

LGBT Activism as Ministry

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It seems somehow appropriate that as the Earl Lectures this year examine emerging models of church, I begin by telling you how my life was changed by television. So much of what I am going to share with you today, began with *Little House on the Prairie*.

Do you remember that show from the 1970's? It was set in Minnesota and South Dakota and chronicled the life of a young woman, Laura Ingalls Wilder who was played by Melissa Gilbert.

Well, one of the early telltale signs of my orientation was a huge crush on Laura Ingalls Wilder. (I watched faithfully every week to see my shero tackle yet another daunting task of life on the prairie.)

In 1983, Melissa Gilbert starred in a made-for-TV movie entitled "Choices of the Heart." "Choices of the Heart" told the story of Jean Donovan, one of the four US Churchwomen who was raped and murdered in El Salvador in 1980¹ by US-backed Salvadoran death squads. That movie changed the course of my life.

All the admiration and love I felt for Melissa Gilbert as Laura Ingalls Wilder, I transferred to Jean Donovan. And it led me to read every book I could find on her--biographies, books on Archbishop Oscar Romero—whose assassination nine months before Jean's had greatly impacted her ministry, and liberation theology from the Latin American context.

Jean's life story and the subsequent consciousness I gained from the passion I felt for her, led me to sign the "Pledge of Resistance," a document whose signatories promised to resist if the US ever invaded El Salvador. It led me to start a chapter of Amnesty International at my high school, host a conference on "Children of War" and participate in the "Sanctuary Movement." And, in 1987, as a first year student in college, it led me to participate in an "accompaniment" trip to El Salvador.

As I have reflected on this, I am aware that, in my own life at least, my passions have an expansive quality to them. That is to say, that my love of another person is connected to my love of their life circumstances and that these are connected to my deep desire to make this kind of love and justice in the world. For me, desire and passion are deeply personal, but they have led me, over and over again, to desire and passion and love and justice out in the world.

¹ For more information on Jean Donovan, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel and Maura Clark, visit <http://www.justpeace.org/advent2000.htm>

One of my most profound experiences of this expansive quality of desire and passion was that trip I made to El Salvador in 1987 as part of the “Accompaniment Movement.”

The accompaniment movement grew out of the desire, on the part of North Americans, to support the efforts of Salvadoran refugees returning home from Mesa Grande and other refugee camps outside of El Salvador. The refugees had fled in 1983 in the wake of “Operation Phoenix”² the US-supported offensive of the Salvadoran National Guard whose motto was, “the guerillas are like the fish, the people like the sea. If we dry up the sea, we can find the fish.” The strategy was to drop thousands of tons of bombs on the Salvadoran countryside and then have soldiers move in and wreak havoc, terror and death.

In the early 1980’s, Santa Marta had been a village of about 4000. Operation Phoenix killed about 3000 of these folks and the remaining 1000 fled into Honduras and lived there, in a refugee camp, for four years. In October of 1987, the survivors took diapers, towels and anything else that was white and could be held up as a flag of peace and walked back into El Salvador to the place that had been their village. There they were joined by North Americans whose presence was meant to keep the Salvadoran army from killing the villagers because the army didn’t want the US population to be made aware of what was happening in El Salvador. (They’d learned their lesson in 1980 when Jean Donovan and her three colleagues were killed. The US had cut off aid for a few months.)

I was part of the delegation that spent a week in Santa Marta over Christmas, 1987.

During that trip, I asked one of the women how it was that she was able to come back to El Salvador and protest the government and not be terrified. In response, she said to me. “I have lost five of my children to this civil war. One of them, my oldest son, I witnessed being tortured to death.

“I have been able to survive because I know that in Jesus Christ, God knows in His body what it means to be tortured to death. So my son did not die alone, but being held in God’s arms. And in the resurrection, God has said, once and for all, that life and love are stronger than death. So, it doesn’t matter what they try to do to me. Even if they kill me, I know that God will resurrect me. And that makes me powerful.”

Now, I am a double—PK (both of my folks are pastors), and I have heard a lot of sermons over the course of my life. Many of them have been brilliant. But no one has spoken more powerfully about the meaning of what God has done in Jesus Christ than that fearless, powerful Salvadoran woman. And to her, I owe the debt of my faith.

Her words taught me that faith is not something that is practiced once or twice a week as an optional activity, but is, instead, literally necessary for survival. Furthermore, faith is that which compels us to act to make the world more like God would have it to be: just and abundant and joyous.

² For more information on Operation Phoenix, which was originated in Vietnam and replicated all over the world, see <http://www.bulatlat.com/news/6-34/6-34-phoenix.htm>

When I returned home from El Salvador, I continued to do a lot of work with the Central American solidarity movement. I learned Spanish; I went to Nicaragua and Mexico and lived in Christian Base communities; and I began a formal study of liberation theologies. All of it remains etched in my person and continues to shape my ministry.

One of the ways my Central American experience continues to inform and inspire me is that it was the context that emboldened me to come out as a lesbian. Because I was interacting with women and men who were fearless, I was called to face my own fears. And, at the time, my deepest fear was my own internalized homo and trans-phobia. Although I grew up in a UCC context with parents who were very support of lgbtqqi people, I knew that there were many, many barriers that would stand in my way if I were to name both my growing awareness of my sexual orientation and my desire to pursue ordained ministry.

But the words kept echoing in my heart and mind—*faith isn't a convenience, it is necessary for survival...*

If that were true, I was going to have to accept both of the calls God had placed on my heart—that of ministry and that of loving women.

I share all of this with you because, for me, given my own life experiences and the debt I owe to those who have embodied God for me, it is impossible to separate my call to ministry, my coming out as lesbian and my understanding of God's desire to have us participate in making the world more like God would have it to be. And the fact is, that in such a world, justice is about non-violence AND it is about an abundance of food AND it is about universal access to health care AND it is about creating a space so that the gifts of all are shared—including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

So, this is the beginning place for me as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ who finds her vocation as an lgbt activist:

1. Passion and desire are deeply important. They are not uncomplicated and we must *always* be aware of their capacity for destruction. But when our passion and desire for creation, for connection, for love and justice are embodied, we are called into powerful relationships and ministries. And there exists a dialectic between the passions and desires between two people for love and justice and the passions and desires for all peoples for love and justice.

I can say more about this, but I think this is one of the charisms of the lgbt community—that we have named and called out this dialectic between love and justice between two people, and love and justice amongst all people.

(I can also say more about the fact that, because one of our charisms has to do with sexuality and embodiment—which are VERY powerful spiritual forces that can be used for both destructive and creative purposes, we also, as an lgbtqqi community, need to be

very careful about creating spaces to name the power of destruction, face into it and transform it.)

2. Our faith in God, when it is deep enough, can embolden us to face into our deepest fears. When we claim the power of the solidarity of God—in the worst oppression and violence—and the power of God—to transform even degradation into new life—we can literally participate in hearkening the Realm of God.

3. Because God calls us to participate in making the world as God would envision it—abundant, joyous and just—we cannot pretend that our movements are separate from one another. Thus, my work as an activist for lgbtqqi justice is indebted to and has wisdom to offer, every other manifestation of gospel work.

So that's my starting point. Those are my assertions and the place out of which I operate. These, in and of themselves, offer some ideas about the ways in which I understand lgbt activism as ministry. But let me offer a few more, which I hope will spur some good conversation and dialogue.

4. The very topic we are reflecting on together, assumes that lgbt activism and ministry might be different things. And, indeed, I am a bit of an odd duck—working for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force as an ordained minister. I get a lot of ponderous looks from all sides when I share this information.

From my Association of the United Church of Christ, I have to submit paperwork every year to keep my “Four-Way Covenant” current and explain how it is that what I'm doing is an “ordainable” call. How am I a minister of Word and Sacrament? What is my ministry? How does it all go together?

From my secular colleagues—who, by the way, call me “Rev.”—I get a range of responses. One of my colleagues has, with a tremendous amount of respect, said that she views what I do in much the same way as her colleagues who are Log Cabin Republicans (lgbt folks working within the Republican party). We are both working in institutions that are, in her estimation, irredeemable.

Several of my colleagues talk about the work that I do as important, but name the reality that the vast majority of folks within the lgbt community have been literally scarred by the Church. (At a recent Gay Christian Network conference, a colleague met with a young man who has castrated himself because his minister had told him to do so.) They question if any good can come from this institution.

And some of my colleagues talk with me on the side, coming out as religious but not wanting other of our colleagues to know.

Each of these positions represents part of the truth about lgbt activism as ministry. My United Church of Christ Association colleagues are right—ministry is often defined as within a parish. And those of us who minister outside the parish—and who often seek

to speak prophetically TO the parish—need to be articulate and clear as to how our work is ministry.

And my secular colleagues are right. As one who comes bearing the sign and symbols of the Church, I must always be mindful of the death-dealing, the oppression, the brutality and the torture that has been done in the name of Christianity. If I forget this (and I only need look at the Prop 8 campaign ads inferring pedophilia, the treatment of those at Guantanamo Bay and the abuse of women by husbands who hold their Bibles high), if I forget this, I act as a perpetrator myself.

So lgbtqqi activism as ministry calls me to stand in a liminal space—holding seemingly contradictory things in tension.

But, I understand that one's definition of ministry is related to one's understanding of ecclesiology³.

As a former parish pastor, I take very seriously that form of ministry. It is truly an honor and a sacred responsibility. Gathering as the Body of Christ to worship and praise, to remember our vocation and to break bread together on a weekly basis are absolutely central to my understanding of Church and ministry. As I read Scripture, there is very little about individual spirituality, instead, there is a large focus on the People of God and the Body of Christ. Matthew 25 clearly addresses nations, not individuals. So, gathering as communities of faith is, in my opinion, critical. And parish ministry is sacred work.

But it is not the only form and role of being Church or being pastor. Jesus spent very little time inside the Temple. His was a ministry in the streets and in peoples' homes. His was a vocation of speaking to the powers of his day. And, as I've shared, my own life of faith and ministry has been profoundly shaped by those who minister beyond the walls of the Church.

5. The lgbtqqi community is still a much denigrated community—one small example is this past Transgender Day of Remembrance in which we honored the three transgender women who were executed in Iraq last year and many of the trans folks murdered here at home⁴. Because of this denigration, we have had to find ways to survive and thrive. One of these has been through “chosen family.” Like the understanding of passion and desire as both personal and communal, I think “chosen family” is a charism of the lgbtqqi community and that we have much to remind the Christian community about because of it.

When lgbtqqi folks are rejected by biological or adoptive families, or when we are needing to find deep connection, we often form “chosen family.” These sacred friendships form the space in which we raise our children, share meals, nurse our partners through breast cancer and HIV/AIDS and generally embody God's love for one another.

³ Ecclesiology is the study of the how and why of “being the Church.”

⁴ For more information on these murder victims and on Transgender Day of Remembrance, visit http://www.transgenderdor.org/?page_id=58

As I read the gospels and even the epistles, it is community and chosen family that I see lifted up as the way in which we are called to live. The lgbtqqi community has much to remind the larger community with this charism.

(Parenthetically, it is because of this, that I struggle sometimes with the marriage equality movement. Practically, I understand that marriage has always been the carrier for the oppressions of the day and that the attempt to limit marriage to one man and one woman is the manifestation of misogyny, heterosexism and homo- and trans-phobia. I also know that marriage is an economic justice issue—especially for immigrant and working class lgbtqqi folks. And so I have been very active in the marriage equality movement.

But I have been torn in my heart of hearts—first as a feminist and one who's worked in the anti-domestic violence movement and second as one who sees the particular charism of the lgbtqqi community as reminding us of community and chosen family as sacred models of human love.)

6. Another charism of the lgbtqqi community that is deeply related to the desire and passion piece has to do with sabbath practice.

One of the main criticisms I get from my Christian colleagues is that lgbtqqi work is not as important as other justice issues. It is secondary at best and indulgent at worst.

But as part of my work, I have been doing quite a bit of reflection on the Ten Commandments. And I keep returning to some related themes. If you notice in the Ten Commandments, the ability to not kill, to honor one's mother and father, to not covet one's neighbor's ass—all of these flow out of keeping Sabbath.

In Scripture, Sabbath—which is practiced every seven days, is connected to sabbatical—which is practiced every seven years, is connected to Jubilee which is practiced every seven times seven years. Sabbath practice is deeply connected to Jubilee—which is the re-instatement of economic justice and abundance for all.

But Sabbath practice isn't just about gathering the community for worship and prayer—both of which are deeply important. It is also about mind-body-spirit connection. It is about enough rest, it is about eating good food. And it is about healthy sexuality. In most Jewish communities, sex on the Sabbath is seen as a blessing.

Of course, we can hardly conceive of this kind of understanding, given all that has been built around sexuality within Christian communities.

But as a community whose charism it is to lift up sexuality and gender and embodiment, the lgbtqqi community can help remind the Church about our spiritual roots. We can remind our weary, over-caffeinated, exhausted to the point of violence Christian community and world about healthy sabbath practice, including healthy sexuality. And we can remind us all that it is healthy sabbath practice, including healthy sexuality, that

allows us to move in the world as ones who honor mother and father, who share extravagantly of our gifts and as ones who witness for non-violence and justice.

Two final observations as one whose ministerial vocation is as an LGBT activist.

7. The Book of Acts is a somewhat fantasy view of what the early Church at least *should* have been, if not what it was like. In it, there are many stories, but three are worth lifting up. They are the Pentecost story, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, and the story of Peter and Cornelius.

The Pentecost story deals with the question of who's in and who's out in the early Church. Is it just Jews from Jerusalem?

In answer to the question, the Holy Spirit is poured out as Jews from all over the Mediterranean are gathered—Jews of all different races and cultures and languages. All of those gathered, though speaking in a myriad of languages, understand each other. In a reversal of the story of Babel, all Jews, no matter their country of origin, are welcome. All are understood and understand.

And then a bit later, when Philip encounters a eunuch from Northern Africa, he is convicted by the obvious presence of the Holy Spirit in the man. Now, as you know, eunuchs were sexual minorities in their day. And this man was also a gentile, a non-Jew. Philip is faced with a dilemma—even as he feels and knows the Holy Spirit in this person, he is conflicted because he is not a Jew. Can someone join the Church who is not a Jew? Again—who's allowed in, who's not? And again, the answer is—we cannot deny the presence of the Spirit and we must allow him in.

Finally, in the encounter between Peter and Cornelius, the question of who is in, who is out. Peter's dream teaches him that it is not what goes into a person, but what emanates from her or him that makes a person clean. Cornelius is in.

The fact that these stories form part of the core of the story of the early Church tells us much about how we are called to act. Each of these stories illustrates the Church's opportunity to either be faithful—and extravagantly welcoming—or to turn away from their mission.

I believe—especially as I work with many, many congregations who grapple with the question of being welcoming and affirming of LGBTQ folks—that we are facing a modern day illustration of the same question. And the stakes are no less high. Will the church be the church? Will the church live up to its mission of extravagant welcome?

It is this question, this opportunity, this challenge that the Church faces today.

And the reality is that congregations that say yes to extravagant welcome learn the same lessons that the early Church did. That radical hospitality invites a kind of new life that wasn't present before it. Welcoming and affirming congregations do better financially,

on average, then their counterparts who aren't welcoming and affirming. Congregations that are welcoming and affirming are more likely to be involved in other social justice movements. And the welcoming and affirming process allows a kind of speaking truth—about each of our individual lives, about our faith, about our fears, about our desires—that does, indeed, set us free.

8. As an lgbtqqi activist, I learn from and draw strength from other great social justice movements. They are not the same, but their spiritual wisdom has much to teach us. In particular, they have much to teach about the unique, and deeply Christian work of non-violent transformation.

In the book *Gandhi and Jesus: The Saving Power of Non-violence*⁵, Terrence J. Rynne lifts up the fact that there are four major movements that have radically transformed their societies through the use of Gandhian non-violence. They are the Civil Rights movement in this country, the Solidarity movement in Poland, the movement that deposed Marcos in the Philippines and the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa. In each of these, people of faith were at the core and the ministry and methodology of Jesus were woven throughout the movements.

The key to this Gandhian/Jesus approach is that of recognizing the humanity of all involved in any given situation. Both the oppressor AND the oppressed have their humanity devastated. To transform the situation of oppression is to liberate all involved. This recognition of the humanity of all means that that which is created beyond the dismantling of the oppression has the possibility to be life-giving, not just a change in who is oppressor and who is oppressed.

For the lgbtqqi movement—particularly the religious lgbtqqi community—this Gandhian/Jesus wisdom can be a guiding light.

Our daughter, Shannon, just turned two a week ago. These past two years, plus the nine months of pregnancy, have taught me incredible lessons about the God I love and the ministry to which I am called.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons comes every night as we are going to bed. Either my partner, Maggie, or I sit in a chair in Shannon's room and read and talk about Shannon's day with her. And then, gradually, she will begin to relax. When she's ready to sleep, she'll turn around, take my face in her little hands and give me a squeeze or say "I ove you." Then she'll wrap her arms around by my neck and put her head on my shoulder to sleep.

She knows in her body about love.

And I want to help make a world in which she never has to forget that.

⁵ *Gandi and Jesus: The Saving Power of Non-violence*, Terrence J. Rynne. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008.