

NOTES FROM OUR RAINBOW HISTORY

More Light Sunday*

Narrated by Ethel Hornbeck

July 7, 2019

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Our reflections today will be framed by Luke 9 (instead of today's appointed reading from Luke 10). It's a well known story, that offers some important context for Luke as a whole, and really, for our faith as a whole. It also provides an interesting lens for our rainbow history today. So -- from Luke 9 verse 10—there are many ways to tell a story-- here's one:

Prologue: God's Abundance (Luke 9:10-17 -- Chris Morehouse)

Loaves and fishes. You may know the story. It's the end of an exhausting day, Jesus and the disciples have been out doing their thing, healing, welcoming, sharing the good news of God's inexhaustible love. And the crowds, hungry for more, just keep following after them. More and more and more hungry people. The disciples are cranky and tired, and now surrounded by crowds of tired and hungry people. So, they tell Jesus—get rid of these people, will ya? We have come here to rest. They need to go get something to eat. Jesus replies: "you give them something to eat." "But, we have no more than five loaves and two fish—barely enough for ourselves. There must be 5000 of them!" Jesus said, "gather them up and have them sit, together." And he took the five loaves and the two fish, he blessed them and gave them to the disciples to share. Everyone ate, and everyone was filled and the leftovers filled 12 big baskets.

Surely, this is about abundance. About tired and hungry people--hungry, perhaps, in more than one way. It's worth noting that one version of the story features a child, which suggests that even the most vulnerable among us can point the way to abundant life. In the version of the story in Mark, it says that Jesus felt compassion for the multitude, seeing them as "sheep without a shepherd." Elsewhere, in John, Jesus reminds us that he has "other sheep, not of this flock," pointing to the possibility of abundant life for all. Amen.

Introduction (and Brief Personal Note) (Ethel Hornbeck)

The disciples here do not go out intending to create a new program. They haven't set out to open a soup kitchen and go looking for hungry people. They go about their business and encounter people who are hungry. And even then, they are inclined to continue on with their own agenda; feeding people is just not part of their plan. Jesus gently but firmly turns them back around. He tells them to gather together their gifts, which he takes and blesses, and then encourages them to share. What follows is a magnificent communal celebration where somehow everyone ends up with more than enough. Abundance beyond imagining. This is, in fact, one of many stories of abundance in our tradition, from manna in the wilderness, to all-you-can-drink fine wine at a wedding feast. You gotta wonder why so many good churchy people are so focused on scarcity.

More Light Presbyterians has been talking a lot lately about God's abundance; it has been an important and intentional re-framing of their work. Previous efforts had focused a lot on convincing good Christian *people* why LGBTQ *people* actually deserve to

be loved and valued—like *people*. After many long hard years of this, it began to feel to a lot of people like begging for crumbs under a table loaded with food. So, as many of our polity issues began to be resolved—everyone is now eligible to be ordained, everyone is now free to be married in our church--the emphasis has shifted from arguments based on us (people), *our* differences, our shared humanity, back to the Holy One--who is this God we claim to follow, anyway? A crucial theological reframing.

Here are a few words from More Light's statement of faith: "We believe God is bigger than we could ever imagine. We are created in the image of a God of abundance, of limitless possibilities and expansion... We are called to confront God's holy abundance with awe and wonder. We are abundant because our Creator is abundant. By not limiting our understanding of who God is, we refuse to limit who God loves and welcomes into community."

Our whole rainbow history – which you will find illustrated in our beautiful new brochure -- is a pretty fabulous example of that abundance. It also helps remind us that we have been on a long, involved, intentional, prayerful, and sometimes challenging journey --- from tolerance to inclusion to full on celebration our LGBTQ+ family. We've engaged numerous events, classes, bible studies, and conversations over many years. And like those disciples, we did not set out to do any of it. We didn't decide to be the "rainbow church." What we did do was receive and respond, prayerfully and intentionally to what and who was showing up in our midst. We listened together to the Spirit of Love and followed her invitations as faithfully as we could. And we've been gifted with so much in return that there is now more than enough for us to share.

Many people have been involved in these efforts and today just a few of them will reflect on some of the highlights of our journey together. The question that each one pondered was basically--where did you experience the God of abundance in your part of our story?

To set the stage, lets go back to 1997, when for some inexplicable reason, the Presbyterian Church, USA passed a constitutional amendment, designed to exclude gay and lesbian Presbyterians from serving in ordained leadership.

And just brief personal note here, because this was a major turning point for me. I was shocked, furious, and heartbroken; I just could not imagine being part of a faith whose God would demonize His (!) own beloved children. I was ready to walk right then and there. And a very wise pastor told me this: "sure! you can do that. But if you do, if everyone like you leaves, you guarantee that nothing can ever change." So I stayed, and over time, that heartbreak became fire. It drove me to prayer, to scripture, to deep study, to spiritual direction, to study spiritual direction and eventually to seminary. And--it brought me here. The church that Jeff and I had been attending was not particularly welcoming, and certainly did not welcome our efforts at education and conversation on this topic. Arriving here at SPC, bruised and confused, we learned pretty quickly that the immediate response in this school of love (to just about everything important!) was and is--education and conversation. By the time we showed up in late 1998, there had already been classes and forums and conversations on scripture, theology and science. And all of that laid a strong foundation for what came

next--something a bit unexpected, because, you know, the God of abundance also loves surprises.

The Nomination

In 2001, the nominating committee of this church, met as they do each year, to nominate candidates for leadership, which are then presented to the session for approval. One of those candidates was Sally, a longtime faithful member of the church, who also happened to be living in a long-term committed relationship with her beloved partner Allegra. And so, our Presbyterian session was faced with a situation. **Jeff Hornbeck**, one member of that session, is here to tell you more.

Sally's nomination was indeed a turning point for SPC. Although Session members held diverse political and theological opinions, all knew Sally was in many ways an ideal candidate for Deacon. My family situation defined my position because I couldn't imagine supporting a church that would reject my sister simply for who she is. Still, as the governing council of the church, we all had to do our duty and grapple with the difficult language of ordination standards.

Without delving into "wonkish" details, the Book of Order limited ordination to those who "live in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness." Other problematic language involved obeying Scripture and conforming to the historic Confessions of the Church.

Everyone took this language, and the challenge it presented, seriously and proceeded to parse and carefully interpret it based our understanding of Scripture, the teachings of Jesus and the work of the Spirit. We prayed together, listened carefully to each other and deliberated over multiple meetings.

Careful study suggested to most that the ordination language was ambiguous and made the Book of Order internally inconsistent. If we declined to approve ordination, we were in conflict with the inclusiveness principles reflecting God's universal love, and if we moved ahead with ordination, we might be viewed as failing to live up to narrow ordination standards, although I, among others, believed this was simply not the case.

In the end, and to the surprise of many, Session voted unanimously that Sally had not "departed from the essentials of Reformed faith and polity," the critical test, and so was cleared for ordination and installed as a Deacon at SPC.

Importantly, from the beginning, Session intended to be in compliance with the Book of Order, Shenandoah Presbytery and the PC(USA) and we believed we were. Shenandoah Presbytery, however, disagreed and formally rebuked us, although it was with tears in their eyes that the representatives from Presbytery met with us to fulfill their obligation. Since then, those tears helped move the church to action. Shenandoah Presbytery and the PC(USA) have changed their positions, formally revising the Book of Order to eliminate this particular point of contention.

Although the process at times was heavy on policy debate, it was actually a deeply spiritual experience. We developed an abiding sense of trust and good will toward each other, assured that we would be guided together by trusting in the divine presence. Some 17 years later, it is that

trust, as much as, the affirmation of history that reminds me Session acted faithfully and correctly. (Note: other members of that session included: Bill Kaplin, Elaine Hurd, Suellen Myers, Chris Duewel, Roger Forsythe, John Landolt, Melinda Schmitt, and Phil Hill)

Connections and the Rainbow C

We'll return to our polity struggles, in a minute. But I want to pause here to make sure everyone knows that the story of our campus ministry Connections is also an integral part of our rainbow history. Connections was birthed more than a decade ago, after the conservative Christian groups at Shepherd co sponsored an event, **on campus**, that was just a blast of loud and hateful Islamophobic and homophobic rhetoric. A certain pastor came to me and said: "are we ok (beware the royal we!!) with that being the only Christian presence on that campus??" "No!!!!" Soon after, Connections was born, with that rainbow "C" logo (specifically designed and gifted to us by local artist Tom Conant.) That rainbow C has been and continues to be a powerful witness on that campus. Connections has never been a large group in numbers, but it has always had an outsized influence, in part because it has always attracted **the** most amazing and gifted young people, many of them LGBTQ students; believe me, their perspective has had a huge impact on me, and on us. And now a word from one of those students, **Bethany Pryzbocki**.

It was hard being a college student who felt like I didn't belong. In this prime time of figuring out who I was away from the expectations of who my family wanted me to be, I was lost. I wasn't even really sure of what, or who, I was waiting to find. This state of mind persisted my first year of college, until I found the group 'Connections'. What drew me to this group of people was their willingness to engage with me on my feelings of loneliness and uncertainty with just about everything in my life. They listened. They opened up on their own vulnerabilities. They cared. This kind of environment, where everyone, and I mean everyone, is welcome, really shaped the course of the rest of my life. This community, where love persists against all opposition, where everyone is heard and celebrated, where I learned to love myself; this community is an integral piece for the makings of who I am.

The Long Constitutional Journey

Our denomination has been arguing about equality issues for the last 20 years. And **Jeananne Stine** has had a front seat quite a few years; she is going to offer a few thoughts from her experience.

My journey through the parliamentary process of the PCUSA began in 2006, when I was still part of the Baltimore Presbytery. My church developed an overture to change the words in the Book of Order, our constitutional handbook, about marriage from man and woman to two people. This led to a long period of discernment that resulted in me attending my first GA in 2008 as an Overture Advocate for equal marriage.

I attended the next three GA's as an overture advocate in support of marriage equality. In 2008, it was just me. In 2010, there were eight of us. In 2012, there were 40 of us, all advocating for the same idea; that with so many states legalizing marriage between same gender

couples, ministers needed to be able to perform these ceremonies as part of their care for their congregations.

It was around this time that I joined SPC and began my relationship with the Shenandoah Presbytery. Randy discovered that I was a Presbytery worker and asked me to be the designated commissioner to the ShenPres meetings. I had been told that ShenPres never supported gay rights, but, what I discovered was that, while there was definitely support there, everyone was intimidated by the Old Guard; conservative white guys who had been running things for years. In 2014, GA approved the marriage overture, and we began the process of ratification. A simple majority of Presbyteries needed to approve the overture before it became official. I continued to be a part of the ShenPres gatherings, and there was an interim Executive Presbyter there at the time. I had several conversations with him. He was supportive and set up opportunities for discernment which led to ShenPres voting to approve the marriage equality overture, 77-55! A great start to ShenPres supporting gay rights. There are now three More Light Churches in the Shen Pres. and the new Executive Presbyter is a woman. She's from DC and she grew up attending one of the first More Light Churches, Clarendon PC, whose current pastor was one of the eight advocates with me at GA in 2010. She wants me to present a workshop on More Light Presbyterians at a future gathering.

My experience of God's abundant love has been consistent throughout this parliamentary process. Whenever I spoke with people, it would lead to more people taking action and getting involved. One of my favorite sayings from Micheal Adee, former director of MLP, is that we are working to create a church that reflects God's heart. Our God is a God of Love. That is the fire that is the light behind More Light Presbyterians.

Marriage Equality

The year marriage equality finally passed was a big one in the church and transformative here at SPC—among other things, that was when and why we finally formally affiliated with More Light Presbyterians (great story there!) We also got involved in the national campaign in some pretty visible ways. Here to tell us more is **Elaine Hurd**, along with the crew that represented SPC at the General Assembly in Detroit (Rie Wilson, George Jordon, and Rob Mahaffey):

In 2014 the four of us had the opportunity to see our church at work and God at work in the church, when we took a road trip to Detroit for the 221st meeting of PC (USA) General Assembly. We listened, prayed and worshipped together. Rie and George both spoke to the Civil Union and Marriage Issues Committee about the need to include all of God's children in the life of the church and that we are being called to be an inclusive body, sharing God's love and grace with all. Thanks to their testimony and that of others, the committee moved recommendations allowing pastoral discretion to perform "Any such marriage they believe the Holy Spirit calls them to perform" and to change Book of Order language to indicate that "Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people". After years of thought, discussion and prayer, the deep desire to hear God's voice and discern God's will, the full body approved both recommendations.

Before we left for Detroit, SPC members participated in More Light's rainbow scarf project. You became a rainbow scarf factory, creating over 200 rainbow scarves that were included in the 1,500 that were collected from across the country. Rie and I had the privilege of being part of the

More Light team, handing them out to delegates and attendees. With each one, we prayed that the scarves would be a visible witness to God's unfailing love for all. I don't think there was one person I gave a scarf to who didn't feel God's presence in that moment of shared prayer.

Seasons of Love: SPC's Marriage Ministry

These scarves, still adorning our sanctuary, went up during that time, and have stayed up, as a symbol of all those efforts, and of some very powerful stories of healing, (I have a few of those myself), and as a reminder of what came next, which I like to call our Seasons of Love—when we witnessed wedding after wedding after wedding, each one just flooding this place with abundant joy. Here to say more about that is **Marlene Gallo**.

Donna and I met 24 ½ years thanks to a mutual friend. We knew immediately that we were meant to be together. At that time gay marriage wasn't legal so we had a commitment ceremony, witnessed by friends and family. We knew we were going to be together for a long time.

When gay marriage became legal in Canada, many of our friends went there to get married. They then went from state to state to repeat the process. We agreed that we would not do that and we'd rather wait until it was legal throughout the United States.

Six years ago we moved to Shepherdstown and it was a culture shock to me, a person who lived in New York State my whole life. Being raised Catholic I went to the Catholic Church in town but my soul wasn't happy there. A number of friends urged me to go to Presbyterian Church so I decided to give it a try. As the service progressed, I was positive God guided me to this house of love. It was what I was seeking for many years.

Eventually Donna had the opportunity to join me and she felt the same love wrap around her, We both became members of the church and when marriage became legal nationwide, we reconsidered getting married. I was on the More Light Committee and saw how hard people were working to get the Presbyterian Church to accept gay marriage.

Many years ago I was married to a man and the experience left me wounded and afraid of marriage. As much as I love and trust Donna Jean, my beauty queen, I prayed for a sign that it was okay to marry her and I would be safe. As things turned out, I had a total knee replacement and while in the recovery room, I was talking with the nurses about Donna and they asked why we weren't married. I told them I wanted to make sure it would last (we were together over 21 years at that point.)

After I was settled in my room, I was telling Donna and our friend Jeananne about the conversation. My lovely Donna came around the bed and asked if I would marry Her. Mind you, I just had surgery and was a bit groggy. Jeananne later told me my response was "only if I can be the wife". God helped me see that marrying Donna was the right thing to do.

Our church wedding was wonderful and we don't have a Gay marriage, we have a marriage.

Transitions and Coming Out: Service of Blessing for Panhandle Pride

The final entry on our Rainbow History—the **current** version anyway!—is the “inaugural interfaith service of celebration and blessing at SPC to kick off Panhandle Pride, 2019.” This was just one week ago. Some 8 other faith communities, their pastors, and many visitors joined with us in a remarkable expression of celebration for and with our LGBTQIA+ siblings. The response continues to be overwhelming; I am still hearing from people who were so deeply touched and inspired and eager to know more. As the service began, a very savvy young person who knows us well turned to me and said: “this is big. This is us coming out.” And you know, she was right. Something changed that day. We changed that day. I could feel it. The stories we heard broke us open and made something new. We need to pay attention to that. And I know not all of you could be there, so I’ve asked one of our storytellers, **Chris Thatcher**, to share with us this morning part of what she shared last Saturday.

Life is full of transitions. Life is a transition. Transitions, one after the other, and in parallel to each other. These transitions are the weave that make up the fabric of our lives.

We are infants, toddlers, children, adolescents, adults. We are friends, spouses, parents, grandparents. We transition through our careers with innumerable titles. In the end we all make the ultimate transition, from life to death. In doing so we earn a new set of pronouns. Thou, Thy, Thine.

By being here today, bearing witness to me, our threads of our lives transitions are forever joined.

Some transitions we choose to make entirely independently, while others are unique opportunities afforded to us. Some transitions are entirely forced upon us by great pressures and insist that we quickly make space or change our shape. In the words of Hunter S. Thompson, “Being shot out of a cannon will always be better than being squeezed out of a tube.”

While I’m taking that quote well out of context, it’s a very relevant quote to the experience many young, and old, LGBTQ people face. When the world around us is more narrow than, or incongruent to, the shape we need to take, to be our authentic selves, we are squeezed through a tube. And the mental health issues: depression, addiction, suicide are the otherwise avoidable messy glob that results.

As a child, I was effeminate but I was always “protected” by my friends and family. They had the best of intentions. “Don’t flop your wrists when you talk. Don’t put your hands on your hips. Don’t cross your legs like that.”

There was no ill will. They didn’t tease me, or hate me. They were afraid of a word. “Sissy”. This is life, as a youth, being “squeezed out of a tube”.

I have 3 children. I have struggled with addiction. I have struggled with suicidal ideation and actuation. So I got into therapy. Christian counseling. Positive, non-judgemental counseling. One loooong year. One horrifying year. One of the most painful years of my life. I reclaimed myself.

Sissy

I would sit in my car afraid to go into the grocery store.

Sissy

My ex-wife and I are best friends but hormone replacement therapy was a line she drew in the sand.

Sissy

My penultimate transition began the day I came to SPC as myself. 5 months on hormones. It was the second time I came out into Shepherdstown dressed as a woman, as myself. I arrived 10 minutes late, to the late service. I had known Randy Tremba. I had been married here. It was a safe place.

I snuck up the stairs to the balcony. I crept into the back row. I was so nervous I was barely aware of anything else. There was a new pastor. An interim pastor named Bill Sitterley. Bill had no idea I was there, as a trans woman. Bill had already written and planned the sermon well before I was there.

The sermon was on actively supporting and accepting trans youth, and although I'm no spring chicken, I assumed the heart of that message included me. He pointed to the sign that said "We Choose Welcome". I hadn't even noticed it. It's never moved since I've been here.

The congregation gently approached me after the service when I went to get coffee in the Fellowship Hall. I wasn't just tolerated. I was celebrated. I went home and cried. For days. weeks. It was a different cry. I was finally welcomed.

I will never be able to express how that one day changed my life forever. I have a new word for myself. Sissy. That is my word. It's a beautiful, empowering word now. I was finally being shot out of cannon.

Our ultimate transition is as personal as my new pronouns. She, Her, Hers. We each are gifted the opportunity to choose welcome or unwelcome. We each, we all, are afforded opportunities to choose love.

I have never been an activist. It was a strange and complicated word for me. This year as I was shot from the cannon, flying high above the circus of life for a brief moment, I was able to see the world 500 feet below me from a new perspective.

I saw my white male privilege for what it was. I met trans youth, both without support from friends and family and with support. The difference in their quality of life was night and day. I met trans youth struggling to find work and housing. Struggling to get access to treatments that could be the difference between life and death for them. I am comfortable. Three kids, two mortgages, health care.

I realized the fruits of my white male privilege could help someone else. I became an active supporter of other people being squeezed out of a tube. I began to line up a long row of cannons in my heart, words and deeds. Like the More Light committee I was invited to participate on, I can see myself now as an activist.

In the end we are all going to transition. In the end we all get new pronouns:

Thou, Thy, Thine.

My friends,

Thou all art welcome in the Kingdom, and in this Church.

Thy suffering is my suffering.

Thine own true, authentic self is God's good works.

Looking Ahead (Ethel Hornbeck)

Today we've heard just a few of the countless stories we could tell about how we got here from there. I hope it helps remind us that we have come a very long way, and that many, many people and events have brought us here, and that each one has had powerful and unexpected impacts. It's how God's abundance works. It's also critical to remember as we celebrate that we still have a long way yet to go. In our denomination, we've opened up ordination and marriage, but few LGBTQ people are being ordained as pastors—turns out, *churches have to call them first*. And marriage is a great and marvelous joy **if** that is the path you choose—many do not or cannot. And at our last General Assembly, one that I had the privilege of attending, our denomination passed a series of powerful measures making explicit the commitment of our whole denomination to the flourishing of all LGBTQIA+ folk, and in particular calling all churches to advocate for transgender and gender nonconforming people in church and society.

Because—make no mistake, in this world we live, there are serious issues that remain to be addressed—discrimination in employment, housing, and healthcare—all legal in most places, including WV; epidemic levels violence, homelessness, and despair especially among our LGBTQ youth. And the so-called “Christian church” is **the most powerful** voice out there promoting these hateful behaviors. So churches like ours – that have done some work, that know some things, that have some freedom—we have a tremendous responsibility. We can at least, keep doing what we've been doing—we can continue learning, we can keep reaching out, advocating and seeking new ways to **choose welcome**—which is to say, really and truly embracing really and truly marginalized people. We can continue trying to become a place of safety and healing. We can continue choosing compassion over comfort. We can continue listening to and learning from our LGBTQIA+ members. Trust me, we all have a lot to learn about the fullness of human being and flourishing. And, we can continue finding ways to share what we've learned with others. All the while, let's keep setting the theological record straight by reminding ourselves and others, as often as we can: God is love. And love is love is love. Amen