

Interfaith Pride Weekend

This weekend began with Shabbat services and continued to Sunday morning Eucharist. The Eucharist was celebrated at St. Paul's with Mother Kristin Saylor of St. Peter's presiding and Rabbi Alpert as the speaker. Our First Interfaith Pride Weekend was a variation on five years of services where clergy of four churches have rotated pulpits to talk about Dr. Martin Luther King and Human Rights.

Part One: Saturday June 10th, 2017

Congregation KTI, Port Chester, NY

Pastor Jim O'Hanlon

It's an honor to be invited to be here with you again, a privilege to speak to you again. It's also good. It's good to have clergy friends, friends who understand the strange life of a pastor. Friends you can be yourself with. I was sitting here watching and being moved at how you (Rabbi Alpert) are WITH your congregation, how you are FOR them in worship. I was realizing that I rarely see you the way most people see you. I'm also moved by the way you make music without instrumental accompaniment.

It's good to be here again. Our relationship is more essential than ever. I hope you know we welcome you to join us tomorrow when Rabbi Alpert is speaking at St. Paul's.

In one of the prayers you said, "If you believe you can do damage, then you should believe that you can fix. If you believe you can harm, then you should believe that you can heal."

Religion is a two edged sword. It binds us into powerful, meaningful communities but it also makes us parochial or even at times tribal. We all have our biases and blind spots and we all feel the pressure to conform to our specific, particular community. We don't always know our blind spots, we often don't know what we don't know.

I have biases that result from gaps in my experience. For a long time if I heard a preacher with a southern drawl I assumed they were fundamentalist. When I met one preacher who defied that view I got past that. Previously, if someone told me they were from Appalachia, or West Virginia I'd hear banjo music in my head.

Maybe some of you know or you've guessed that I was raised Irish Catholic. Whatever crazy caricature of a stereotypical Irish family plays in your mind when you hear that... that is exactly what my childhood was.

My Dad was in the NYPD. On Sunday, he and my mother together scooped up their eight kids and took them to Mass. We were schooled by Nuns, and subtly taught to keep to our own. I was an altar boy. I could go on.

Did any of you catch the Irish times last Sunday? Do you get the Sunday edition? Last week's party elections mean that the next Prime Minister of Ireland will most likely be Leo Varadkar, the son of an Indian immigrant. I wish my parents were around for me to get their reaction to a son of an immigrant from Asia, a Gay man who describes himself as not very religious preparing to become Ireland's Prime Minister. When I heard that my jaw dropped.

Forty years ago if there was a story about terrorism in the United Kingdom it was about the Catholics of the Irish Republican Army. In a country where bloody fighting was, fairly recently, between Catholics and Protestants, today we see a son of an Indian physician is preparing to be their next Prime Minister.

We rejoice in great strides like this, like a Muslim Mayor of London, but every step forward is met with resistance, obstruction or backlash.

We haven't finished addressing the concerns of bias against the LGBT community. Not in far away Chechnya and last week when there was a celebration of Pride Month in White Plains people came out to their cars to find hate literature on their windshields.

We know there is a growing movement of secularism in our country AND a persistent element of religious radicalism in our world, and we have our religious radicals here at home too.

For many people the response to faith-based intolerance is universal-ism, a bland civic religion which seeks to be inoffensive. People often see universalism as the antidote to the old particularism, as if it is a binary choice between right and wrong. They see particularism -- identification with a specific, defined tradition -- as the domain of prudes, people who want to impose their ideas in a puritanical way. I don't see particularism that way. Not necessarily.

I think your particular Jewish Conservative faith can inspire you to engage the world in a positive way. I know it can and does.

I think my particular Lutheran tradition can give me a place from which to dialogue with you and other interested partners. I can engage you as equals with your own more than valid theology and venerable, traditions, not to compete though perhaps to contrast. We can compare our practices in respectful curiosity. Many people think of interfaith activity as finding prayers and beliefs that are the lowest common denominator or focusing only on where we overlap.

I don't think interfaith encounters at their best are about downplaying the differences. It's also, for me, not about any and every belief and tradition being equally valid. I think there are many valid and beautiful faith traditions, enough for a lifetime of exploration. But I evaluate each.

I also think each tradition has its offshoot distortions and lurking malcontents.

In many ways, Americans are not very advanced in understanding the potential for pluralistic society and the less literate Americans become about religion the less capable we will be to make the best use of our great diversity.

We have made a start. We've made a good start: The annual diaper drive we do together; The MLK commemoration; Food2Grow On; PrideWorks and cooperation with the Port Chester H.S. Gay Straight Alliance. We've gotten quite involved.

Rabbi Alpert has welcomed many visitors and shown the Torah Scrolls and told the story of this congregation many times even just in my presence.

As we Christians work to undo the damage that our tradition has done and recover what is best, I see a larger society that has rightly rejected a false morality

that condemned sexual minorities and non-conforming gender identities.

The secular world has often been a counterbalance, a corrective to what churches have done when our power was unchecked. But Christians must remind the world that while the old morality needed to be corrected, morality is still needed and our traditions -- yours and ours -- represent the thousands of years of hammering out that balance between order and compassion, stability and creativity.

The old morality that was often repressive needs to be reformed, but too many people reject the harsh moralism AND our methods of moral discernment along with it.

There was an article in the NY Times just recently about the age at which various states allow people to get married and I found it shocking how young we allow girls to be married off in America, in New York even.

Our old moral sensibilities are needed even more as we reform our ethics and norms. Many people over the recent social revolutions have said, "I don't care what people do in their bedrooms, God doesn't care." But that's wrong. We do care and we have a long way to go in addressing domestic violence and supporting families while becoming more inclusive for diverse families.

The Austrian composer Gustav Mahler once said, "Tradition is not about preserving the Ashes but rather passing on the fire."

Americans can be surprisingly ignorant about our own nation's history, especially those parts that are embarrassing. Monday night at 7pm an interfaith book club is gathering in Lyon Park to learn about the history of people of African descent in Port Chester.

In America, after the Charleston shooting we are critically reevaluating our national identity and removing Confederate flags and statues in many places but we also must make sure that the real history is not forgotten.

Many people will say, "When will you let it go?", "When will you stop dragging out slavery?"

We can't as long as... people are people. The Bible shows us very clearly, our amazing capacity to repeat the same mistakes. We need to remember every system of oppression that people have designed.

Religion is a two edged sword. Maybe it is a sword that should be re-purposed as plowshares and pruning hooks but even still it cuts both ways, with an ability to heal and to harm.

For Christians, we must be honest about the damage that we've done and work now in transparent ways, in ways that allow us to be accountable to the larger community.

We need you and our other neighbors to partner to bring the ancient healing arts, the ancient wisdom and time honored practices that nurture a more noble character.

We Christians and Jews are guardians of the sacred stories. Stories that are as old as humanity and still as urgently needed for today's and tomorrow's challenges.

We are charged with telling the stories because they are about truths still being lived out today.

We must tell the story of the ongoing work for civil rights for African Americans, the story of the fundamental need, still, for equality for women, the story of the need for Gay and straight to live and let live, love and let love.

We must tell the story of the 40% of America's homeless youth who are LGBTQ. We must tell the story from 1969 when the Gay community of Greenwich Village stood up at the Stone Wall Inn to assert their humanity and their rights. And the story of Marc Carson who was shot in a hate crime around the corner from the same Stone Wall Inn in May of 2013 as part of a sudden wave of anti-Gay violence.

This “telling of these stories” is essential for a better future and no one can do it like people who cherish scripture and communities where faith formation for the generation to come still takes place. Our communities are about passing on the stories of breakthroughs and setbacks, struggle and resistance. We are needed, our work is urgently needed and we need each other to do it right.

**Being Gay
Is Not A
Sin. Period.**

Interfaith Pride Weekend

Part Two: Sunday June 11th, 2017

St. Paul's Lutheran Church Rye Brook, NY

Service lead by Pastor Jim O'Hanlon, Mother Kristin Saylor of St. Peter's Episcopal Church presiding and Rabbi Alpert as our speaker.

Sermon, Rabbi Jaymee Alpert

Good morning. It is an honor and a privilege for me to be here this morning, and to share in worship with you. I am so grateful that our communities value interfaith discussion and action. It is remarkable that we have been speaking from each other's pulpits for at least five years, and I think it is worth taking a moment to acknowledge how special that is.

I also really value my relationship with Pastor Jim, and I am proud to call him not only a colleague but a real friend.

Yesterday in synagogues all over the world, Jewish communities read a passage from the Bible about lighting the menorah, which now we associate most closely with Hanukkah, but originally it was a the seven-branched candelabra that was to be lit inside the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and that is still found in all synagogues today.

The Book of Numbers teaches that the priests were to tend to the menorah twice a day. It took work to keep the menorah lit, it wasn't as simple as flipping a switch or lighting a match. After all, the lamps of the candelabra needed to be cleaned, oil needed to be made and purified, and the flame needed to be managed, in order for the menorah to emit light.

Light is a powerful metaphor. We do not see light, rather we see what it illumines. Light is a lot like God. We don't see God, rather we see what and who God touches. We feel God through prayer, study, and action. We sense God's presence, when we open our eyes to the divine sparks in the world – when we allow ourselves to elevate the mundane and to make it holy.

- When we treat each other with respect, even when we disagree – especially when we disagree. When we treat one another in such a way so that everyone has dignity regardless of religion, race, gender, or sexual orientation. When we recognize that we have all been created in God's image. When we do these things, when we behave in these ways, I believe that we are bringing God's light into the world.

This year, St. Paul's, St. Peter's and KTI decided to share pulpits during June - Pride Month. While we, along with All Souls Presbyterian Church, have partnered over the last several years to teach at Prideworks and to support the Port Chester High School Gay Straight Alliance, this is the first time that we have chosen a topic for discussion from the pulpit that is specifically about the LGBTQ population.

As a clergy person, when I am looking for ideas and inspiration, I turn to the source first, and I was excited to learn that as part of this morning's Bible passages here, we would be reading the first account of creation – Genesis 1:1-2:4.

It is a beautiful text, and one I look forward to reading every year. In synagogue, we usually read this passage in October, shortly after the beginning of the Jewish year, so it is a treat for me to get to study it in June, and if you are interested in hearing

it again in a few months, feel free to join us at KTI on October 13.

This passage feels especially poignant to read this morning, as we celebrate Interfaith Pride weekend because of chapter 1, verse 27. As we read a few moments ago, “And God created man in God’s image, in the image of God God created him; male and female, God created them.”

At first blush, it seems that God simply created male and female beings – it seems clear that man and woman are created in God’s image, at the same time. However, when we look more closely at the words of this verse, we learn that like most things in scripture, it is not so simple.

Breisheet Rabbah is an early rabbinic text known as *midrash* or homiletic material, dating back to about the year 300, and it offers commentary and insight into the verses of Genesis. Midrash tries to read between the lines of the Bible to gain deeper understanding into what the Bible is trying to teach us.

The rabbis who wrote *Breisheet Rabbah* posit that it is not just that males and females are created in God’s image, equally and at the same time, rather that “the first human being was half male and half female, and then split into two separate beings. The rabbis then go on to suggest that perhaps the first human being was actually an infinite, genderless mass.”

It is wild, mind-blowing, to realize that 1700 years ago, rabbis, teachers, and scholars were calling the gender binary – male and female - into question. We think it is a modern phenomenon, and certainly one that we hear about regularly in the news in the

debates over who gets to use which bathroom, but actually, the discussion is hundreds – almost 2000 years old.

The Talmud, the central rabbinic source that is still studied, consulted, and used to find precedents to determine contemporary Jewish law, describes four types of gender that are neither male nor female.

It must have been revolutionary in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries to be discussing gender beyond the male/female binary, just as it seems revolutionary today. I'm not sure what happened over the last 14 centuries, but I am so glad that we live in a time and area where no matter how a person defines his/her/hir/their gender, we recognize them – we recognize each other, as having been created in God's image.

I say this, and I mean it – I am grateful to live in a community that values all people; I am grateful to live in a state that recognizes same-sex marriage; I am grateful to be a rabbi for a movement that allows me to officiate at same-sex weddings. But I also know that there is more work to do in terms of how we accept one another, and in terms of how we can move our communities to be increasingly open, particularly with regard to LGBTQ youth.

According to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 82% of LGBT students had problems within the previous year with bullying about sexual orientation. 64% felt unsafe at school due to sexual orientation. 44% experienced physical harassment.

And according to the Trevor Project, a national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to

lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) young people ages 13-24,

- The rate of suicide attempts is 4 times greater for LGB youth and 2 times greater for questioning youth than that of straight youth.
- In a national study, 40% of transgender adults reported having made a suicide attempt. 92% of these individuals reported having attempted suicide before the age of 25.
- LGB youth who come from highly rejecting families are 8.4 times as likely to have attempted suicide as LGB peers who reported no or low levels of family rejection.
- Each episode of LGBT victimization, such as physical or verbal harassment or abuse, increases the likelihood of self-harming behavior by 2.5 times on average.

My friends, these statistics make it clear that we still have work to do. We must continue to create community in which every person feels valued, and in which every person is truly made to feel that he/she/zie has been made in God's image, as we are taught in Genesis.

It is critical that our houses of worship continue to work together to spread the message that we want our community to be a safe place for all people regardless of gender and sexual orientation. That we want our community that is filled with people of different religions, backgrounds, and opinions, to be free from hate.

I come back to the image of the menorah in yesterday's Torah

reading in synagogue. Let us light up our houses of worship, our towns, our schools – our community by treating each other with respect and dignity, so that acts of self-harm will be minimized and lives will be saved. Let us bring God’s light and reflection into the world through our actions and our words. Let us recognize that each one of us, indeed, has been made in God’s image. *Kein yehi ratzon* – so may it be God’s will.