

National Coming Out Day Service Homily
Rev. James Lee Walker

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I'm Fr. Lee Walker. I'm one of the clergy here at this church. Tonight we are observing a service in honor of National Coming Out Day. I want to share with you a little bit about when we put this service together; by 'we', I mean Anthony Keller and some of the people in our EFLAGS group who did this for us. I opened the service up to look at it about a week ago when I received a copy. For those of you who are not Episcopalians, you need to understand the liturgical situation here. We have a Book of Common Prayer (it's the red book in your pews). In it, you will find all of the services that are done in the Episcopal Church. The Mass, Baptism, Marriages, Burials, Confessions... all those sort of things.

The Episcopal Church has been opening up to gay people quite a bit, but we do not yet have a Coming Out service in the Book of Common Prayer. I, along with this parish, am working on that. So as I was looking at the service bulletin, I found myself thinking "Oh my gosh! There are going to be some people there who are out and very militant, and there are going to be some people there who are not Christians, maybe atheists; there are going to be some people there who may be very frightened about coming out in public." So I was very concerned about how we could present a service that would make everyone feel comfortable.

One of the first things I noticed is that right at the very beginning of the service there is a Confession of Sin. I thought to myself, "Oh Lord; I hope we don't do that. They will think 'uh oh, it was a trick. They got us in here. They're going to lock the doors and try to make us change.'" Being gay is bad and all that stuff.

I wrestled with this and then I started reading some of the Psalms that were talking about wickedness. Then all of a sudden I said "Stop it Lee. Just stop for a minute." Would I ask the same questions about a service that began with confession as Morning Prayer does or as appears early in the service at the Mass? Would I do this on a normal everyday Sunday? No, of course not! I said to myself that the people who come to this service tonight, whatever their politics, whatever their sexual orientation, whatever religious beliefs they may or may not have, they are just like the people who are here on Sunday mornings here, the regulars. They are human beings, they are children of God.

This is the way the Episcopal church worships as we begin our services early on, with some sort of statement to effect of "Lord there are things we have done which we should not have done. There are things which we should have done and have left them undone.' And before we begin our conversation of worship with you O Lord, we would like to make ourselves clean and ask your forgiveness.

So the first thing I had to come to grips with was this was simply another service for more of God's people. And to me that starts getting down to one of the cores of coming out. First of all, and not all of us think of this much, but straight people don't really have any concept of what coming out is about. Every human being has something they have hidden in their lives that they maybe have to come to grips with and let out, but usually it is something that is either dangerous

in their society, perhaps being a Jew in Nazi Germany or it is something they feel is wrong. But to have to hide something that is glorious and wonderful; straight people usually don't have any idea what that is about, especially when it is something that goes right down to the very marrow of your spiritual bones. About love and relationship and about who and what we are as people.

As I was thinking about what to say tonight, I remembered many years ago (20 to 30 years ago) seeing something on the news something about a young child who had been lost in the woods for two or three days and they had found the child. The child was about four or five years old and remarkably good shape considering it had been out in the wilderness for three or four days. I saw the pictures of the parents rushing and grabbing the child and then they showed them taking the child to the hospital. As they were getting into the ambulance, someone handed the child something to eat. Not a lot because the stomach had been empty for a few days and they wanted to go slow. But when they handed the child something to eat, the hungry child didn't question it, but just took it and ate it because it was the natural thing to do.

Those of us like myself who are gay and lesbian go through life in this society often being told something that is just a lie. We are told that if we turn around and make a simple honest statement of truth that, I am a gay person and I, Lee love Jim or Bob or Frank or Harry or whoever it may be, that somehow we have done something unprecedented, radical, and confrontational. But we haven't. We've just acted in a normal way. It's normal to acknowledge love. We have broken from the mold that we were expected to live in and all we've done is just do what's natural.

I have a friend who had started attending a church in Dallas. I said, "Do they know you're a lesbian?" She said, yes. I said, "How do they react to you?" She said, "Oh, it's a wonderful church. They don't agree with homosexuality but they tolerate me. I'm really tolerated there."

I do not wish to be tolerated. I wish to be celebrated because my love is magnificent and it is the most beautiful part of me. It is the part that connects me to my own soul, to God and to the people around me. I have been tolerated and I know what that feels like. I have been celebrated and I know what that feels like. If you look in our Book of Common Prayer, you will find that the title of our marriage service is "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage." The first sentence giving instructions about that service says that marriage is a "solemn and public covenant." A solemn and public covenant that is to be celebrated, not some dirty little secret that only should be *tolerated* if we just keep our mouths shut and don't mention it.

How many of you who are gay have had people say to you, "Well I can put up with your being gay, just don't flaunt it. Don't push it at me." And when they're saying it in the office to you they have they have their wife or husband's picture on their desk, their children. They're wearing a wedding ring. They sit at the water cooler and talk about what they did with their dates last night or with their families, and they don't realize that they talk about their love relationships all day long with symbols on their hands, with pictures on their desks because it's normal, it's natural and it's healthy to share that and bond with people through that. It's glorious to celebrate it. And what if I dare as so much say, "Oh I went out to the movies last night with Bob and we had such a wonderful time I think I may ask him out again." All too often, the response will be, "Shut your mouth. How dare you mention that in front of me?"

One of the first things I had to do as a gay person was to come out to myself. Now at first I thought it meant just knowing you were gay. I'm a perceptive little guy. I knew by the time I was in first grade that I was gay. I just didn't have the words for it. All I knew was that when the little boys told their playground little dirty jokes, about what men and women do, I thought the jokes were funny but I thought they'd be a lot funnier if told about two men. So I didn't have to come out to myself in the sense of figuring it out. What I had to do was figure out, "Oh my God. It's the 1950's in a small town in Texas. How am I going to live to the age of 21 and then get out of here to some place where I can live, really live? How can I survive?"

I found out that the greatest obstacle was not the homophobes. The greatest obstacle was me and my own perception of myself. How do I hide? How do I keep quiet? I'm so lucky that someone found out and they are still my friend. They didn't beat me up and spit on me.

As I look back now, it's so incredible that I would actually be thankful because someone didn't beat me up when he or she discovered that I'm gay. The other side of that coin is that my thankfulness implied that it would have been understandable if they had beaten me up!

I'm a child of God. No one should be beating up children of God and spitting on them. I finally had to say to myself, "Wait a minute. How can I expect other people to feel really good about me and who and what I am until I feel really good and who and what I am? And I began to find out that the Church which had been presented to me as the authority that was going to condemn me and damn me to hell was actually a group of people in desperate need of my help and my input. The Church has been committing a horrible sin against gay and lesbian people for centuries. The Church needs our help, our witness, and our forgiveness if she is to repent of this sin and sin no more.

We, as a Christian Community, have abused and oppressed women and people of color. We have used the Bible to enforce slavery. Yet I found that as a gay person, coming out truly opened the Bible up to me. Once I stopped living a lie, the Bible was no longer a scary book, but a wonderful "family diary." I discovered the Bible to be a diary kept between two Lovers; those Lovers being God and the People of God. It's the diary of Their relationship.

When I was in seminary some thirty-five years ago, someone handed me a pamphlet from the Metropolitan Community Church that said the real sin of Sodom was inhospitable behavior. They had violated the laws of hospitality. And thirty-five years ago having just entered seminary, I looked at that and said, "Boy they'll come up with any lame excuse to justify gays being out and open." So I brought this up to one of my conservative professors who told me to get a concordance of the Bible which will tell you every single place in the Bible where the word 'Sodom' occurs and read what it says. And in every single place in the Bible after Genesis where the word 'Sodom' appears, from the book of Ezekiel thru the Epistle of Jude, the reason given by the Scriptures themselves is that Sodom broke the laws of hospitality. How that had been hidden from me all those years, I couldn't tell you. But our society programs us to listen with deceived ears and to see with deceived eyes when it comes to homosexuality.

Now people, you didn't come to here me preach tonight so I'll try to keep it shorter than what I normally do to the people on Sunday morning. But I'm really asking you, come out, but do it in your own time. No one should be forced out of the closet before their own time. It is a process to be worked out with your own soul, your friends, your family and your God. But do understand that while God is patient and will work with you as long as it takes or with friends that you know, do be aware that it is what God wants for you. We have to get rid of shame. We have to get rid of fear. And the greatest source of shame and fear is not somebody next to us; it is down inside our own heart where we have closed off the healing light of God. Come out to yourselves and understand.

A friend of mine who is straight told me one time, "Gay people are OK with me, but the one thing I'll never forgive you for is that you've stolen the word 'gay'. I can't use it anymore without people thinking I'm a homosexual." And she said, "How could you have co-opted that word, gay?" I looked at her and said, "OK. You can have 'gay' back if you'll give us 'normal' back."

What is it about this word 'normal' that it only applies to straight people? Why do people think that for us, being gay is a lifestyle, but you never hear straight people refer to the "straight lifestyle?" It's normal to be loving. Normal is to look around at the world and say, "Wow, God. You've put a lot of work into this just for people like us." Normal is dancing in the streets, holding your love relationships up and saying, "Wow! Who would have ever thought something this wonderful could happen?"

And get rid of fear. When you read the Bible, every time an angel appears to someone almost without exception in the Scriptures, the opening line is "Do not be afraid." The demons want us to be afraid because people who are frightened can be manipulated and used. But people who are at peace and without fear know that they can stand for themselves. Whatever any human being may think about the issue of homosexuality and homosexuals, this much we can all agree on: We cannot have a healthy, healing discussion about this and know each other for who we are when there are fear, lies and hiding overruling that entire meeting. The first step is to come out and say "I am a Child of God. I am someone capable of love and joy." Yes maybe I'm black or white or Jewish or Christian or atheist or gay or straight, transgendered or bi or whatever it may be, but I'm going to take the gift of my sexuality and use it to the glory of God and use it to enjoy life. This is what it is about.

Let's enjoy the music. Let us open our hearts and our prayers to God and thank you so much for being here tonight. I think this witness will be something that serves us all and glorifies God who made us.

In His Name,
Amen