

PROUD

A Sermon Delivered by

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Riverside Baptist Church

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Being my twenty-eighth sermon of the interim

Text> 1 John 2:

⁷ Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. ⁸ Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. ⁹ Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. ¹⁰ Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling.

I had a conversation in 1988 with a church member, a gay man, who had found his way to the church I was pastoring because the grapevine had let him know that I was a "gay-friendly" pastor. He was a bright and wonderful young Christian in his mid-twenties, I think. I'm going to paraphrase the conversation and what happened to him in one instance of public shaming and treachery undertaken by a certain Baptist church in Columbus, Ohio. He had served in that church until the dreadful events unfolded and then left. That he was back in church after having been manipulated and betrayed was a miracle all by itself.

He shared with me that he had sung in the choir at that church and the choir director and he became friends and this led to one thing and then another so they became romantically involved. By the way, romantic relationships happen in choirs and churches all over the world. At least I am told it does. So this was not so odd. But as you can imagine, no one in that suburban Baptist church knew the director was gay. This is even before "don't ask, don't tell," right? Remember those days? So the orientation of both of these individuals was a secret. Then apparently someone had a hunch the director was gay and told some important person in the church and of course, they weren't going to have a gay person on staff but they needed someone to stand up and identify him as being gay. And so they asked this young man, sitting in my office and crying as he shared this story with me. He was pressed by this important person to stand up in a church business meeting and confirm that the choir director was gay. Mind you, they didn't know he was gay nor did they know of their relationship. And at this point in my life, the details are fuzzy to me as to why they asked this young man or what led them to conclude he would be able to identify him. So the business meeting came and he was asked to stand up and identify the choir director as gay and then, of course, they dismissed him. I sat there listening to his story, shocked not only that a church leader and pastor would demand that this young man betray a Christian but that he would feel so diminished in his life that he would agree to stand up and do it. He betrayed a person he loved and the choir director of a church because apparently in 1988, the stigma of being different was too terrible to live with openly.

In this single incident—and we know it is a single incident amongst millions and millions of such incidents—the treachery of so-called Christians, of churches that say they welcome everyone but persecute certain ones, the hatred of self-hating persons, the cowardice of self-loathing persons, the sheer, unmitigated abuse doled about by the religious, presents itself to us. Shame, shame. What the Church has done to our children in the name of the compassionate Christ should make us cry out in righteous indignation, no more! You don't get to use Christ as your cover for hatred. You don't get to cite holy scriptures for unholy persecution and hatred of others. You cannot manipulate people to do terrible things like betraying their beloved. You will not relegate gay persons to second class citizenship in the church and prevent them from holding offices in the church or bringing their children to the Lord. You

can't do that any more without our protest. You do not get a free pass to do that any longer. And to all those who have fallen victim to this kind of vile, religious practice, I want you to hear me today: you are welcome here and you are safe in our church. We embrace you as a child of God, made in the image of God and no less deserving of love and protection than any other citizen of the world. And to the churches of exclusion, demonization and persecution I can only say to you as soberly and somberly as possible: repent.

Another true story. As you know we have family in Florida and when the girls were young, they would sometime attend a conservative Southern Baptist church that certain of their relatives attended. This happened a few summers in a row and then one summer my eldest child had a question. And here is why she had a question. My children attended that worship service one time in a year and it was a random time. It is important that you understand that so you can connect the dots in this story. But it did not matter when they arrived for a service that one Sunday in a summer, they always heard the preacher railing against homosexuals. Let me connect the dots for us: if my children attend your church one time in a year unannounced but each time they do so they hear you railing against homosexuals then we have to conclude that you preach that venom on a fairly consistent basis. I asked to see the bulletin from the church. No sermon title. There was a blank page for sermon "notes." I turned it over and saw announcements for the coming week and there in black and white was the menu for their Wednesday night supper. Now many of you grew up in Baptist churches that had mid week suppers and prayer services and this one was no different. And that Wednesday on the menu was a pork roast. I smiled. And I simply pointed out that the preacher had no problem eating pork even though pork is called an abomination in the Old Testament. That is the same word in Leviticus used for men who were attracted to men. Now somehow, this preacher got around this text. Maybe he ate bacon for breakfast that Sunday or any Sunday when he railed against homosexuals. I don't know. Clearly his church was serving pork, an abomination, on Wednesday night prayer meeting. So here is what I have to say to you cherry-picking, literalist preachers of hate: you don't get to get away with this any longer. We will not simply sit idly by while you misuse scripture this way. You found a way around pork roast; you found a way around the bible's sanction of holy war in Joshua where men, women, children and cattle were killed; you found a way around texts that endorsed slavery; you found a way around texts that suggested stoning to death children who were obstinate or rebellious; you found a way around texts that seem to clearly reject divorce; you found a way around texts –and you prosperity preachers perk up your ears now—you found a way around texts that condemn wealth and Jesus' teaching that it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle; in fact you not only got around that text, you have turned Jesus into a capitalist, hawking prosperity as a sign of God's blessing, when the truth is, he was poor, he was powerless as the world understood power and he was given the death penalty by Rome. Now you got around those very many texts, you can get around a few texts that are simply culturally bound that had no idea about anything like sexual orientation and gender fluidity. Oh, yes you can. But whether or not you do, we have grown up and moved on and we now understand that women are not property to be exchanged in marriage, that a woman's word is as valid as any man's and that truth is not gender dependent; we have embraced the science of cosmology and biology and there is not a person sitting here in this auditorium today who will not, by the end of the day, use those insights to figure out what the weather is going to be like tomorrow or microwaved a cold dish of food. We have grown up. We are skilled enough to decipher the truth that God is love and that God expects justice from cultural ideas thousands of years old that would sell your child into slavery as a reward for having conquered you or stoned your child for being different. We are not buying your hatred in the name of God any more. And I say that to every religious proclaimer of hatred be you Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or Hindu and I say it to the atheist haters out there too. I don't accept, by the way, that someone who refers to himself as an atheist is any more rational or less delusional than a religious person. Sorry, history defeats that frivolous and silly idea.

Let me share a story about our church and how we got to be where we are at this moment in time. About the same time I was listening to that young man in Columbus, Ohio, tell me in my pastoral office about his having been manipulated into betraying someone he loved, this church was going through the issue of whether or not a person who was gay could serve on the deacon board. After the fourteen year pastorate of Robert Troutman, the church had to go out and find a new pastor and they called a gentleman here. At some point the choir director came to that pastor and told him about a gay man in the choir who had just been elected as a deacon by the church. She knew this information, I don't know how. My hunch is, he was not exactly hiding in a closet. It was still a time of don't ask, don't tell but he lived honorably and did not hate himself. So she shared this information with the pastor and he had been here for about two years. His response? He gave an ultimatum to the deacons and the church. He would not serve with a gay deacon. Now mind you, this is pretty much the tact today of most churches, Baptist or not. No deacon ordination and certainly no ordination to ministry. The leaders of the church told him that the church had elected this man and he would serve. Some folks left but most stayed and Riverside had stood up and been counted. When I arrived in 1992, one of the first things we did was to dissolve our association, though at that point it was merely historical, with the Southern Baptist Convention. We weren't going to be a part of homophobic slurs and baiting. You can read that statement on our web site, by the way, under the "welcoming outreach" tab. So that is how Riverside is what it is. We began ordaining women to the diaconate in 1972. We ordain women as ministers. We ordain gay persons as deacons and if you give me the chance, I'll be happy to ordain a gay woman who is an aspirant in church to the Gospel ministry when she graduates seminary. Oh, yes, I will and we will. Because I'm proud and you know what else? The haters don't scare me. Look, while I am proud of our prophetic stand I have to point out that the denomination I am ordained in, the American Baptist Churches USA, is lagging behind us. I chose to be ordained in this denomination because of its history of abolitionism, its commitment to women in ministry and its ecumenical outlook. But on this issue, they are still lagging behind. We are, however, also aligned with the Alliance of Baptists and I am glad to say that Deacon Terryn Nelson is on the board of this denomination and the Alliance is right where we are on this issue and other issues of justice. I hope in the next year or two we will find a way to get closer and be more involved and supportive of The Alliance of Baptists. They need us and we need them. I'm weary of supporting religious institutions that will advocate their own freedom while denying it to others. Let's move on in our history. Let's be as involved with the Alliance as we can. It matters with whom we are affiliated.

Just this month, May 24th, Taiwan's Constitutional Court ruled in favor of allowing same-sex marriage, paving the way for the island to become the first place in Asia to legalize marriage equality.¹ Before I share a story from Taiwan let me say a brief word about why marriage equality or same-gender marriage is such a threat to people who say they want to protect traditional marriage.

What I am about to say will be understood only if you have some idea about how marriage has worked in the world down through the millennia. Traditional marriage was and still is to a great degree unequal. Women were not and to this day are not equals in traditional marriage. They were and still are in many cases, second class citizens. They were and are in many arrangements, perceived as less-than their husbands. So while many who argued against marriage equality did so on reproductive grounds and other traditional ideas of marriage, clearly their arguments failed since there are plenty of traditional hetero marriages with no children. The problem, or at least a problem, is I think that with same-gender marriage, equality of relationship is no longer built on gender difference. Mind you, these GLBT folks who marry are committed to the covenant of marriage between two consenting adults who love each other and vow to care for each other no matter what happens and come what may. They deserve credit for restoring faith in that institution, I would say. But let me quickly cite a feminist that I'm reading, Rebecca Solnit, from her book, Men Explain Things To Me. She explains this idea of marriage equality and

¹ Emily Rauhala, "In historic decision, Taiwanese court rules in favor of same-sex marriage," Washington Post, May 24, 2017, online.

its threat to traditional marriage this way, “Marriage equality is a threat: to inequality. It’s a boon to everyone who values and benefits from equality. It’s for all of us.”²

As I said earlier, Taiwan recently ratified marriage equality. I want to tell you about the Taiwanese novelist, Qui Miaojin. Her book, Notes of a Crocodile, is considered a classic by the *New York Review of Books* and indeed this is where I came across a review of her work. I knew nothing about her until six weeks ago. Her novel is set in the post-martial-law time of the late 1980s in Taipei. Qui is Taiwan’s most renown Lesbian writer. She graduated with a degree in psychology and then pursued graduate study in clinical psychology at the University of Paris. She was awarded posthumously the China Times Honorary Prize for literature. Posthumously because at the age of 26, she committed suicide. I would like to share a few thoughts from her novel with you today.

She captures the oppressive and damaging culture of her time and ours when she writes, using the voice of her character in the book, a young lady named Lazi that she and others like her are confined to the prison of stigma and abuse simply because, “your crime is your existence...”³ Sadly, there are any number of minority groups across the world who understand all too well this statement, your *crime is your existence*. African-Americans, Native Americans, Jews, and, while they are half of the human race nonetheless, women. The Church throughout its history has, of course, been complicit in repressive efforts aimed at all of these groups. I am not saying that the Church didn’t contribute in other magnificent ways to the world and even liberation of people but we might as well own our history and as one scholar has said of history, “It is sometimes very hard to tell the difference between history and the smell of a skunk.”⁴ This is true for Church history. Churches have been obsessed with the crimes of people. Substitute the word sin for crimes and you see what I mean. And the sin of women was the sin of being a woman. The sin of GLBT persons is for being different. But allow me to point out something about Jesus our Savior—he was not obsessed with the sin of people. He did not beat up on sinners. Instead, he prophetically protected and spoke up in defense of the sinned-against. How sad that the Church has been complicit in the suicides of so many young people because a preacher or priest convinced that child’s parents and that child! That they were an abomination only worthy of death. The shame of that is appalling. From the Trevor Project are these terrible statistics:

- Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among young people ages 10 to 24.
- The rate of suicide attempts is 4 times greater for LGB youth
- . . .
- 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.⁵

I’ll be succinct but please know, I welcome longer conversations in the confidentiality of my pastoral office for any who are struggling with this issue. If you are in a church that considers your existence a crime, then get out. Leave it. If you are a straight person and belong to a church that considers the existence of GLBT persons a crime, get out and stop supporting them so you can avoid being complicit with hatred. And for any who are considering suicide I just want to plead with you to stop and not carry through with it. Your future self will thank you. Those who love you will thank you. We need you and it is a tragedy that we do not have Qui Miaojin and so many others with us to help us change the world.

² Solnit, Rebecca (2014-04-14). *Men Explain Things to Me* (Kindle Locations 534-535). Haymarket Books. Kindle Edition.

³ Qui Miaojin, *Notes From a Crocodile*, p. 21.

⁴ Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, cited by Paul Theroux, *The Last Train to Zona Verde* (p. 310). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Kindle Edition, 2013.

⁵ “Facts About Suicide,” The Trevor Project, <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/pages/facts-about-suicide>

Qui's character, Lazi, made a remarkable admission early in her book. It is an admission for all of us, no matter our orientation, our race, ethnicity or religion and it is particularly important for us to hear in a society like ours that is so distracted by anything from tweets to sports to entertainment. Reflecting on her college experience and trying to become settled in her life as a student, Lazi, admitted, "My social identity was comprised of [these] two distinct, co-existing constructs. Each writhed toward me with its incessant demands—though when it came down to it, I spent more time getting to know my way around the supermarket next door than I did getting comfortable in my own skin."

For the sake of your own dignity, you must spend time on getting comfortable in your own skin. For the sake of your humanity and the humanity of others—I say this to everyone, not just GLBT brothers and sisters—for the sake of your humanity and the humanity of others, you must consider your own self as important to discover as any supermarket. For your spiritual life, which is your life in God, you and I must take our souls as seriously as we take the latest upgrade to our tech devices. Upgrade your soul.

On this PRIDE week-end, I say to all of you, I am PROUD. I am proud to be the pastor of a church that is not complicit in hatred and oppression. I am proud of our GLBT brothers and sisters and say to you again because I want you to forever have the memory of hearing a pastor say this to you, I love you and receive you with joy into the beloved kingdom. No more hate. No more distortion of the Gospel of Christ. No more suicides. No more trembling in shame behind some locked door. But love, the joy of the Gospel of Christ and life full of light accompany you now and always.

Amen. +