

SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Lake Worth, Florida

Saturday In Easter Week (March 29, 2008)

Canon Richard T. Nolan

EASTER AND LGBT PEOPLE - GAY LIFE RESURRECTED: WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE?

[in solidarity with this weekend's PrideFest in Lake Worth]

During the past half century, people like me in their 70s have witnessed enormous transformations in public understandings of human diversity. For many, this shift has been all too slow; for many others, the changes are frightening and misguided. And, at times, here in Florida – and elsewhere – we see efforts to turn back the clock.

Lest we forget, during this fifty-year evolution, right through the present day, untold injustices have been, and are, heaped upon multitudes of innocent citizens in our country, and in some nations sexual minorities are brutalized freely and even imprisoned or executed. Adolescent depression and suicides linked to sexual confusions and peer brutalities are all too frequent.

In solidarity with this weekend's PrideFest in this city, we may raise the question, "If LGBT (that is, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) men and women are to continue this journey toward justice, what is envisioned? What do we want?"

In the tradition of the Hebrew prophets and Christ's mandate to love God, our neighbors and ourselves, we yearn for justice *for everyone*. We insist on no more, nor any less, than all citizens' full rights and responsibilities. We want to continue to transform *inequality for some people to equality for all*. We envision for everyone gathered here tonight an equal sharing of this nation's citizenship – which is not now the case.

I am nearer death than birth, and still over one thousand benefits open to legally married couples elude my partner and me – despite the fact that we shall celebrate 53 years together in September. For example, our early 1990s pensions from our public teaching posts in the State of Connecticut are such that when one of us dies, that pension stops entirely; the same is true for our Social Security coverage. Furthermore, even though we are registered Domestic Partners in Palm Beach County – which allows us access to each other in hospital emergencies (and I have had about 5 in the past few years), that access can be denied us at the present time in Miami-Dade and Martin Counties, and in all or most other Florida counties. Currently there is a statewide effort to enact a statewide law that would make allowances for making current and future Florida domestic partner registrations null and void.

Largely because of my medical history of sudden emergencies, we travel nowhere. Nothing could be worse than being kept apart in a medical crisis, which happened to two women in Miami in 2007 – when one of them was admitted on an emergency basis to the Jackson Memorial Hospital. Lambda Legal, a multi-million dollar, national law agency, has initiated a major suit against the hospital. [See www.lambdalegal.org/.] Regrettably, legal steps rather than legislative actions have become the most effective route to justice – as it has been for racial justice and justice for women. Most of the obstructions to gender-related justice ironically and tragically have come from self-identified Christians. (Happily, our St. Andrew's congregation is openly on the road toward justice for all.)

The life of Christ is a proclamation about transformation, of conversion, of radical change in people's lives - inwardly and outwardly. The 50-day Easter Season is celebrated with accounts written as both interpreted, literal history and in the poetic imagery of faith. The accounts of Christ's Resurrection convey that his faithful disciples, and others, perceived their executed friend and rabbi as extraordinary. As if a veil had been lifted from their eyes, Jesus was seen anew, transfigured, and more illuminating than the traditional laws and customs. In the eyes of his followers, Jesus life and teachings were uniquely authenticated as God's Messiah who embodied God's Word for all humanity. In him, the Creator's purpose for all humanity was made concrete for everyone to observe and incorporate in their lives. Love and justice for all people are central to his teachings. "Going to church" involves much more than receiving a Communion wafer; it means living as Christ has called us to do on a daily basis, with his priorities. A Communion wafer without active ministry is like an old vitamin pill supplemented only with junk food.

As Jesus was resurrected to new life and new beginnings, so may be the hearts, minds, and activities of his faithful disciples in every generation. For us, life is neither forlorn darkness nor religious giddiness.

Rather, fulfilled living flows from the New Covenant of love that integrates joyful celebrations with understandable sadness, realistic hopefulness, and the power to cope with adversity. Beholding the Resurrection of Christ does not magically solve all problems of justice; however, Christian disciples are strengthened to bear their crosses, to grow into Christ's glorious likeness, and to persevere in establishing love and justice.

What has this to do with LGBT people? Not only is Christ's Gospel concerned with a just society, but also matters of the heart and spirit – the “internals” of *all* individual lives.

“I'm queer. That's who I am!” proclaimed Brian, a 30ish character on Showtime television's series “Queer As Folk.” For most of the series, the several primary characters were portrayed as men and women who accept their most fundamental personal identity in terms of their sexual orientation. Each has a slightly different version of what “I am gay” means. In any case, Brian and his friends were most at home in their often limiting associations – sub-cultures in which they feel accepted and generally out of harm's way. Similar characterizations are found among the programs available on the *Logo* TV channel. A prominent Episcopal cleric observed, “Every culture has its own norm, its own rituals for claiming identity. For a gay man, going to gay bars and baths may be a way of discovering who he is. For the first time he feels free; there's no place else where he can go to affirm his identity.” (http://philosophy-religion.org/soulmates/chapter_two.htm - page 57)

As viewers of *Queer As Folk* and *Logo* might expect, the negative portrayals of Christians stem from the sanctimonious hatred they have experienced all too frequently – even from their own relatives. Fortunately, from time to time, a character will ask bewilderedly how such animosity fits with the religion of Jesus Christ. That observation distinguishes between mean-spirited, willfully ignorant Christians and the Good News of Christ. The *Queer As Folk* writers realize that the self-righteous slogan “hate the sin; love the sinner” is a poor cover-up for genuine, personal, irrational abhorrence. At any rate, Brian and his friends realize that their sexual orientation in itself is not immoral.

It is tempting to call attention to the insufficiencies among so-called “gay communities” – the affectations, the many unsatisfying relationships, the problems of physical and emotional well-being, the imprisoning stereotypes, and so on. However, aren't such deficiencies also found among all supposed communities, all cultures, indeed, all religious associations? If one were to analyze the “straight community,” parallel imperfections can easily be highlighted. Clearly, all human communities, all religious associations, all cultures, all nations, are in need of transformation, new beginnings. and resurrection to fuller lives.

I am convinced that transformation is symbolized by virtually everything written in the New Testament. As were the first disciples, you and I are invited to open our eyes, our hearts, and our minds to behold Jesus as God's glorious Exemplar - as the prototype “child of God.”

Imagine if LGBT lives, in fact *all* lives, were touched by Easter! Social justice would continue to be pursued vigorously. Additionally, however, Brian's inward spirit that proclaims “I'm queer. That's who I am!” would be transformed into a biblical “I'm a unique ‘child of God.’ That's who I am!” Authenticity would replace affectations; mutual caring would replace unsatisfying relationships; healthy living would reduce problems of physical and emotional well-being; and, a liberated diversity of individuals would replace imprisoning stereotypes. Furthermore, intrinsic self-worth and self-acceptance as a unique child of God, made in the image of God, would replace unwarranted shame, guilt and self-loathing. LGBT associations would become oases of people with equal regard, able to strategize and to agree to differ wisely as we labor for fairness in the laws of the land.

All of us here tonight whose personal circumstances vary a great deal, can choose to be illumined by the Word of God that is able to gradually transform society and deliver each of us from hardness of heart and spirit. As Christians, we are called to be who we truly are – with an identity that transcends, and gives a context for, our individual personality traits. Each of us can be effectively nurtured as unique children of God by way of recurring corporate worship and private prayer.

At least, *our* lives and fellowship can be an oasis of mutual affection-in-the-making. In *this* place, you and I may perceive ourselves symbolically as coming to receive, *and then act on*, the Word of the Lord written in our hearts and minds. Here we will always find Jesus proclaimed as God's Anointed One, and draw near to listen to his life-changing words and ministry. In these encounters we may be graced with the abiding gifts of faith, hope, and love; *and, by this love, we are continually fed, changed, and strengthened to act within our own unique circumstances* . No longer identified chiefly by sexual orientations, or any other *part*

of our being, we all can acknowledge and celebrate our differences. No longer separate from one another, isolated by our individuality, perhaps also by arrogance and hatred, we can see the glory of the Lord, when we truly recognize that we “are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” Such would be a Resurrected, everlasting life to which all humanity is invited here and now!

[For two local, effective agencies for LGBT justice, please visit Compass at www.compassglcc.com/ and the Palm Beach County Human Right Council at www.pbchrc.org/.]