

Epiphany4_YrB_020115
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

This past week has been quite an interesting one. After a ruling at the beginning of last weekend by a Federal judge approving the request brought by two parents, legally married in California, for the non-birth mother to be able to adopt their son and be a legal co-parent with the birth mother, this week has been one of verbal shots fired across the various bows of state government offices, Christian denominations, and the inevitable anonymous trolls of comment sections in the paper and on social media sites.

There is the state Supreme Court judge who says he doesn't have to - and won't - abide by the Federal ruling; the wanna-be Senator who sounds so angry when he is decrying the ruling, that I would not want to be face-to-face with him in any discussion; and the only openly gay state legislator who has threatened to 'out' the affairs of the heterosexual members of that elected body because of their hypocrisy. Then there are the trolls. Comments from them come fast and furious, not all of them the same in content, but I'd venture to say at least 99% the same in character - said, written, or tweeted with a disrespectful and hateful tone aimed at all who disagree with them.

The office here at the church was a-buzz with the latest on TV, AL.com, Facebook and the newspaper. However, everyone who came in, or called up, had positive things to say about the ruling. As a group, this congregation understands what it means to accept the dignity and worth of every human being, to treat others as part of the same family of God to which we all belong, to build each other up in love.

So when I read the Collect of the Day for today in light of the events of this week, I was struck by what it means for us in our context. (For someone who might read this who does not attend our services, we use the Collects found in *Prayers for an Inclusive Church* by the Rev. Steven Shakespeare, collects for the three-year lectionary cycle.) Let's look at it again:

God of liberation, confronting the powers that exclude the unclean and bind us to death: may we receive your word of authority, your rule of peace, your

earthly holiness, which comes not to destroy but to set us free; through Jesus Christ, the holy one of God. Amen.

Who are the unclean?

We have a history in this country of naming as unclean those who are different from us - people who don't look like us, people who don't think like us, people who don't worship the same God as us - or no God at all, and people who don't love the same kind of people we love. All of us, whether we want to admit it or not, have been, at some time in our lives, part of the powers that exclude in one way or another. Naming others as unclean kills their souls - and ours - as surely as it can kill their bodies.

But I can say without hesitation that we, as the part of God's family that lives on the corner of Government and Ann Streets, no matter what our individual past deeds may have been, are now engaged not only in standing against any such naming, but also in offering God's blessing to all who come through these doors. And when Jim wrote his blog this week for The Herald, I was so moved by it that I thought we should hear it all together (even if you've already read it) - not so that we can be puffed up, or pat ourselves on the back - but it is important for us to believe out loud.

Here it is:

Judge Ginny Granade's ruling striking down Alabama's gay marriage ban seemed to come out of nowhere. Truth has a way of doing that. Perhaps it's because we don't get a regular newspaper anymore. Maybe I wasn't paying close attention, but it seemed the other media outlets gave the impending ruling little thought. But what a seismic shift in the way of things. What a step toward a more mature and gracious society. Mature, yes. What a cause for celebration! I was watching a local television news broadcast a few nights after the ruling. The news anchor prefaced the segment by saying that "local clergy" were weighing in on the ruling. That of course caught my attention. I was fearful about what might be said in the name of the church. Sure enough a local priest stated that to bless same sex unions "denigrates" the institution of marriage.... How sad... how shameful.... how willfully ignorant. Good father, go ahead and say what you mean... that homosexual people aren't worthy of the dignity granted to the rest of us. What about the Gospel do you not understand? As I read scripture, it is central to Jesus' teachings for us as people of God, people of conscience, to stand against shame and indignity in any form it takes. Justice and dignity always trump social convention; justice and dignity always trump "religious" convention as well.

Given the mass (no pun intended) exodus from mainstream Christianity over the last several decades, one would think the church and the clergy thereof would be on their knees thanking God that there are still people in the world who want the church's blessing; that for some the church is still relevant. Is the church not first and foremost in the blessing business? We should be honored.

Over the past recent years I, like many of you, have become increasingly cynical as to how well our system of government functions.... the gridlock in congress; decisions of the court that undermine civil rights, that favor the rich over the poor. But every now and then our system of government has shining moments of genius; every now and then our government rises above ignorance and prejudice and fear, and serves the common good. This decision is one of those moments, and I for one rejoice in it. Wouldn't it be something to behold if the church could, or would, rise to such genius as well. Come on, father.

We are taught duly in Hebrew scripture and in New Testament literature to love the stranger among us; and warned to pay attention to our xenophobic tendencies; that in God's alchemy, we love God and we love ourselves by loving the stranger. Our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters have for far too long been shamed as the stranger among us. By loving them and celebrating their lives among us we move as the human community one step closer towards the wholeness God intends for our world. As a priest of the church I rejoice in this courageous step in righting a grievous wrong. We are all made in God's image. It is high time we started acting like it.

Thanks be to God, who has liberated us from the bonds of death and set us free!

Can I get an Amen?