

Liberated to Be Together

Yesterday I had the honor of delivering the following homily to the good folks at Spirit of St. Stephen's Catholic Community.

Liberated to Be Together

A Solidarity Sunday Homily by Michael Bayly



Spirit of St. Stephen's Catholic Community
October 4, 2009

First Reading: Genesis 1:1-31 (abridged)

In the beginning, when God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form. There was deep darkness, and a wind from God swept over the waters.

God separated the light from the darkness, and the waters from one another, and God saw that it was good.

Then God made the dry land and the oceans, and plants of every kind, and God saw that it was good.

Next God made the sun and moon and stars to light the passing of the days and seasons, and God saw that it was good.

Then God brought forth great swarms of living creatures, the legged and winged and finned creatures, and God saw that it was good.

Finally God said, “Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground.”

Thus humanity was created in God’s image; in the divine image God created humankind; female and male God created them.

And God blessed them, saying: “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and govern it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth.” . . . And so it happened. God looked at all of this creation, and saw that it was very good.

The Word of God recorded in the book of Genesis.

Second Reading: Hebrews 2:9-11

We see Jesus, who was made little less than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God, Jesus might taste death for everyone.

Indeed, it was fitting that God, in bringing many sisters and brothers to glory, and for whom and through whom all things exist, should make their leader in the work of salvation perfect through suffering. For the one who makes holy and those who are made holy are all from the one God. That is why Jesus is not ashamed to call them sisters and brothers.

The Word of God spoken through Hebrews.

Gospel: Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees approached Jesus and, as a test, asked, “Is it permissible for husbands to divorce their wives?” In reply Jesus asked, “What command did Moses give you?” They answered, “Moses permitted a husband to write a decree of divorce and to put her away.” But Jesus told them, “Moses wrote this commandment because of your hardness of heart. From the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘This is why a man and a woman shall leave their parents and cling to one another, so that they become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has united, let no one divide.”

Soon the people began bringing children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples spoke sternly to them. When Jesus saw this he was indignant, and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not stop them. It is to just such as these that the reign of God belongs. I tell you solemnly, whoever does not welcome the reign of God like a little child will not enter it.”

And Jesus took the children in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

The Good News of our Salvation spoken through Mark.



Homily: “Liberated to Be Together”

by Michael J. Bayly

Today, the first Sunday in October, is honored by many within our Catholic tradition as Solidarity Sunday – a day when we are invited to recommit to living and working for justice with and for our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender brothers and sisters. (1)

Now, at first glance, it may seem difficult to find in today’s readings support for the message of Solidarity Sunday. After all, much of what they say is clearly aimed at heterosexuals. We hear, for example, of heterosexuals being affirmed in their uniting together, in their “*clinging*” to one another so as to experience a sense of oneness and to procreate. To be honest, I have no problem with such things. After all, if it wasn’t for such physical, heterosexual union on the part of my parents I wouldn’t be standing here today. Yet I also know that I wasn’t created for such union.

The union for which I was created as a gay man has existed throughout time and across cultures. Yet most religions – including Christianity – have consistently condemned it. Indeed, more often than not, religion fuels and provokes bigotry and violence against gay people, and actively works to drive and keep apart those who embody – or seek to embody – loving relationships that truthfully reflect who we are.

In short, powerful elements within both the Church and society have always felt compelled to do their utmost to ensure that gay people are left fragmented, isolated, cast adrift. I’ve come to realize that for such elements the most dangerous kind of gay people are the ones who are accepting of their sexuality, who dare to be proud of who they are and the loving relationships they’ve managed to build and maintain – often against great odds.

Of course, in the past, when religion and secular society were much more entwined, it was often society that persecuted and punished those who violated religion’s prohibition against same-sex activity. Also, it’s a historical fact that thousands of gay people were burnt directly by the Papal States up until 1750 and executed in other states by the civil authorities with papal approval. “Sodomites,” writes Joseph O’Leary, “were demonized in exactly the same style as ‘witches’ were, and treated with equal brutality.”

For me, one of the most haunting examples of such brutal treatment took place in 1727. A Dutch ship was wrecked off the coast of Western Australia; the survivors found themselves stranded on an inhospitable chain of islands. Two of the sailors – young men in their late teens – were caught in the act of “sodomy,” and a trial was hastily arranged. Here’s what an officer who presided at this trial recorded in his log:

[The two youths] were not willing to make a confession. Wherefore we placed burning fuses between all their fingers. But being obstinate they would no more confess. So upon due consideration we resolved with the entire Council and consent of the Common Hands, to place these men apart on one of the northernmost islands.

They were to be marooned, in other words – a punishment that ensured a cruel and horrible death. The youths were rowed to the north-eastern corner of the island group, about eleven miles from the wrecked ship. Here they were left on separate islands to die. These islands are known today as the Mangrove Islands, and have been described as: “Mere nodules of coral slates and spikey bushes raised four feet above the surrounding reefs. There is no water on them. No food. . . . If the youths could not swim they would have been prisoners, each on his own rock until they died from sun and thirst, or went mad with despair and flung themselves [into the sea]. In any event, death must have overtaken them within a day or two.” (2)

What an unspeakably cruel fate for two young men whose only “crime” was their clinging together for comfort, pleasure, relief . . . that wondrous, and, yes, life-giving, experience of two becoming one.

I find it intriguing that these two sailors were dealt such a harsh punishment at a time when homosexual relations aboard ships were well-known. Of course, such relations were often about relieving sexual tension and/or using sex so as to assert and establish dominance. Those who engaged in them were not necessarily homosexual. Perhaps what these two young men embodied and expressed was different. Perhaps it was a genuine loving and caring relationship. Was this the reason their peers were so shocked and enraged - and why they meted out such a severe and cruel punishment? Was this the reason why the two boys remained silent? Perhaps any attempt to explain their love would have felt like “throwing pearls to swine,” and so they allowed themselves to be perceived as “obstinate” in their silence before their accusers. Why would they confess to “sodomy,” if this term meant loveless, even abusive, sexual activity? One thing is for sure: the Christian European culture of that time could not accommodate the idea of two men in a *loving* sexual union. The boys themselves may not have the words to begin to describe, affirm, and defend their experience of such a union.

In much the same way, our readings today - products of their time and culture - are not accommodating of the experiences of gay people. Well, at least not on the surface. Thankfully, we’re not called to remain on the mere surface of things – be they the stories of lost sailors or scriptural passages from ancient times.

No, I believe that as spiritual people – as people of conscience and compassion – we’re called to be seekers of ever deeper levels of engagement and meaning.

One way of going deeper with today's readings is by looking for broader, overarching themes. An obvious one in our first reading is that all of God's creation is "very good" – and although it's not made explicit, "all of creation" includes gay people. Now that doesn't mean that as a gay man I can't, like anyone else, say and do things that are foolish, selfish, and/or hurtful to myself and others. But the bottom line is that, as part of God's created order, we are all – gay, straight, and everywhere in between – intrinsically good. In addition, we are, according to Paul in his letter to the Hebrews, "made holy" by the saving life of Jesus – who has no shame in calling us sisters and brothers.

I don't know about you, but I experience a great sense of welcome and inclusiveness in these broader themes of today's readings – so much so that I can live with their heterosexual bias. Furthermore, I relate such welcome and inclusiveness to the major theme that's shared by both the Old and New Testament. This theme also serves as a meta-narrative, one that is embodied in the Exodus story and in the story of Jesus. It's the theme of liberation, of the journey from enslavement to freedom. Whenever I come across a story or passage in scripture that fails to impress or inspire me – perhaps even repels me – a closer look always reveals that it's because this particular story fails to live up to the broader, overarching biblical theme of liberation. I think in particular of the story of how "blessed" it will be for the Israelites to dash the heads of their enemies' children against a rock (Psalm 137:8-9), or the passage in Leviticus that speaks of putting to death men who engage in sexual relations with one another (Leviticus 20:13). These are not liberating texts. I refuse to call them "sacred," as they fail to inspire us to be the best we can be, fail to reflect the transforming and life-giving love of our Creator God.

A second way of discerning deeper meaning from our readings today is by recognizing that they derive from a specific cultural context – one dominated by patriarchy. They are patriarchal texts – products of the *men* who controlled and managed the social order of their time. No space was permitted for the emergence and sharing of the perspectives and insights of women or gay people.

Now, the shaping of the Bible by this limited patriarchal perspective doesn't mean that we can't discern the wisdom and compassion of God. We can. The words and actions of Jesus, for instance, constantly challenge and subvert the patriarchal norms and expectations of his day, and in so doing continues to invite us to expand our circles of inclusion and compassion. I believe Jesus demonstrated God's wisdom and compassion when he strongly condemned divorce. Remember, men at that time were free to treat their wives as property. Women had very few rights. Jesus knew this. He knew that in such a patriarchal society, the prohibition against divorce served to protect the interests – perhaps even the lives – of women. Does it mean that divorce everywhere and at all times is to be avoided and condemned? I don't believe so.

Words and expressions of wisdom and compassion may indeed be different in different situations and contexts. Figuring out these different ways of being wise and compassionate takes work and a willingness to attune ourselves to God present in our own lives and the lives of others. Of course, sometimes it may seem easier to just stick with what was said and done in some far off time and culture. But that, for me, isn't a sign of a living, growing faith.

I've discovered that some folks get very uncomfortable when you start talking about faith as "living" and "growing"; when you start talking about "mystery" and the idea that truth is still "unfolding." I find the aversion to such realities perplexing, especially given Jesus' words to his friends before leaving them for the last time: "I still have many things to say to you," he said, "but they would be too much for you to know now."

I believe that among those unspoken "things" is the truth that homosexuality, far from being a "disorder," is a natural variant of the gift of human sexuality – a gift that all of us – gay or straight, partnered or single – are called to lovingly express and share.

Jesus also told his friends that the Spirit would lead them to the complete truth of these as yet unrevealed things. I don't think he was just talking to those who walked beside him 2000 years ago, but to us, his friends today. When it comes to issues of gender and sexual orientation, we are clearly still being lead to the "complete truth."

It's a journey – one that's taken thousands of years, and one that reflects that major, overarching biblical theme of liberation. Through this journey we are lead out of our enslavement to ignorance and bigotry and into a way of living and loving by which all are free to be the relational beings God created them to be. We are liberated, in other words, so as to be together - as community, as family, as friends . . . and, yes, as lovers.

As a community, we at Spirit of St. Stephen's have consciously embodied this journey of liberation – and have done so for years. We recognize that within our historical and cultural context, and in light of the insights offered by the sciences and human experience, silence is no longer an option. The Spirit, that same Spirit that infused our brother Jesus, has led us over time into ever greater awareness of many things – including the truth of sexual orientation. We have the words. We can and we must speak.

Those two boys whose story I shared . . . their names were Adriaen Spoor and Pieter Engels. They couldn't speak for themselves, they were not allowed to be together. I like to think that in our speaking out today for justice for gay people, we're somehow speaking on their behalf; somehow honoring them and ensuring that their torturous deaths help bring liberation and new life to all.

May it be so.

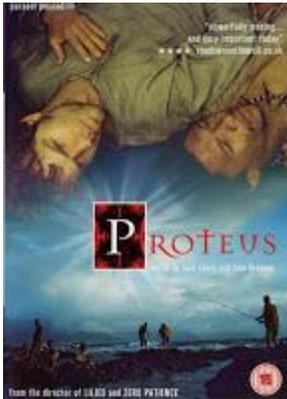
Michael J. Bayly

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(1) Solidarity Sunday was established in 1995 when the Board of Directors of DignityUSA, the nation's largest Catholic gay organization, recognized that 70-80% of American Catholics support equal rights for gays and lesbians. It was decided to invite these people to join in solidarity with gay Catholics and to work with them to end verbal and physical abuse – including the "dehumanization" of gay people by religious organizations and church leaders.

(2) I am indebted to Karen, creator of the blogsite, *Nihil Obstat*, who first brought the story of Adriaen Spoor and Pieter Engels to my attention (see [here](#)), and to Hugh Edwards, who devotes a chapter in his book, *The Wreck on the Half-Moon Reef* (1970), to this tragic story.

Image: A still from director John Greyson's 2003 film, *Proteus*. Notes Wikipedia:



Set in 18th century South Africa, the film dramatizes the true story of Claas Blank (Rouxnet Brown) and Rijkhaart Jacobsz (Neil Sandilands), two prisoners on Robben Island who were executed for sodomy in 1735. Their relationship also had a racial component, as Jacobsz was a white Dutchman, while Blank was a black Khoi. The film also stars Shaun Smyth as Virgil Niven, a Scottish botanist who befriends Blank for his knowledge of South African flora, but may in fact have his own sexual interest in Blank. The film also attempts to explore unanswered questions, such as why prison officials tolerated the relationship for a full decade before Blank and Jacobsz were executed. Intentional anachronisms, such as the use of radios, typewriters and jeeps, are also used in the film to illustrate Greyson's larger theme that homophobia and racism of the type that led to Blank's and Jacobsz's executions are still very much present in today's world. A speech by Nelson Mandela, who was imprisoned at Robben Island in 1964, is also used at the end of the film.