

ESTABLISHING JUSTICE
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
January 9, 2011

Today's gospel lesson from Matthewⁱ is one of the three accounts in the New Testament of the baptism of Jesus. I spoke about the meaning of baptism last month during Advent. Today, I'd like to emphasize the notion of Jesus "fulfilling all righteousness"ⁱⁱ in his baptism. The voice from heaven that describes Jesus as "my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased"ⁱⁱⁱ seems reminiscent of the voice of God in the passage read this morning from Isaiah, more than 500 years earlier in biblical history, which describes a great servant of Israel as the chosen one "in whom my soul delights." In fact, later in Matthew, Jesus is explicitly claimed to be fulfilling these words of Isaiah: "I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice."^{iv}

The theme of establishing justice is central to the mission of the servant in Isaiah, just as it is to that of Jesus. What exactly does it mean, though? In the passage read today from Isaiah, establishing justice in the earth is related to opening the eyes of the blind and bringing prisoners out from the dungeon. In the gospel of Luke, the first thing Jesus is reported to do after being baptized and tempted by the devil for forty days in the wilderness is stand up in his local synagogue in Nazareth and read these words from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free."^v

In today's terms, there are plenty of people on this earth who are blind, literally and figuratively, and whose eyes need to be opened. There are many who are imprisoned in dungeons of various kinds. The list is very long of those who are oppressed in a myriad of ways

and are yearning to be set free. This morning I'd like to talk about a particular population in our midst, and how the prophetic message of Isaiah and Jesus may relate to them: people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered. I'm sure I don't need to recount to this congregation the kinds of oppression this population has experienced: from being forced to remain in the closet for so many for so long, to various kinds of discrimination, including the overturning of the fundamental right to marry each other in this state, to outright murder, torture and brutality. And there are many of the rest of us who have been blind to much of this and whose eyes need to be opened.

Just about a year ago I was asked to be a keynote speaker at a national conference on creating an inclusive environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people in higher education. I began by thanking the organizers for including a university chaplain who's an LGBT ally as a plenary speaker, both because religious institutions have long been a major part of the problem, not the solution, of homophobia in this country and around the world, and because I am, as my university chaplain, William Sloane Coffin, used to say about himself, a recovering homophobe.^{vi} My own self-discovery and healing as a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant straight male is on-going, and I said to the audience that I'd appreciate both their understanding and their criticism of the continuing construction zone of who I am today.

Last year I started an LGBT/Religion Leadership Roundtable here at Stanford with a student named Aidan Dunn. He keeps reminding me that a critical issue is that many students simply don't know that one can be both religious and LGBT. It's so often assumed that you can't be religious if you're LGBT, and you can't be LGBT if you're religious. The fall-out from this is a heavy burden, especially given that national survey results reported by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public life establish that 3 out of 4 Americans now between the ages of 18 to 29 are

religiously affiliated.^{vii} As the Hillel rabbi here at Stanford, Mychal Copeland, who's long been out as a lesbian, has explained to me, most of us have spiritual needs, whether we're heterosexual or LGBT. Those needs will bubble up to be satisfied even a student has closed the door on religion for him- or herself on the basis that it's homophobic.

Aidan describes some of the dilemmas for certain students: You can be absolutely terrified to come out, because you're quite sure you'll be rejected by your faith community, and the faith community is a very important part of your life. You don't have the slightest idea how your sexual orientation can possibly be reconciled with your religion's teachings. But even if you begin putting your religion together with your LGBT identity, you'll have to go home over vacation and face your family, face your church/synagogue/mosque/temple/shrine, and face your community, which usually will still have a negative reaction to your sexual orientation and actions. On the other hand, many queer people and organizations can be very negative about religion, and they can assume that everyone else who's queer agrees with them. Students of faith then get a clear signal that the LGBT community is not a place where they can express this part of themselves. They may be in contexts where everyone in the room assumes it's fine to disparage religion, not even thinking that there might be practicing Catholics or Protestants, Jews or Hindus present. If you do mention your religious commitments, it seems, you must not be very aware. Somehow you haven't heard the word that all religions hate you. Or you're made to feel a bit eccentric by the LGBT community, if not crazy. Or you're treated with condescension or pity.^{viii}

So, what can be done? One of the most important things, I've been told again and again, is to have the campus office for religious life be crystal clear and very public about its support and affirmation for LGBT students. A way we've tried to do that at Stanford is to have a

prominent, boxed notice, in a contrasting color, inside our Office for Religious Life brochure that describes our university chaplaincy as well as the thirty-five member groups of Stanford Associated Religions. It is called "A Note to Gay, Lesbian, Bi and Transgender Students," and it states, in part, that, "The Office for Religious Life is committed to welcoming students of all genders and sexual identities, all religious and non-religious traditions, and all cultural backgrounds. Please feel free to schedule a visit with a staff clergy or attend one of our regular or special programs." Then it helps that we have an out and outspoken LGBT associate dean for religious life, the Rev. Joanne Sanders. There are also a number of well-known professional leaders of our Stanford Associate Religions organizations who are well known to be lesbian or gay. And we have regular programming on spirituality and sexuality that examine the relationship of religion and LGBT life.

Similarly, LGBT centers on campuses need to be crystal clear and very public about their support and affirmation for LGBT students who are religiously or spiritually engaged. Our Director at Stanford, Ben Davidson, who happens not to be religious himself, has described how he's come to assume that virtually everyone entering the center is coming from some religious or spiritual perspective.^{ix} He's gone out of his way to co-sponsor programming with the Office for Religious Life and Stanford Associated Religions groups and to have religious resources that are LGBT-friendly available on the center's website. Last year the center screened three films on LGBT identity and religion, followed by discussion. *For the Bible Tells Me So* was shown in the fall. It's a documentary portraying how five committed Christian parents, including former House Majority Leader Richard Gebhardt and his wife, and the parents of Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson, handled the realization that they had a gay child. It brings in other informed voices like Harvard Chaplain Peter Gomes and Bishop Desmond Tutu.^x

Last winter the documentary at the LGBT Community Resource Center was *A Jihad for Love*, followed by a discussion with its gay Muslim filmmaker Parvez Sharma. Islam is portrayed with respect from the inside, but we also view conflicts of a number of gay and lesbian Muslims with their clergy, their families, their countries, and even themselves, given that "the majority of Muslims believe that homosexuality is forbidden by the Qur'an and many scholars quote Hadith to directly condemn homosexuality." The believers in the film don't reject their religion, but struggle to reconcile their sexual orientation with the faith they cherish, ultimately pointing to a new kind of relationship with Islam.^{xi}

In the spring, the documentary at the LGBT Center was *Trembling Before G-d*, portraying gay and lesbian Hasidic and Orthodox Jews who worked to reconcile their kind of human love with Biblical injunctions on homosexuality. The world's first openly gay Orthodox rabbi, Steve Greenberg, was featured, along with a variety of Orthodox Jews in a range of relationships to their partners and families.^{xii}

A third major initiative on university campuses to expand the circle and provide a religiously and spiritually welcoming environment for our LGBT students must be to widely and boldly publicize the religious and spiritual groups that are truly affirming. On our campus, that would be the Unitarian Universalists, Quakers, the Episcopal Lutheran Campus Ministry, the United Campus Christian Ministry (a progressive Christian fellowship sponsored by the United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, American Baptist, and United Methodist denominations), Hillel, and AHA! (which stands for Atheists, Humanists, and Agnostics).

But what about the religious groups on campus that aren't LGBT affirming? Student Aidan Dunn has described what he calls a misguided liberal clergy notion that we can or should try to shepherd all religious LGBT students into liberal religious organizations. Many of them are

religiously conservative and simply don't want to go there. The director of the Stanford Women's Community Center, who's lesbian, has told me the same thing: "Don't think you can tell a Christian conservative to try liberal Christianity. It won't feel real to them."^{xiii} Evangelical Christians need to hear LGBT-welcoming messages from people who believe the way they do, not the way I, Scotty McLennan, do as a liberal Christian. People who read the Bible within a conservative context as the ultimate authority by which to live their lives, are not going to change their views about homosexuality from someone like me, who claims that the Bible should be read largely metaphorically and allegorically, but not as the literal or inerrant or finally authoritative word of God.

In preparation for my keynote address last February, I spoke about this with one of our lead evangelical professional leaders and with two students from one of our largest evangelical groups on campus. They tried to help me see where the cutting edge for LGBTQ-friendliness is these days in evangelical circles and what its limits are. They encouraged me to try to work with it, rather than fighting it or driving it underground on campus. Two important facts, first of all, are that evangelical consciousness is evolving and that evangelical Christianity is not a monolith. There are lots of varieties and shades of evangelicals from very conservative fundamentalists -- few of whom are found at Stanford -- to so-called Progressive Evangelicals like Jim Wallis who has been our Baccalaureate speaker here. And younger evangelicals have a very different profile from older ones. For example, the Pew Forum survey found that 4 out of 10 evangelical Christians under 30 say that homosexuality as a way of life should be accepted by society, almost twice as many as those over 30 who would affirm this statement.^{xiv}

These three Stanford evangelicals were clear about LGBT students being created as much in the image of God as anyone else. They saw nothing sinful about homosexuality per se, but

saw sex of any kind before marriage as sinful -- heterosexual or LGBT. Inconveniently, they also opposed same-gender marriage, insisting that it must be between a man and a woman, but they seemed open to same-gender civil unions with all the rights of marriage. They might also agree that America has a problem in allowing clergy to act both on behalf of the state and of their religious institution. Would it be better for all if we separated functions as they do in certain European countries, requiring a legally-binding ceremony in a state context first and a religious ceremony later, if one chooses.

It should be noted that religious traditions that seem not to be LGBT-friendly on campuses almost always have alternative groups within them that are: For example, Dignity and New Ways Ministries for Catholics, Affirmation for Mormons, Freedom in Christ for evangelicals, and Al-Fatiha for Muslims. And what is done in pastoral counseling behind closed doors by sensitive Catholic priests, evangelical ministers, Orthodox rabbis, and Muslim imams can be life-enhancing -- indeed, life-saving -- for many LGBT religious practitioners. I've spoken with both Catholic and Protestant evangelical professionals on campus at Stanford who say that they always try to respond to students where they are and not to lead with church doctrine. There's also a lot of moral nuance, they explain, that always needs to be recognized.

One of the most positive experiences many of us at Stanford have had in a long time, ironically, was when the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, came to campus last January. This is the Rev. Fred Phelps' church, whose web-page address is GodHatesFags.com. They demonstrated outside of Hillel at Stanford, chanting and singing, and holding up anti-LGBT signs along with their anti-Semitic signs like "God hates Jews" and "The Jews Killed Jesus." Their homophobic signs included, "Fags are Beasts," "Fags doom nations," "Fags Can't Marry," and "God hates Fag Enablers." (I take it that last label is intended for people like me).

As many of you know, what the Stanford community decided to do in response, since we were given a week's warning that they were coming, was to create our own celebration of unity, which turned out to be 1000 strong, on the Hillel lawn, circled around with our backs to the Westboro church members, singing songs, and reciting a formal pledge together. There were 25 co-sponsors and partners, including the LGBT Community Resources Center, the Queer/Straight Alliance, and an organization called Jewish Queers, and then evangelical, Catholic and progressive Protestant organizations, the Buddhist Community, the Islamic Society, a new interfaith group called "Faiths Acting in Togetherness and Hope," and the Office for Religious Life. The pledge we recited included these words: "We stand united, from diverse secular cultures and religious traditions. We stand united, gay and straight, bisexual and transgendered... We stand united, and with the power of our bodies and our voices, we overcome the ugliness of hate. We stand united, affirming acceptance and inclusiveness. We stand united, affirming respect and diversity. We are Stanford United."

I was very proud of Stanford at that moment, and I feel it was an important demonstration of both secular and religious commitment to bring forth justice faithfully -- to establish justice on the earth. So, as both Isaiah and Jesus described the word of God: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness... I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness... See the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare."^{xv} Amen.

BENEDICTION

Go in peace. Live simply, gently, at home in yourselves.

Act justly. Speak justly.

Remember the depth of your own compassion.

Forget not your power in the days of your powerlessness. Amen.

Mark Belletini

NOTES

ⁱ Matthew 3: 13-17.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 3:15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 3:17.

^{iv} Matthew 12:18.

^v Luke 4:18, citing Isaiah 61:1-2; 58:6.

^{vi} As quoted in Chris Glaser and Sharon Groves, *"For the Bible Tells Me So" Study Guide and Advocacy Training Curriculum* (Washington: Human Rights Campaign, 2008).

^{vii} The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Religion Among the Millennials: Less Religiously Active Than Older Americans, But Fairly Traditional In Other Ways, Feb. 17, 2010 (www.pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=510#beliefs)

^{viii} Aidan Dunn, e-mail to Scotty McLennan on February 21, 2010.

^{ix} Mychal Copeland, Interview with Scotty McLennan on 2/21/10.

^x Film Synopsis, *For the Bible Tells Me So*, at <http://forthebibletellsmeso.org/film.htm>

^{xi} "About," *A Jihad for Love*, www.ajihadforlove.com/about.html

^{xii} "About the Film," *Trembling on the Road*, www.filmsthatchangetheworld.com/site/about/

^{xiii} Laura Harrison, Interview with Scotty McLennan on 2/10/10.

^{xiv} Pew Forum, "Religion Among the Millennials"

^{xv} Isaiah 42: 6,7,9.