

“Known”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Psalm 139:1-14

Acts 10:9-16

June 11, 2017 — Trinity & More Light Sunday

The Central Alabama Pride Parade was last night, and your Edgewood marchers had a wonderful time. We were joined by Patrick Harley, Campus Minister at UKirk Birmingham, and some of his students. The Pride Parade is festive and boisterous. It's unabashed joy. It's fun. It's freedom.

I remember waking up the morning after last year's parade still in a pretty good mood. And then, just before our worship service, we heard that something had happened in Orlando at a dance club. I didn't have time to get the full story about the shootings at the Pulse nightclub until after church. It was awful. I attempted a theological response the following Sunday.

With the shootings at Pulse in my mind this week, I kept going back to the most powerful theological response I've seen, a devotion written just a day or two after all the violence. It was written by the Rev. Quinn Caldwell, who is the pastor of Plymouth Congregational Church in Syracuse, New York. I rarely quote someone else at length from this pulpit, but I can't improve on Quinn's words. He writes from his own experience, and his words are soul-stirring:

For me it was The Common Ground in Ithaca, NY, a magnificently seedy roadhouse several miles outside of town. It had a gravel and grass parking lot, a perpetual haze of cigarette smoke, and an all-age cast of regulars you could easily have built a sitcom around. My husband will tell you about The Park in Roanoke, VA, which he and his college friends would drive 45 minutes to get to every weekend, and which they talk about today like it's a homeland from which they're in unwilling diaspora.

Ask any queer person you know, and chances are they'll have a story to tell you about a place like this. They will tell you about how they found a family there, how they found themselves there, how they felt safe for the first time on the dance floor there, how much they learned there, how they found love there, how they learned to be bold there, how they dressed like themselves for the very first time there, showing off their glitter, or butch haircut, or size 13 high heels without fear. That note you hear in their voice as they tell you about it? That's gratitude, and reverence.

50 dead and more than 50 wounded hits hard any time and anywhere. But for many queer people, what happened at Pulse hits as hard as shootings in churches hit for Christians, as hard as shootings in black churches hit for black Christians. It's not just the death toll. It's not just that it was a hate crime. It's that it happened in a sanctuary.

Here's a true thing: every sanctuary will be invaded, by madness or death or slow decay, sooner or later. Even the Temple in Jerusalem fell. Even the body of God was penetrated. But here's what Christians believe: that body is still our refuge and our might. That the lord of the

dance(hall) wouldn't stay dead. That his pulse wouldn't stop pulsing. That they couldn't take our Sanctuary away.

So as you mourn and grieve and organize today, here's what I hope: that you do not let your sanctuary be taken from you. I hope you remember wherever it was you first found freedom and safety, and that you go back there if you can, if only in memory. I hope you go out dancing.¹

Quinn extends sanctuary beyond the walls of the church. Sanctuary — where the people who surround you feel like family. Sanctuary — where you find yourself. Sanctuary — where you feel safe. Sanctuary — where you learn and find love and learn to be bold and get to be yourself. Sanctuary — a place of gratitude and reverence. Sanctuary — a place where you are known.

Quinn reminds us what sanctuary is supposed to mean, and how for so many of God's children, they have had to find that sanctuary in places that are emphatically not the Church. The Church has been the opposite of a family, of a safe space, of a loving and affirming place, for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, agender, intersex, and so many more children of God. They have been told they are abominations. They have been told they are sinful, not because they are human, but because of the kind of human they are. They have been told that they are in violation of God's law. They have been told they are violating scripture. They have been told they need fixing. They have been told they are unclean.

And so they have gone in search of love in whatever direction is farthest from such spiritual abuse. They have, if they survive, found their other sanctuaries. Places where they could be truly known.

Quinn Caldwell is a pastor, and it seems he is seeking to make a Church that is truly a sanctuary for all. And we join him in that pursuit, for we believe in a God who has searched us and known us, and to whom we give thanks that we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

This is our calling: to be a community that seeks to worship God and to do God's holy work of justice and peace. God gives us hearts and hands and minds and tells us to care for the Earth and one another. We proclaim a God who is so interested in knowing us as to come and walk among us and to bear our burdens and to suffer the wrath of human fear. If this is our God, then we are equipped to create new sanctuaries for any to enter and be loved and learn and live boldly and be fully known as children of God.

Peter has an idea in his head about who was in and who was out. This idea was not his. It was taught to him as part of his faith. There were things that the faithful do not do. Like eating bacon. That is outside the faith. Other people can do that, but they can't be faithful at the same time. There is no room for the Gentile agenda within the Way of Christ. And then he has this vision.

He doesn't have this vision at a random moment. It comes to him just as he's about to be introduced to Cornelius, a Gentile seeking God. It seems God is preparing Peter for the encounter. Peter goes into the trance hungry, and he sees a large sheet descending from the sky. It's the least kosher sheet in the history of sheets. On it is everything he has been taught is wrong to eat. And a voice tells him to dig in.

¹ http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_sanctuary

Peter seems to know the voice, for he responds “By no means, Lord.” He’s not going to fail this test. He will not go against God’s law and scripture. The voice replies: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

When I was a student at McCormick Theological Seminary, I was part of one of the student organizations called Acts 10:15, keying on that line Peter hears. The message of our group was clear: the Church has turned away from children of God, called them unclean, and ignored or abused them. We must not let this continue, for God knows what God is doing, and the story of God’s relationship with us is one of more light being shed and new doors being opened.

Frankly, Peter had more scriptural basis for not eating bacon than the Church does for its refusal to fully embrace LGBTQ+ children of God. Thanks be to God, our denomination — the Presbyterian Church (USA) — has come to that conclusion and has taken giant leaps toward creating sanctuaries where all can be honest and loved and known as fearfully and wonderfully made. There is work to be done and vigilance to be kept if our congregation is to continue to be on the leading edge of this movement. Marching in parades and unabashedly declaring our welcoming and affirming stance is, of course, important. Learning more about emerging understandings of gender and sexuality will be key. Checking in on our own privilege and preconceptions is required. Outreach to and advocacy on behalf of those that much of the worldwide Church still considers unclean is vital.

Sanctuaries save lives. Can you envision a world in which places of Christian worship are the very places where young people can go to feel safe, and to figure out who they are, and to learn about sexuality, and to dance with joy, and to feel surrounded by family, and to be fully known?

If you can conjure that vision, then it is possible for the people of God. Let us make it so. Amen.