme Court ruling in favor of same-sex marriage; it was the "best Pride ever."

Would all those who participated, and supported participation, in last Sunday's Pride Parade please stand.

Our small but loving group is known as the "Church Ladies and Gents for Gay Rights" wore long floral print dresses, hats, white gloves and comfortable shoes.

The Church Gents, playing a supportive role to the Ladies, wore our Sunday best as we carried the banner for our group while the Ladies waved ceremonially to the crowd and performed their pinwheel dance routine.

It was deeply, and slowly, moving to be walking up Market Street in San Francisco with such a diverse and colorful group of people.

I loved watching the faces of the people in the crowd as they lit up in surprised appreciation for a church group who shared love rather than judgement for people in the LGBT community.

At the very last corner a young man sitting on a top of a truck saw our group and shouted out, “That’s amazing! Thank you for being here!”

I not only felt a sense of pride in our sharing love with our neighbors,

I also felt a sense of being forgiven for the years of hate and ignorance that the church has taught its members and society.

It was a brief moment of truth and reconciliation right there on Market Street.

I am proud to say that our denomination, the United Church of Christ, came out in favor of same-sex marriage back in 2004.

We could take that stand in 2004 because of the core values of the United Church of Christ,

which includes an open affirmation of the diversity of God’s love embedded within Creation that takes so many different forms and expressions.

On the way to Market Street on that Sunday morning I remembered that the last time I participated in a march on Market Street it was against the war in Iraq.

This time, instead of marching in protest, I was parading in affirmation.

Love is Supreme!

Love Wins!

Love makes a family!

I also thought about all of people who have been close friends of mine
who are gay or lesbian,

including a work associate of my father at Gulf Oil,
a geologist whose name was Gus Pryor.

I met Gus and his partner, Alex, in 1967 when I was fifteen years old.

When I told my father that I was marching for Gus and Alex, he said that Gus
had always wanted to be married.

Gus and Alex died several years ago. Gus and Alex were members of the St
Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in SF. My father, Betsy and I attended Gus's
Celebration of Life service at St Gregory's. Gus and Alex were my first teachers,
the first ones who taught me that it is perfectly normal for a man to love a man.

I have to admit that has taken me a long time to understand what that means, to be
gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender
and all the places in between on that amazing spectrum of human sexuality.

And I have needed the help of many teachers.

It took me awhile to accept the right of people who are gay to be married.

And I recognize that there are many people who still cannot accept this right.

The Supreme Court decision does not take away anyone's rights to believe what they want to about homosexuality.

No one's freedom to marry whomever they want has been taken away from them.

Faith communities can teach whatever they want to their communities, but in our country, where separation of church and state is a founding principle, the beliefs of a particular religion are not the law of the land.

Though many of us can celebrate the recent decision of the Supreme Court in favor of same-sex marriage,

we know that this is only a step in a long journey towards freedom and dignity for all God's creation.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said,

“Morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated.

Judicial decrees may not change the heart, but they can restrain the heartless.”

The Supreme Court decision is going to open the doors for many couples who

have been waiting for such a long time to marry the one they love.

But the decision won't open the minds of those who have been carefully taught that homosexuality is a sin.

Those of us who believe in this just cause will need to continue to share our stories with those who will listen.

It won't do any good to force ourselves or our beliefs on others.

But we can share our stories about what we have experienced, how we have changed. And we can listen to others share what they believe and how they find it difficult to change.

And people whose love is based upon mutual respect, can get married!

There is a Jewish Proverb that says, "There is more good than evil in the world,

but not by much."

We are called to be just that much.

Though many of us can celebrate the recent decision of the Supreme Court in favor of same-sex marriage,

we know that this is only a step in a long journey towards freedom and dignity for all God's creation.

At the same time as were celebrating on Market Street,
we were crying inside for the people of Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal
Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

At the same time as were moved by President Obama singing “Amazing
Grace” in his eulogy for Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney, Pastor of the Emanuel
African Methodist Episcopal Church,

we were crying inside at the news of other African-American churches being
burned.

We were reminded once again of a legacy we would just as soon forget,
the fact that this country was founded on freedom **and** slavery.

We still have such much to unlearn in regards to bigotry that is unconsciously
instilled in us white folk who enjoy so many privileges just because of the color of
our skin.

There is more good than evil in this world, but not by much.

We are called to be that much.

We may need to engage in what the United Church of Canada has done for the
First Nations peoples of their land,

and that is to have a Truth and Reconciliation Program modeled after the one
that took place in South Africa under the guidance of the deep spirituality of people
like Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu.

Just as people are learning the history of the Confederate Flag and taking it

down, we need to understand the history of slavery in this country, and take prejudice down.

There is more good than evil in this world, but not by much.

We are called to be that much.

Jesus has called us to be that much.

Jesus has called us to keep it simple,

give time to those who want to hear your message,

because change begins in desire and longing,

bring wellness to the sick,

bless their bodies,

heal their spirits and

preach with joyful urgency that life can be radically different.

Today's reading from Psalm 49 also gives us a wise word for the road to freedom

“Truly I cannot save myself or offer a haven of peace to another

When my home is like a hornet's nest, a hive of restless fears.

Turning to you, O Guiding Spirit, is my strength and support

a stronghold in the time of trouble.”

(Nan C. Merrill, Psalms for Praying)

The joy that was experienced last Sunday in the Pride Parade came out the despair that was expressed in the Stonewall riots that were a series of spontaneous demonstrations by members of the gay community against a police raid that took place in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn, located in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan, New York City.

The despair that became a courageous struggle for hope and dignity arose out of a constant turning to the Guiding Spirit, our strength and support, and a stronghold in the time of trouble.”

The amazing grace and faith that we witnessed in the forgiveness of Dylan Roof by the people of Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church that became courageous struggle for hope and dignity arose from a constant turning to the Guiding Spirit, our strength and support, and a stronghold in the time of trouble.”

There is more good than evil in this world, but not by much.

But it is enough to give us hope.

As Evangelical Activist Jim Wallis says,

Hope in spite of the evidence

and watch the evidence change.

As I was thinking about all the events of this past couple of weeks leading up to the July 4th celebration, a verse from Paul Simon's song America came to my mind.

“Kathy, I’m lost,” I said, though I knew she was sleeping.

I’m empty and aching and I don’t know why.

Counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike

They’ve all come to look for America. All come to look for America.”

Where is America today? Lost? Found?

Where is the Christian Church today? Blind? Seeing?

It is still living the struggle of a dream that has not yet been realized,

but one to which we still long for and work for.

Looking for America

The opening line of Paul Simon's song expresses the call to be just that much goodness there is in the word when he sings,

“Let us be lovers and marry our fortunes together.”

Let us be lovers and marry our fortunes together.”

I did something completely different the Sunday after Father’s Day this year.

I danced on Market Street with 100,000 of my new friends,

and in honor of two of my father’s closest friends, Gus and Alex.

May they rest in love.

May we sing for our lives in peace for all.

Let the people say, Amen