

**Sermon Preached June 14, 2015**  
**Year B, Proper 6 – Boston Pride Parade**  
**St. John’s Episcopal Church**  
**Beverly Farms, Massachusetts**  
**The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight,  
Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

“Happy Pride!” That was the greeting we shared with each other yesterday during the Boston Pride Parade. I was honored to walk with the Diocese of Massachusetts alongside Bishop Alan Gates. It was a sunny, hot day and Boston was crowded with music, balloons, posters, floats, and colorfully dressed people for this family-friendly event. Organizers estimate that over 25,000 marched in the parade along the 2-mile route. Over 230 organizations marched including such diverse groups as AT&T, Beaver Country Day, Blue Cross and Blue Shield, MIT, Huntington Theatre Company, Mass General, Medford High School, Oxfam, Santander Bank, and many churches and synagogues.

One of my favorite “floats” was a mini-bus from Linden Ponds, a retirement community south of Boston. The outside of the bus was festooned with colorful streamers and flags, and inside was filled with the elderly, some with oxygen tanks and walkers, but all in bright clothing and waving their Pride flags.

The Diocesan contingent included about 40 people and we conceived of our section of the parade route as a liturgical procession. We were led by an acolyte swinging a thurible with

incense, followed by a crucifer carrying the cross, followed by acolytes asperging the crowds with holy water. Then the rest of us came in procession with banners and signs, waving, smiling, calling out “Happy Pride!” and handing out invitations to come to church. We concluded our march by following our procession to the Old West Church and celebrating communion together with the Methodists.

What was endlessly surprising to me throughout the day was how just a few years ago this sort of mainstream celebration would have been unthinkable. What has changed?

In our reading from Samuel, the Lord is guiding the prophet Samuel to select a new king for Israel. God leads him to the family of Jesse the Bethlehemite (as an aside here – Jesse is from Bethlehem, as his son is David, so when centuries later Mary and Joseph need to go to their home city, they go to the city of David, from whose house Joseph is descended. That is why Jesus is born in Bethlehem). So Samuel goes to Bethlehem, greets Jesse, and asks to look at each of his sons one by one. God will then alert Samuel which of the many sons to select as the new king. When the first born, Eliab, comes before the prophet, Samuel is very impressed. He is tall and good-looking and surely God will choose him! But no, God does not. In fact, God chides Samuel and says, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” We learn from this passage that God sees people differently than humans do. The Almighty has perspective focused on the heart, and so perhaps may come to different conclusions about us and others than we would. Eventually, while all the other sons are

worthy young men, it is the youngest son, David, who is selected by God to be the king. The least promising son is the chosen one.

The 2 Corinthians passage builds on this theme. In it the Apostle Paul says, “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view.” In this passage Paul is taking Samuel one step further by noting not only does God see differently from humans, but that in Christ we are to cease looking at the world from a human point of view, and begin looking at it through the eyes of God. Using the heart. The trick is, when we do that, it might lead to some unexpected results. It may be that when we no longer regard people from a human point of view we discover, those who we may at one time have rejected, are in fact, acceptable to God.

Could it be that the Pride Parade is one small example of humanity no longer regarding people from a human point of view, but with our hearts and the eyes of God? That God’s embrace is wider than we might previously have imagined?

About 20 minutes into the 2 hour parade, one young man became tired of carrying his poster and, noting that I had admired it earlier, offered it to me to carry. I happily obliged. It was a paraphrase of the passage from Romans, to the effect of “Nothing can separate you from the love of God.” I carried it enthusiastically because, it seems to me, that that is the root of much hate, alienation, and judgement in the world, including towards the GLTB community: the belief that we can be separate from the love of God. Assuring people that the contrary is true, seemed to me to be the greatest message I could share.

Historically the Christian Church has spent a lot of time and spilled a lot of ink deciding who is in and who is out. Who is part of the in-group and who is separate? Not just gays and lesbians, but slaves, or particular ethnic groups, or classes of people. Where does God draw the line? The church created a very narrow gate and often, not surprisingly, those in power found that few, other than those like themselves, met the criteria. Yet scripture is not interpreted the same way by all Christians. It has different interpretations depending on the era, the location, and the community. If the community doesn't have access to or understanding of scripture, the gatekeepers in the church can choose to wield power by deciding who is going to hell. Who is separate from God? Who doesn't make the cut? Sadly, "Salvation" has often come to be understood in the most simplistic sense of "are you going to heaven when you die?," rather than the much deeper perspective found in questions like: "Jesus modeled for us what holy living is, loving God, neighbor, and self. Do you choose to live under the reign of Christ, beginning in this life?" or "Do you know yourself to be created in the image of God and do you choose to follow Christ and live into your heritage?" or "Nothing can separate you, or anyone else, from the love of God. Do you choose to live according to that love?" Answering yes to any of these questions - THAT is salvation! And it starts today.

And yes, of course people do sinful, evil, and hurtful things to themselves and others. There are some people who just aren't that loveable from a human perspective. It's easy to assume God doesn't love them either. We want them to go to hell so that we will be justified! That is the lure for us of creating separation. But when we look from God's perspective, we may find their intentions are not as evil as we thought, and that our intentions are not as pure as we

believe. We all fall short of the glory of God. But God loves us anyway and judgement will take place. It's just that judgement of others isn't OUR job.

I have been asked if I believe in universal salvation, and my answer is "sort of." I believe there is judgement, but that we bring it on ourselves. Not all are saved, but it is not because God found them unworthy, but because they found themselves unworthy. St. Isaac the Syrian wrote in the 6th century. "It is absurd to assume that the sinners in hell are deprived of God's love. Love is offered impartially. But by its very power [love] acts in two ways. It torments sinners, as happens here on earth when we are tormented by the presence of a friend to whom we have been unfaithful. And it gives joy to those who have been faithful."<sup>1</sup> In other words, God's love is always given. No one is separate from the love of God. But some people choose not to see it or accept it. This is hell. And it starts today.

If this is the case, then the first step of helping others towards salvation is not judgement, but assuring them that they are not separate from God's love. That they need not fear God. That they are not separate from or hated by God. Once that is established, they then have the freedom to take the next steps and move closer to Christ in love, assurance, and faith.

For me the absolute bliss of the parade was when I was carrying the sign that said "Nothing can separate you from the love of God," and experiencing the response of the people. Gay, Lesbian, and transgendered folks would look at the sign and cheer and take pictures of it and shout "Yes! Yes!" with enthusiastic joy and delight. It was as though no one had ever shared with them their indescribable beauty as created in the image of God. They had always been told

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<sup>1</sup> <http://blogs.ancientfaith.com/glory2godforallthings/2006/11/01/words-from-st-isaac-of-syria/>

they were outside of God's love. Frankly, I wish I had that sort of response every day when I preach the gospel! Truly, there is a hunger for the love of God. Is it not our responsibility, as the church, to feed that hunger?

Could not every day be Pride Day? Not the "look down at others" kind of pride, but the "I am grateful for who I am" kind of pride. Proud to be gay? Proud to be straight? Proud to be black? Proud to be white? Proud to be female? Proud to be male? Proud to be from Iraq? Proud to be from the North Shore? Proud to belong to St. John's? Can we not see through the eyes of God, recognize that we are all made in the image of Almighty, and equally loved in our diversity? Amen.