

Living Happy and Gay

A Sermon Delivered on November 1, 2009
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“Years hence, perhaps, may dawn an age,
More fortunate, alas! than we,
Which without hardness will be sage,
And gay without frivolity.”
-- Matthew Arnold*

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Reading: by Benoit Denizet-Lewis from an article entitled “Coming Out in Middle School” which appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* on September 27, 2009

Though most adolescents who come out do so in high school, sex researchers and counselors say that middle-school students are increasingly coming out to friends or family or to an adult in school. Just how they’re faring in a world that wasn’t expecting them — and that isn’t so sure a 12-year-old can know if he’s gay — is a complicated question that defies simple... explanations...

What is clear is that for many gay youth, middle school is more survival than learning — one parent of a gay teenager I spent time with likened her child’s middle school to a “war zone.”

Reading: by Laurie Higgins, DSA (Division of School Advocacy) Director - Illinois Family Institute, from a piece entitled “Scandalous Homosexuality-Affirming Milwaukee Middle School”

The nation's first "gay"-affirming middle school has just been approved right here in the Midwest. On Dec. 16, 2008, the Milwaukee Board of Education approved a "gay-friendly" school for 11, 12, 13 and 14-year-olds...

Yet more public money will now be used to affirm theories about the nature and morality of homosexuality that are controversial, unproven, flawed, and harmful, first, to very young, sexually confused adolescents and, second, to society.

Homosexual desire and conduct are not immutable, intrinsic human attributes. And volitional homosexual conduct is not moral conduct. The beliefs that homosexuality is intrinsic, immutable, and moral are unproven, hypothetical, and dangerous philosophical theories that public school administrators have no business affirming and no business using public money to affirm.

And taxpayers, parents, civic leaders, and church leaders have no business remaining silent in the face of this educational malpractice and misuse of public money.

This new school is the cancerous fruit of ignorance, silence, and cowardice. If churches do not assume the responsibility to teach their congregations how to understand the specious secular arguments effectively used to normalize homosexuality, we will continue to lose ground to the pro-homosexual forces that are hugely influential in public schools.

Reading: by the retired Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong from “A Manifesto! The Time Has Come!” (October 15, 2009)

I have made a decision. I will no longer debate the issue of homosexuality in the church with anyone. I will no longer engage the biblical ignorance that emanates from so many right-wing Christians about how the Bible condemns homosexuality, as if that point of view still has any credibility. I will no longer discuss with them or listen to them tell me how homosexuality is "an abomination to God," about how homosexuality is a "chosen lifestyle," or about how through prayer and "spiritual counseling" homosexual persons

can be "cured." Those arguments are no longer worthy of my time or energy. I will no longer dignify by listening to the thoughts of those who advocate "reparative therapy," as if homosexual persons are somehow broken and need to be repaired. I will no longer talk to those who believe that the unity of the church can or should be achieved by rejecting the presence of, or at least at the expense of, gay and lesbian people. I will no longer take the time to refute the unlearned and undocumentable claims of certain world religious leaders who call homosexuality "deviant." I will no longer listen to that pious sentimentality that certain Christian leaders continue to employ, which suggests some version of that strange and overtly dishonest phrase that "we love the sinner but hate the sin." That statement is, I have concluded, nothing more than a self-serving lie designed to cover the fact that these people hate homosexual persons and fear homosexuality itself, but somehow know that hatred is incompatible with the Christ they claim to profess, so they adopt this face-saving and absolutely false statement. I will no longer temper my understanding of truth in order to pretend that I have even a tiny smidgen of respect for the appalling negativity that continues to emanate from religious circles where the church has for centuries conveniently perfumed its ongoing prejudices against blacks, Jews, women and homosexual persons with what it assumes is "high-sounding, pious rhetoric." The day for that mentality has quite simply come to an end for me. I will personally neither tolerate it nor listen to it any longer.

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I bet many of you here this morning, didn't know our Social Action Committee has been supporting the work of the East Central Illinois Safe Schools Alliance. For the past several months the Safe Schools Alliance has been meeting in our church, working to help create schools that are safe and welcoming places for all students, especially those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

Bullying is a problem for all children in our schools. But LGBT children are particularly vulnerable. Much more than other children, they are targets of taunting, intimidation and physical attacks.

Now some people may say this is no big deal. Occasional bullying is a reality so common, it seems hardly worth mentioning. Those of us who can remember their school days, may also remember times when they were taunted or chased by bullies. I certainly do.

When my family moved from Germany to America, I remember being ridiculed in elementary school, because I was German. I remember feeling awful. I remember how easy it was for a bully to rile up other kids, so that a small crowd would congregate during recess, calling me names, and pushing me around.

I remember when I was older, and living in Germany again. At that point I was the new kid from America, whose German skills were poor, and who was unfamiliar with the customs of German middle school. I remember sometimes needing to pick the routes I chose to walk home from school very carefully, so as not to encounter a couple of classmates who were eager to beat me up.

But as frightened and sad as the bullying made me feel, I was never seriously hurt, either physically or spiritually, and I never missed a day of school because of it. Not all children are so fortunate. And for children who are targeted because of their sexual orientation, it is worse.

LGBT kids are three times more likely than their straight peers to miss school, because they feel unsafe. LGBT kids are almost four times more likely to be in a physical fight that requires medical attention, than straight kids. They are nearly twice as likely to suffer from depression, and three times as likely to attempt suicide, than their straight classmates.

The anti-gay atmosphere in schools is pervasive and real. Almost three quarters of Illinois students hear remarks like “faggot” or “dyke” from other students at school. More than three quarters hear homophobic remarks like “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay,” which has come to mean something is “lame” or someone is “dumb.” And almost half of the students say teachers rarely intervene when they hear homophobic language.

In the *New York Times* article I quoted earlier, a school counselor says,
“We have veteran teachers who have been teaching for 25 years, and some just see the language as so imbedded in the language of middle-schoolers that it’s essentially unchangeable... Others are afraid to address the language because they feel like it would mean talking about sexuality, which they aren’t comfortable doing in a middle school setting.”

How can we begin to change this kind of climate?

A teacher in Texas says, “Many boys at that age are so unsure of themselves and are incredibly worried about being perceived as gay, so they call everything and everyone else gay.” She talks about one instance in which a boy in class picked up a book with a pink cover, and said he wouldn’t read it because it looks “gay.” She says, “Everyone in the class started laughing like it was the funniest thing they’d ever heard, but I said: ‘We don’t use the word “gay” in a negative way in this classroom. Gay people are human beings, and that’s the way we talk about them in here. Is that understood?’ ”

The first step in changing the prevailing climate is to speak up and challenge it.

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This year the Unitarian Universalist Association launched a public advocacy campaign called “Standing on the Side of Love.” The campaign was conceived as a response to the shooting at a Unitarian Universalist church in Knoxville, Tennessee last year, in which two church members were killed and seven wounded. The police said the gunman was driven by a hate for liberals and gay people. He chose the UU church as his target, because the congregation was known in the community for being progressive and welcoming. The shooting was a hate crime.

The president of the UUA, Peter Morales, says, “It is clear our nation is suffering an epidemic of identity-based violence and oppression. Our response to these heinous acts must be personal. We must stand on the side of love, in solidarity with those who are targeted based on their identity.”

“Standing on the Side of Love” is being promoted, because “the religious point of view has too often been ceded to those who use religion to shut people out, but American history would not have progressed on any social issues without people of faith who fought for justice and who continue to do so.” (UUA Press Release)

The campaign supports our individual efforts to petition for LGBT equality, to participate in the shaping of public policy, and to form coalitions with like-minded neighbors and believers. The effort is grounded in our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and our commitment to work toward a world of liberty and justice for all.

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Last week President Obama signed a new hate crime bill into law. Up to this point, hate crimes were defined as those violent acts committed because of the victim’s race, color, religion or national origin. This new bill expands the definition of federal hate crimes to include those committed because of the victim’s sexual orientation. The bill was named in memory of Matthew Shepard, the gay young man from Laramie Wyoming, who was murdered 11 years ago.

The President said, “Prosecutors will have new tools to work with states in order to prosecute to the fullest those who would perpetrate such crimes... Because no one in America should ever be afraid to walk down the street holding the hands of the person they love.”

This is good news for those of us who affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and believe that all citizens of this country should receive equal rights and protection under the law.

However, not even the most enlightened laws will do much good, unless they are enforced. This country’s first hate crime bill was passed in 1968, but the government didn’t start tracking hate crimes until 22 years later, in 1990.

Even today, almost 4,000 police agencies across the country are not participating in the work of the Hate Crimes Statistics act. And 80 percent of those that do participate, claim that they have zero hate crimes.

Indianapolis, the 13th largest city in the country, for instance, regularly reports to the FBI that it has had no hate crimes whatsoever. For the last three years in a row, Mississippi has reported that not a single hate crime has taken place in the entire state. This is puzzling, because Georgia and Louisiana both report hate crime figures in the double digits.

Also, not everyone agrees the bill is a good thing. David Smith, the Executive Director of the Illinois Family Institute, for instance, calls the hate crime legislation “misguided,” and sees it as a threat to religious liberty and free speech.

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A parent of a gay student described her child’s middle school as a “war zone.”

A different kind of war is being waged among religious institutions, committed to conflicting visions of divinity and morality. Each side is determined to protect its religiously inspired conviction, and advocate it in public policy debates.

The Illinois Family Institute believes that providing schools that are safe and welcoming to gay students is “the cancerous fruit of ignorance, silence and cowardice.” The Institute believes it is the duty of churches to promote the notion that homosexuality is abnormal and immoral.

Laurie Higgins, the author of our second reading this morning, points not only to the Christian scriptures to support her idea of religious activism. She even quotes the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in which he criticized his white clergy colleagues for failing to confront the injustice of racial segregation. For Higgins, Dr. King provides a compelling model of religious activism.

She writes, Dr. King “confessed Christ boldly as the church faced, not an assault on sexuality, but an assault on the inherent dignity and equality of all men. But the truths he spoke in "Letter From Birmingham Jail" resonate today as we face yet another assault on truth...”

Just as Dr. King called on his Christian colleagues to be activists challenging the status quo of segregation in 1963, Higgins would like Christians today to challenge what she considers a status quo of widely accepted homosexuality.

I confess, hearing Higgins affirm the “inherent dignity and equality” of all people, and prophetic witness of Dr. King, baffles me. Hearing opponents of the new hate crime bill defend their claims on the basis of protecting religious liberty, baffles me.

* * *

I must tell you, though I always try to see the both sides of conflicting issues, and though I like to think of my opinions as well-balanced, when it comes to the matter of protecting the rights of our GLBT brothers and sisters, children and elders, I am not impartial. I come down very clearly on one side of the issue.

When I read the recent Manifesto by Bishop John Shelby Spong, I was moved and inspired by his uncompromising clarity of conviction. His bold statement resonated deeply for me. And part of me was tempted to read it in its entirety this morning, in lieu of a sermon. He says, he will no longer debate the issue of homosexuality in the church with anyone. For him, the battle is over. The victory has been won. He says, "There is no reasonable doubt as to what the final outcome of this struggle will be. Homosexual people will be accepted as equal, full human beings, who have a legitimate claim on every right that both church and society have to offer any of us."

For Spong, the debate is over. "I do not debate any longer with members of the "Flat Earth Society" either," Spong writes.

"I do not debate with people who think we should treat epilepsy by casting demons out of the epileptic person; I do not waste time engaging those medical opinions that suggest that bleeding the patient might release the infection. I do not converse with people who think that Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans as punishment for the sin of being the birthplace of Ellen DeGeneres or that the terrorists hit the United States on 9/11 because we tolerated homosexual people, abortions, feminism or the American Civil Liberties Union."

I encourage you read Spong's Manifesto in its entirety. If you need help finding a copy, let me know. I believe his words convey some powerful and compelling truths.

But as much as I share Spong's beliefs, and as much as I admire his public position, I myself can't take that same position. For me the debate is not over. As far as I can see, the battle is not yet won.

Spong has debated this issue for decades. He has published several books in which he provides a clear and compelling case for an accepting and affirming Christianity. He has fought the good fight, and has good reason to say the battle is over. His battle is over.

* * *

For us, on the other hand, the battle is far from over. For us, who have children in school, for us, who still need to think twice before mentioning our partner's gender to colleagues and neighbors, for us, who know the insidious reality of homophobia, and the countless manifestations of fear, for us, the battle continues. For some of us, the battle is just beginning.

There are many ways to engage in efforts for justice. It can begin as simply as responding differently to the remarks we hear among friends and colleagues. Like the teacher who challenged the homophobic climate within a class of laughing middle-schoolers, and stood her ground saying, “We don’t use the word “gay” in a negative way in this classroom. Gay people are human beings, and that’s the way we talk about them in here.”

Or you can become involved in some of the initiatives promoted by the “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign. You can educate yourself about the current situation. You can sign or circulate petitions. You can form coalitions with like-minded neighbors, and raise the awareness of friends as yet unaware of the current crisis.

Or you can learn more about efforts in our local schools to discourage bullying, and creating a safer environment for all our children. Tomorrow evening at 6:30 the Safe Schools Alliance is hosting a panel presentation with the Illinois Superintendent of Education, as well as local students and others. Attending this forum, is one way to learn from our young people and each other how we can better address the needs of our community's students.

May we each do our part, to promote our vision of justice.
May we put our faith into action,
That our world be transformed by a deeper love.
Amen.