

John Sampson
"No More Passing"
Text: Esther 8:3 - 8
Preached at KVCC
June 23, 2019

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

No more passing.

On this day when we celebrate our first LGBTQI+ Pride as an Open and Affirming congregation, I say to you there is no more passing, for us. There's too much at stake.

There's too much justice at stake, and there's too much blessing at stake not to continue to come out more deeply and profoundly to the community all around us.

Passing is a term that many marginalized communities use to describe a way of being in which the truth of their experience, and who they are, is hidden. It's a way to live under the radar, and make oneself invisible.

For African Americans passing means being understood and accepted as white.

For a gay man like me, it meant growing up trying to act straight and be recognized as straight.

For Esther, and for Jews around the world and across time, it has meant downplaying their Jewish identity and assimilating the characteristics of the cultures and societies they are members of.

People pass because who people understand you to be can be a question of life and death. In this kind of world passing is a strategy of survival.

There was a time, and it is still now in many parts of our world, that to come out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex is to put your life literally at risk. Ask Chynal Lindsey who was found dead at the beginning of this month. She is the fourth trans woman to be murdered in Dallas in three years.

There was a time, and it is still now in many parts of our world, that to be known as Jewish is to put your life literally at risk. Ask Lori Gilbert-Kaye who was shot dead in the Chabad of Poway synagogue earlier this year for worshipping God according to her Jewish faith.

And so some of those who are at risk – at risk for their lives, at risk for their families, at risk for their jobs, at risk for becoming the objects of random violence – may try to pass. They may try to pass as straight, as cis-gender, as white, as non-Jewish.

And we should never judge those who try to pass. Those who are taking on the persona of the privileged classes to avoid violence and dehumanization are negotiating their lives, and the world around them, so that they may be safe. Who are we to say that's not right?

But there are those who have come to a decision for themselves that passing creates more harm than good – that passing allows the sick jokes and stereotypes and lies and discriminatory laws about who LGBTQI+ people really are - to thrive and grow and harm. And it is in the face of this mounting prejudice that some have decided to stop passing, and come out as who and what they really are. It is in the face of increasing hate that some have decided to stop passing, and come out as the beautiful children of God they are blessed to be.

On this day of Pride, when we celebrate as an Open and Affirming congregation, we hear the story of Esther at a pivotal moment in her life. Esther is a woman who has received all of the privileges a woman could in the Persian Empire because she has passed as something other than a Jew, and through the hiding of her true self was able to marry the king. But there she stands as an edict is about to be put into effect that will destroy all of the Jews across the empire, and she knows if she were to reveal who she was she might be destroyed herself.

At that moment I wonder if Esther remembered the story of how God saved the Israelites, how God saved the Jews, by bringing them out of slavery in Egypt and gave them their own land to inhabit, in which they could be free. I wonder if she remembered how many Israelites were lost in the process, but that the people, as a people, were saved and liberated.

And I wonder if this story, from her Jewish ancestors, made the difference and gave her the courage, and maybe even the pride, to risk it all and reveal who she was to her husband, the king.

Because it is in this moment, when Esther stops passing, that she saves her people by stopping the edict that would have led to the murder of so many innocent people.

It's in light of this story of Esther, and her courage, that I think on this day of Pride of what happened fifty years ago at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village in New York City. I think of how in the early morning of June 28, 1969 police officers entered the Inn to harass and arrest the LGBTQI+ people and their friends who had gathered to drink, and socialize, and partner with each other for the night. I think of the drag queens who were there, and the sissy boys, and the lesbians, all those who had nowhere else to go and meet. And I think about how when the police started harassing the customers that night, how those who were there began to risk it all, and they fought back and threw the police out of the bar. I think about the courage, and the pride of that small group of people, who refused to pass in

corporate jobs and fake marriages, who stood up in their rainbow glory. And how at that moment they saved their people. Because in that moment they started the modern LGBTQI+ rights movement.

This morning our sacred story and our lived experience flow together and tell us the same truth. True freedom, true liberation, true blessing, is achieved when we stop passing, and risk revealing who we are to the world around us. This is what Harvey Milk taught us as LGBTQI+ people; this is what he taught us all as Americans when he said:

You must come out
Come out to your parents
Come out to your neighbors
Come out to your coworkers
Destroy the lies and distortions
For your sake. For their sake.

Because once you stop passing, once you come out, then all of the lies that are told about LGBTQI+ people are revealed for what they really are...lies.

Soon, and very soon, as the hymn goes, our congregation will be taking another step further in our process of coming out to the world as an Open and Affirming congregation.

Because very soon we will be putting up our new sign out on the front lawn of our church. It's going to have our name, and identify me as the pastor. It will give our contact information. And on the bottom it will announce to all of our neighbors, and all of those who drive and walk and bike past our building, that we are an Open and Affirming congregation. Now, for some people that will mean something, but for most it won't. But under these words will be a long thin rainbow. And I think this rainbow, the sign for LGBTQI people and concerns, will mean a lot to all those who will see it.

For many people when they see our church from the street today, when they see its simple classical design, the white clapboards, the dark green shutters, I think they may imagine that we are just like all of the other churches in this area. They might think we are just like all of the other churches around our country.

They might think that of course we believe being LGBTQI+ is a sin.

They might think that we would never ordain a gay man as pastor.

They might think that we would be conservative, and traditional, that we would never mix up the gender of God and refer to God as she.

They may think they know exactly what God's spirit is doing in this place.

But I think the rainbow, which will be etched into our sign, will tell a different story. I hope it will reveal to those passing by, that we are not what they might think we are, and that

God is working hope and liberation in this place. And that a church can be a different place from what they might expect.

This rainbow, which the committee that developed the sign thought was essential in how we presented who we are as a congregation, this rainbow which the Council approved unanimously, will proclaim to those who don't know us yet that:

God welcomes all of her children, including her LGBTQI+ children

That all marriages and families are blessed here

That God is doing a new thing, and that the church can change and evolve to live more fully into God's dream for all of her children

The story of Esther tells us this Pride Sunday that we can't afford to pass. That we have to risk coming out in new and varied ways. That revealing who we are is a matter of life and death – not just for a child who has been told that God hates her – not just for the man who thought there is no church he could visit who would accept him as he really is – but also for the church itself who many feel is a place filled with hate and judgment and in no way reflects the true desires of God for humanity.

It's because of this history of hate and discrimination within the church that we must come out, for justice, for those who are hurting, for the church, and most of all, to tell the truth of God's extravagant love. And it's in this way that coming out is not just for LGBTQI+ people, it is for all of us who are children of God.

This is why Pride Sunday is for all of us.

Happy Pride!

Amen.