

Shared Proclamation (Amos 5.21-24)
Jeremy Rutledge, Covenant Church
October 24, 2010

In January 2007 we held a vigil on the crushed granite labyrinth just outside this sanctuary. It was a vigil meant to stand against hate after the murder of a gay man named Kenneth Cummings. Kenneth had been murdered because he was gay by another man who had specifically targeted him and then explained his rationale to a rather willing media. The newspapers were filled with quotes from the murderer explaining his own bigoted religious view that gay and lesbian people were abominable. The response from Houston's religious community was silence. After a few months, a number of us seeking to get a different message into the media began to organize the vigil. Our message was a simple one: Our religions teach love not hate, we said. We publicly grieved the tragic murder of a gay man. We publicly lamented the misuse of religion to instrumentalize fear and demonize groups labeled "other." We stood shoulder to shoulder to say that our religious communities had to do better, that it was a matter of life and death, that it was a challenge to the very relevance of our faith.

Many of you came to that vigil and saw the clergy lined near the glass narthex wall in dark robes and rainbow stoles. Good Methodists and Baptists, Unitarians and Catholics, Jews, Buddhists, and others stood together in solidarity with the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community. We spoke into the microphone with tears on our faces, naming Kenneth Cummings and grieving the absurdity of his death. At the far end of the labyrinth, sitting in chairs set up on the lawn, were his mother and father. I remember speaking to them afterwards, though I was mostly speechless. All I could say was, "I'm sorry."

We gather this morning in a place that feels sadly familiar. Just over three and a half years since that vigil, we are now grieving a rash of suicides prompted by anti-gay bullying and harassment in our schools, churches, politics, and public life. In the month of September and now carrying over into October, we heard of one boy after another, many of them 11, 12, or 13 years old, who was either gay or perceived to be gay, deciding to take his own life after concluding from all of the hate speech that perhaps there was no place for him. In our own community, in Cypress, 13 year old Asher Brown was one of these boys. His photograph was on the news; in it, he smiles outward from behind bright eyes and beneath a buzzed haircut. He is beautiful and young and just a kid. And our world sent him the message that he'd be better off dead. So we gather again, so soon, to stand and to speak and to say to all as loudly and as clearly as we can that we ally ourselves with the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community.

It is easy to forget in a church like this one, where every person is welcomed, celebrated, and included in full and equal membership, that there is a world outside these walls. Within our little Covenant cloister, the beloved community, or hints of it, really are fleshed out. Here we have gay deacons and straight ones. Here we have women in leadership and men. Here we practice marriage equality by offering religious weddings to all without entangling ourselves in the state's discrimination. Here we read our sacred

stories with an eye toward enlarging the circle, always asking who might feel left out and what we can do about that. Here we affirm that every person holds a spark of divine light and together, in this place, we are mutually illumined. We are warmed by this community, and it is easy to forget that there is a world out there that both needs this light and might be quick to resist it. And so the call this day is to hold out what light we can in a world where the shadows move and play and some months seem to deepen.

There are deep shadows right now in America as the country openly debates its system of separate and unequal citizenship. For our public discourse now includes the questions of whether GLBT Americans can enjoy equal rights to marry, serve the country in our military, adopt children and have families, and be protected from discrimination and firing in the workplace. On the one hand, the fact that we are having these conversations represents how far we've come in a generation or two, since the days of Stonewall and the police raids. Yet on the other hand, these conversations are absurd. Are we really in 2010 debating whether all citizens should be treated equally under the law? Are we really prepared to continue with a system of blatant discrimination against literally millions of Americans? Are we really content with a shameful status quo that teaches our children, explicitly and implicitly, that some of them are acceptable and others are not simply based on who they are and, God forbid, whom they might actually love? Surely the boys we have been reading about internalized the message. And they didn't have time to wait. They needed to know right now if they were loved and accepted. And the response they received from our culture was mixed.

In our reading from the Book of Amos, the old prophet imagines an angry God. His deity is sick of the inequity tolerated by humankind and says that the religions, rituals, and culture are hollow if they don't lead to justice. You know the ancient lines, full of prophecy and passion:

I loathe, I spurn, your festivals,
I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies.
If you offer Me burnt offerings—or your meal
offerings—
I will not accept them;
I will pay no heed
To your gifts of fatlings.
Spare Me the sound of your hymns,
And let Me not hear the music of your lutes.
But let justice well up like water,
Righteousness like an unfailing stream.

And here we might just agree with the prophet. As nice as our vigils can be, as nourishing as our Sunday services, they are not enough. What the world longs for, what it aches for, is a measure of justice. So let us work for that, inside these walls and outside them. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender brothers and sisters, we lament loudly and publicly the violence directed against you, the discrimination, and the dehumanizing hate you continue to suffer. And straight brothers and sisters, we have no excuse to ever be

silent again. We must raise our voices in every conversation and context as allies with the beautiful and brave GLBT community. For this is about even more than love. Even more than justice. This is life and death.

SHARED PROCLAMATION at COVENANT CHURCH

By Bill Colburn

October 24, 2010

The recent incidents of suicides among gay teens, and teens only perceived to be gay, have upset me in more ways than you can imagine. It has brought up painful memories for me personally that very few people have ever heard me speak about. You see, at an early age, I sensed there was something about me that was different. Unfortunately, my classmates picked up on the difference as well. This was long before I understood anything about sex, long before I had even heard the term gay. I, too, experienced the never-ending taunts, the name-calling, the mocking and the laughter from classmates because of this difference. I, too, wondered if this misery was what the rest of my life was going to be like. I, too, wondered if there would ever come a time when I would no longer be laughed at. In my lowest moments, I would get out of bed in the middle of the night to stare at my parent's medicine cabinet, and wonder just how many pills would I need to take to end it all. I was 11 years old.

Yet, somehow, I was able to hang on, even though the taunts and laughter didn't stop with grade school. The taunts and laughter didn't stop with junior high either. They didn't even stop with high school. What built up inside me during those years was that I was someone who was beneath contempt, that I was some-thing 'less than a man'. In my seemingly endless despair, I dropped out of college and did something my parents were never to understand; I volunteered for the military draft and entered the Army. This was the year 1969, the War in Vietnam was still raging, and most draftees were finding themselves sent there. I was no exception. However, at that point in my life, I really didn't care if I lived or died. Part of me even relished the idea of being sent to Vietnam, thinking that in the event I made it back in one piece, I would ever after be looked upon as a veteran, a war veteran at that, and maybe, at long last, no one would ever laugh at me again.

Forty years have passed since then, and if I have anything to offer to the young people today struggling with being bullied and humiliated, it's that things do get better. You just have to hang on. There are institutions like the 'The Trevor Project', that have suicide hotlines for LGBT youth. There is the 'It Gets Better' video campaign started only a month ago by journalist and gay activist Dan Savage on Youtube. Since this campaign began, Youtube has been flooded with videos of ordinary people and celebrities too with the message to troubled gay teens, that there will be many happy memories if they can just hang on. I know that if I had not hung in there, I would have missed the thrill of climbing to the very top of Mt. Kilimanjaro. I would have missed the excitement of hiking the Inca Trail and catching that first glimpse of Machu Picchu through the Sun Gate. I would have missed the experience of placing a Jewish skullcap on my head

praying at the Western Wall. And I would not have had the privilege I've had the last several years of serving on the board of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, a national organization with a single mission: To elect more openly gay candidates to public office, so that we too can have a place at the table.

It is through my work with the Victory Fund, that I have had the honor of getting to know a particular candidate that we endorsed and campaigned for, and that is Ft. Worth City Councilman Joel Burns. Many of you have by now have probably watched the video of his impassioned speech on the subject of anti-gay bullying, and what he himself experienced as a bullied gay teen. This video that has now gone viral, has been seen by over 2 million people, and has caught the attention of the national news media. To me, Joel is a profile in courage and it is his example has given me the courage to share with you elements of my own story. Just as our pastor has eloquently spoken of the need for straight allies to speak out, I feel that I, as an openly gay man, also have a responsibility. I believe I have a responsibility to "Bear Witness", to share my own memories, however raw, however painful, and provide some sense of just what growing up gay has been like for so many of us.

At the same time, I must acknowledge that I am angry, maybe angrier than I have ever been at the religious figures and politicians who continue to demonize the LGBT community, and have kept at it, even as this recent wave of teen suicides has been occurring.

Just three weeks ago an apostle of the Mormon Church used his pulpit to denounce gays as being immoral and vowed that the Mormon Church would continue to martial its financial resources against same sex marriage, just like it did in California's battle over Proposition 8.

Just last month South Carolina Senator Jim deMint proposed that his state ban every openly gay teacher from public schools.

Just two weeks ago the Washington Post gave Op-ed space to the notoriously anti-gay bigot Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, allowing him to attack efforts promoting programs against anti-gay bullying. When confronted by the Gay & Lesbian Anti-Defamation League about this, the Post's response was that they needed to give space to both sides of the issue. Both sides? On the subject of preventing suicides by gay teens, what other side can there possibly be?

Just last week Colorado senatorial candidate Ken Buck repeated the lie that being gay was a choice. A choice? Who chooses a life where they're demonized by their churches, where they risk violence and harassment from their schoolmates? Who chooses a life where they'll be second class citizens under the law, where they can be fired simply because of their sexual orientation?

Yes I'm angry, so angry that sometimes I think my personal response should be to actively oppose all religions, all denominations, all churches. But in my anger and

frustration, I need to remember what Dr. Martin Luther King taught us: That the road to justice is not altogether a smooth one, that there are no broad highways to lead us there easily and quickly, and that we are still in for seasons of suffering.

But how long, we ask?

Not long, because no lie can live forever.

No lie can live forever.

Yes, change will come. I may not live long enough to see it happen, but I believe the generations following behind me surely will. In the years I do have remaining, I realize that I can't live a life in a continual state of anger; however righteous that anger may be. And I don't have to. I don't have to because several years ago I stumbled across a small ecumenical, liberal, Baptist congregation, a congregation whose pastor and whose people give unwavering support not only to the gay members in their midst, but to the gay community outside these walls as well.

Thank you Jeremy, and thank you Covenant for being a candle in the darkness.