

Delivered at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
351 E. 74th Street, New York, NY 10021-3701
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So, you thought this would be easy...
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Sermon Notes

While at the General Assembly, I attended a worship service with That All May Freely Serve. TAMFS, as it is known, has long been a sacred force in this PC(USA) for full inclusion of gay (LGBT) folk and a prophetic voice for God's wildly inclusive and radical love of all.

These friends who God calls to serve as evangelists for the work of TAMFS are among those I most love and aspire to follow in their faithfulness, courage, perseverance, and deep spiritual being.

It was just before 9:00 P.M. I was on my way back to the convention center from another meeting in downtown Minneapolis. I was tired and felt the weight of relentlessly working toward and believing in a church that will one day get it *right*; one day fully welcoming gay people and as a result - break down the barriers and layers of fear upon which this oppression is built, barriers and fears that once they come tumbling down will cause the Spirit of God to come rushing in as never before: the rushing wind of the Spirit that would change the world. That the possible and promise in which we work.

This morning, as I prepared for worship, I thought about the stories of Jesus and his disciples, tirelessly exhorting people in every way they knew to get out of the way of the Spirit. To let God come rushing in. It didn't seem much different than today.

Whether they were standing before councils of the authorities, their accusers, or praying and taking action to overcome all obstacles, they spoke honestly and courageously, present before God, witnessing to others with their lives

Brothers (and sisters), Paul says, I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God.

I imagined they, too, at times were tired; I imagined they at times felt the weight of relentlessly believing in and taking action for whatever it took get the world right with God and God's love.

I imagined that they never realized how hard it was going to be, especially knowing the great promise and possibility of a God of Love . how could anyone not come running to this God. Instead, they watched as all that was promised all

that was possible was being squandered, squandered by fear that masquerading as order and law, when in fact it was all about power and dominion.

~~%~~Keep up your courage!+Jesus says to Paul in a vision. ~~%~~For as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so must you bear witness also in Rome.+

So they persisted.

And so did the small worship group that I joined that evening.

The sanctuary had the ~~%~~old+wonderful feel to it that said it had weathered much, stood by many, and wasn't about to lose its deep prophetic roots.

It had that knowing feel of a place that had welcomed others in the sadness created by church and society through exclusion, wars, discrimination, and more.

It felt much like Jan Hus, Palisades, and South Presbyterian Churches in New York, Palisades, and Dobbs Ferry.

In those pews on this night were the disciples, shuttered by the PC(USA) because they were lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender . supposedly *different*.

In those pews on this night, were 30 young, blessed, and called Presbyterians refusing the shutters, the councils, the accusers and embracing the God of Promise in the midst of others' fear.

~~%~~Keep up your courage!+Jesus says to Paul in a vision. ~~%~~For as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so must you bear witness also in Rome.+

And their witness touched me more deeply than anything else during the 10 days of General Assembly. It changed me, again, and wounded me in a way that should be felt by all, a wound that knows the sadness and wrongness of ~~%~~placing barbed wire around these people and God's Spirit,+as my friend Joe Gilmore says.

~~%~~Keep up your courage!+Jesus says to Paul.+

Their table at worship was set very much like this one. And, as the order of the service unfolded, these young faithful queer people came forward and read Scripture or Prayer, each closing with the statement that said because of their gender and sexuality they were not permitted to serve at this table. They then walked down the aisle and out of the sanctuary, as the remaining witness responded that their presence would be missed.

There was profound silence, except for the tears that could be heard to fall more and more as the evening went on.

Was it something like this in Jesus' time, seeing members of their community marginalized, falsely accused, forced out, taken away, humiliated, punished, jailed, executed? By the leadership of their own traditions – all in the name of God.

I wonder how many times through history the persecution has been repeated before reaching this sanctuary at Wesleyan Church on this night.

Jesus didn't say it would be easy. He said, "Keep up your courage, and prepare for more."

And then, as only Jesus could he framed it all in a sentence or two:

Fortunate are you when people hate you, exclude you, abuse you and denounce you on my account. Celebrate when that day comes and dance for joy . your reward will be great in heaven. Remember that their ancestors treated the prophets in this way.

-Matthew 5:11-12

And so, this group of courageous, oppressed, and fortunate folk at the TAMFS worship, eventually all left the sanctuary, but they didn't end their witness.

They proceeded to a lawn, outside the Convention Center where the Assembly was taking place. They formed a circle, in the midst of the city, and they who would the next day stand before the councils and committees, they who were accused of being abominations, they stepped into the great promise of God and Love, the celebration of those witnessing for Jesus and God and all, into a sanctuary greater than the four walls of any church, and they prayed and broke bread in a place where all were welcome.

And in the deep richness of the night, with a gentle rain of sorrow and joy beginning to fall, passers-by stopped and were drawn in. The sadness toughened the joy and turned to music and prayer and praise and refusal to be denied, refusal to be chased away, any more than the disciples that brought this church forward refused to be chased or denied.

We look around this sacred space this morning, this sanctuary, and know that it is part of God's world of sanctuary. We seek peace and solace and meditation, here, joined by all those who have come before and will follow. Joined by every person who comes to this place for any reason . prayer, food, clothing, or a table where they are welcome.

Jan Hus was the Bohemian Czech reformer for whom this church is named. Yesterday, Robin reminded me of one of his best known quotes, a quote that

could have been spoken by Jesus, Abraham, Martin, John, Nelson, Janie, Lisa, Michael, Howard, and more

we see Truth, listen to the Truth, learn Truth, love Truth, speak Truth, uphold Truth, defend Truth until death; for Truth shall deliver you

The Truth is among the power of this place; it is here because of you who gather here.

On many a night, I have enjoyed the gentle rain of a late summer eve, but it was the *people* and God *in the people* of that assured me of God with us, still. I needed that on that day; we all need that from time to time. The church needs those people and all the others whose absence and exclusion breaks us into pieces, continents seeking the original Pangaea.

Whether you gather here in support of inclusion, for end to wars, for meditation, solace, peace, or petition . whether you gather here in sadness or celebration . you are not here by mistake. You have been called here. This is not a place of entertainment. It is a place of gathering. Nor is it a place of towing any line other than the one God leads you to tow, in all of your fullness of being.

This is also be a place where the difficult will be apparent. Where you are asked to carry the message of our worship to others, inviting them, calling them to be part of the mission of gospel and social justice. It is a place for you to bring your burning desires and your commitment to work toward them, leading others . for so you are.

This is not a one direction way. It is a path of Love and Justice, and like those refusing to be denied in this morning's gospel or in those circled in prayer and worship outside the General Assembly, we are called to step up, speak up, and act.

That is both the Truth and the Joy.

Whatever you decide whoever you are and whoever you lead here

We will stand with all in this sanctuary inside and the one outside, as well.