

David Sauder, Sunday, January 17, 2016

A call to becoming an officially welcoming church to people who are LGBTQ

Good morning.

I'd like to tell you about a television interview I saw years ago, that literally changed my life. It was when I was still living in Maryland, so it would have been in the late 1970s. There was a mid-morning talk show on the air on WJZ Channel 13 in Baltimore, called People Are Talking. The hosts were a white man and a young African-American woman. She was interviewing a gay man one morning. This was when I was in my early 20s, knew I was gay, but didn't know what to do with this information, but I knew I wished I weren't and prayed constantly for God to take this from me. And this young African-American woman asked this gay man a question people used to ask gay people – if there were a pill that would make you straight, would you take it? Interestingly, he didn't answer the question right away. Instead, he turned the question around, and he asked the interviewer, "If there were a pill that would turn you white, would you take it?" And she said, "HELL no!" Her reaction was immediate and visceral. He asked her, "Why not? Wouldn't your life have been easier if you were white?" And she answered, "If I were white, I wouldn't be the person I am today. I wouldn't be me."

Incidentally, this young woman left Baltimore after I had moved away for a better, more high-profile gig in Chicago, and she's done just fine for herself as a black woman. You may have heard of her – her name is Oprah Winfrey.

Now, I can't say that I immediately stopped praying to God for him to change me, but that interview stuck with me, and Oprah's reaction to being asked if she would take a "white" pill stuck with me, and I began to realize: if I were straight, I wouldn't be me. So today, if you were to ask me if there were a pill that I could take that would change my sexual orientation, my reaction would be the same as Oprah's – HELL no! I wouldn't be the person I am today. I wouldn't be me.

Now let's fast-forward about a decade. We're now in the late 1980s. MFM was at that time approached by BMC – the Brethren Mennonite Council on Gay and Lesbian Concerns, and asked if we would consider joining the Supportive Communities Network – a group of Mennonite and Church of the Brethren congregations and other organizations who welcomed and affirmed LGBT people as fully participating members. We entered a period of discernment, which included several group discussions on the issue. During those discussions, I came out as gay. The decision was ultimately made not to join the Supportive Communities Network, but there was consensus that there was no problem with me remaining as a member and continuing to participate fully in the life of the congregation. But we stopped short of making this a blanket invitation.

Now, I'm wondering if we gave my decision to come out then, back in 1989, the Oprah test – if we could take a pill that would make it so I never came out, or just quietly went away and found another church home elsewhere, would we take that pill? I'd like to flatter myself the answer would be a resounding "HELL no!" – we wouldn't be who we are today if I hadn't been

here and been authentic about who I am. Now, I don't want to overstate my value, and I certainly recognize that there have been times where I have been a royal pain in the behind, but if I hadn't been here, we wouldn't be who we are. And I like who we are as a fellowship. I think we have been a good example of many gifts, but the same Spirit. I certainly feel like my gifts have been welcomed and embraced.

But if I am to be brutally honest, my experience has not been the same as that of other LGBT people who have passed through our fellowship over the years. Individual experiences of other LGBT people who have attended have been varied. It is probably important to note that only two other gay people in the last 25 years have publicly avowed their sexual orientation to the fellowship, despite the fact that quite a number of LGBT people have passed through. Some have remained without declaring their orientation; some have left for reasons unrelated to sexual orientation; and some have left (and/or chosen not to return) because they did not feel fully welcomed as an LGBT person.

We in the LGBT community are used to rejection by much of society, but especially by the church. The church has been a source of pain for us – a place where we have been told that we are less than worthy, that “Just as I am” doesn't apply if how you are is gay. That verse we read this morning from the Psalm – “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings” – it doesn't feel to us like we are included in the invitation to take refuge in the shadow of God's wings. When the Psalmist says “Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains” we feel like we have been left behind in the valley, through something over which we have no choice. We bring this pain and rejection to us when we enter a church. And we assume, rightly or wrongly, that, if people knew who we were, we would not be welcome. Rejection is the default position that is assumed whenever an LGBT person walks into a church.

The only way for us to know that this is not the case, that we are in fact welcomed and embraced regardless of our sexual orientation, is for the church to be explicit in its welcome and invitation. I received that welcome and invitation 25 years ago, and I have reveled in it. I have received far more than I have given. But that invitation has been withheld from others, and because it is not an unconditional invitation, even I do not feel completely at ease all the time. If I were a heterosexual man, and were to find love at my age, there would be a big church wedding and a celebration. But as a gay man, if I were to find love, I wouldn't even feel comfortable talking about it in sharing time. And any wedding would have to be outside the church, since our conference explicitly forbids same-sex marriage. (Although Rebecca Dyck has told me that if I get married, the ceremony can be at her house, and she will throw me what she describes as “the biggest wedding reception ever.”) So some pain remains, even for me.

Now, I realize that many of you feel like this issue is resolved, because hey, Dave's here and he participates fully, so it must no longer be a problem. But it's now been a quarter of a century since we decided not to join the Supportive Communities Network, and more importantly, decided not to make a blanket statement that people of all sexual orientations are welcome to participate fully in the life of the church, and that is still our official position. I'd like to suggest that the time has come for us to take a look at this question again.

I wonder what kinds of gifts we have missed out on from the LGBT people who have passed through our doors, and not stayed because we are not an explicitly welcoming church. In some cases, I KNOW the gifts that we have missed out on because people did not feel that their sexual orientation was welcome.

I know some people think this is not the right time to tackle a difficult issue; that we have recently come through a period of intense conflict; that battle lines might be redrawn and we might have another fight. But I ask you, if not now, when? If not us, who? I have a great deal of faith in this fellowship to be able to discuss difficult issues. We've done it before. We can do it again.

You know, something struck me while I was reading the story of the wedding at Cana. Do any of you remember what kind of vessels were used for the water that Jesus turned into wine? They were sacred vessels, the ones that were used to hold the water for Jewish purification rituals. Jesus used these symbols of Jewish law to make wine for the wedding guests, who were already so drunk they could no longer tell the difference between good wine and bad. He used the sacred vessels to extend grace to the wedding guests, and the wedding hosts. What is the message here for us, today? Maybe it is that there is enough grace in our fellowship, that we can extend that grace, unconditionally, to all of God's children, regardless of their sexual orientation.

I pray for the day that when I read "How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings", I will know that God's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning people are included.