

## **Come to the Party**

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle, Pastor  
August 28-29, 2010 • Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)  
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Dayton, Ohio

### **Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16**

*Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"*

*Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*

### **Luke 14:1, 7-14**

*On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place', and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

*He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."*

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***"But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.  
And you will be blessed..."***

Luke 14:13-14

I want to tell you four stories this morning that come out of my recent experience of being a gay Christian person, pastor and parent in Ohio. These are my stories and I am sticking with them, but I hope my stories will prompt you to name some of your own stories.

First story. Back in 2001, Dan and I bought our home in Centerville. As a gay couple, you are never really sure what kind of response you will get from your neighbors when you move to a new place, but Dan and I have been fortunate. Our neighbors have been nothing but kind and welcoming. Except for one. A few years back, the family behind us moved away and a new family moved in. Gideon was around 18 months old. The new family had two children, a little boy who was about 5 and a little girl who was about 3. A simple chain link fence separated our back yards from each other. With kids playing in the backyards it didn't take us long to meet them and it didn't take them long to figure out that Gideon had two dads. Dan or I would be in the back yard with Gideon and the little girl would call out: "Gideon. Gideon." The little girl would happily run to the fence and Gideon would happily run to meet her. Most of our neighbors are empty nesters or retirees, so we were excited that a little girl close to Gideon's age had moved in the neighborhood.

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, just after a few months of moving in, our neighbors erected an 8-foot high privacy fence, replacing the chain link fence along our property line. Now I have to say, it is a nice looking fence and the color of the fence matches our exterior color scheme just fine, but why the fence? If it were for "privacy" you'd think that the whole yard would have been enclosed. But no, the fence just runs along our property line. All I can figure out is that fence went up to keep their children from the little boy who has two dads. I could be wrong, but I don't think so.

Robert Frost wrote a poem that is one of my favorites, for obvious reasons:

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.*

*The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.*

*We keep the wall between us as we go.  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.*

*Oh, just another kind of out-door game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.*

*He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it  
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.*

*Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offense.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. I see him there,  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.*

*He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."*

-- "Mending Wall" by Robert Frost

I look out every day and see that wall that separates my family from their family and I too think: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down." Those parents...those neighbors of mine, so fearful of us who are so strange to them: I INVITE THEM – THOSE POOR, POOR PARENTS -- TO THIS TABLE.

Story two. Many of you know that Dan and I went on a little vacation with the kids this summer to the San Francisco Bay area. Following the Alliance of Baptists Annual Convocation near Monterey, we stayed for an extra week to enjoy the beauty and delights of California. On Wednesday, August 4, we took the ferry boat into the City of San Francisco from near where we were staying at the San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo, in Marin County. And just as we got off the boat, I received a call from a *Dayton Daily News* reporter telling me that federal judge Vaughn Walker would be issuing his ruling that afternoon in regards to California's Proposition 8 ballot initiative that stopped same-gender marriages in California back in 2008. The reporter didn't know what his ruling would be, but he just wanted to know if I would be willing to comment once the ruling was known. Of course, I said "Yes, I'd love too."

Later that afternoon, while eating chocolate ice cream at Ghirardelli Square, I got the call. When I learned that Judge Vaughn Walker had ruled that Prop 8 was unconstitutional, I made my enthusiastic and supportive and hope-filled comments to the reporter. And from that lengthy and engaging conversation I got one little quote on the front page of the *Dayton Daily News* on August 5:

" 'It's a hopeful sign. I know it's not done, but it's a hopeful ruling,' said The Rev. Mike Castle, chair of Equality Ohio, a statewide gay rights group, and pastor of Cross Creek Community Church in Washington Twp., a United Church of Christ congregation."

That was it. From all of my juicy and witty and thoughtful comments, all I got was that: "It's a hopeful sign. I know it's not done, but it's a hopeful ruling." Geez! I guess one little witness is better than no witness at all.

Well, as many of you know, I have been quoted in the paper a lot this past year. And believe it or not, I have not had one response to any of my comments. However, when the topic turned to marriage equality, I got two responses. One man emailed me to express his disappointment that a person with "reverend" in his title would be *for* "gay" marriage. Another man called the church office to offer his protest and talked with Jan Harry, our communications assistant. Little did he know he was talking to a retired ordained United Methodist clergy person who happened to be the mother of a lesbian daughter, and grandmother to two little boys who were born to same daughter and her life partner. Anyway, here's the summary email of the conversation I got from Jan:

There was a call from an excited man from Forest Ridge Baptist Church (He was hesitant to tell me his church because "he might get his pastor in trouble") responding to the Prop 8 decision. He wants us to read Romans as God's word and not pick and choose our Bible understandings. He quoted from his pastor's newsletter article about homosexuality being an anathema and calling for the members to be active in the community in opposition to homosexuality. This was his effort to follow those instructions. He's was a bit calmer when the call ended.

I have no doubt that Jan engaged him in a thoughtful but kind, and yes calming, discussion. Upon returning from my trip I decided to write the pastor of Forest Ridge Baptist Church, after all he was the pastor of that same Southern Baptist church at the same time I was a Southern Baptist pastor in this town. I wrote him and invited him to sit down at table and do some bible study together. Here is a portion of what I wrote:

With grace and kindness, I would be honored to discuss this matter with you personally and face-to-face if you really want to know how a "reverend" or a "Christian" can arrive at such an open and loving and welcoming and life-giving and just Christian position. I would be happy to do bible study WITH you and/or your congregation on Romans 1. It breaks my heart that so many Christians are so "hardened" on this issue that they can neither hear, nor discuss it with those who differ from them.

Well, it's been over two weeks and I am yet to get a response from Pastor Gross. And it makes me really

mad. But more than mad, it just makes me sad. Because I know this in my bones: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.”

How sad it is for people and congregations who claim to belong to Jesus to refuse to listen and try to understand one who is strange to them, but I INVITE THEM – THAT CRIPPLED PASTOR AND HIS CRIPPLED CONGREGATION – TO THIS TABLE.

Story three: I am a part of the leadership team of the Centerville Washington Diversity Council. As a result of our strategic planning last fall, we decided ...imagine this...that it would be in our community’s best interest for the faith leaders to know each other! Can you imagine? It would be in our community’s best interest if faith leaders had a deepened relationship with the faith leaders and a deepened understanding of the faith communities who are our neighbors. Imagine that!

For a number of years now, Centerville and Washington Township has not had a functioning ministerial association. From what I understand, this a common problem in communities all over the country. Ministerial Associations used to important groups in communities but not anymore. I am guessing that it is one more sign and symbol of the deep divisions that are so raw and so real in our country.

Eric Pasanchin, the pastor of the Southminster Presbyterian Church, agreed to head up this little effort. He had made several attempts to get clergy together, but with no success. This time, to get something started, it was decided that just twelve clergy leaders would be invited to participate in a year-long project. The twelve faith leaders would meet once a month for breakfast, which the Diversity Council has agreed to pay for. Over the course of the year, they would meet at the different facilities of the faith leaders who were participating in the project. When they gathered at the breakfast table there would be a simple agenda. There would be time for some fellowship and deepening of relationships between those gathered and then the clergy person of the host church would tell us about their faith community, about the important theological distinctions of their community, and what their community was passionate about in the world.

In July, three letters of invitation went out to identified clergy: One letter was from Eric Pasanchin, the project leader, one letter was from the Mayor of Centerville, Mark Kingseed, and one letter was from the president of the Washington Township Trustees, Joyce Young. The invitations went to four mainline pastors, four evangelical pastors and four other clergy leaders: a Roman Catholic priest, a Reform Jewish rabbi, the Unitarian Universalist minister, and a representative from the mosque in Miamisburg. Since there are no official “imams” in our area we thought it was still important for someone to represent the Muslim community at the table. I was one of the four mainline pastors invited and the token “gay” clergy person.

Well, at this point in time none of the four evangelical pastors have agreed to come. They won’t even return phone calls from the project leader. Why won’t they participate? It could be because that there are two women clergy in the mix. It could be because a Jewish rabbi and Muslim representative were invited. It could be because of the deep theological differences that differentiate us. I am guessing it could be because I am one of the invitees and I am too toxic to associate with. Maybe there are just too many strangers on the list, with strange ideas about God and what salvation is. I really don’t know why, but in my bones something is telling me that: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.” How infuriating and disconcerting it is for faith leaders, especially Christian pastors, who claim to follow in the way of Jesus to refuse to humbly and hospitably welcome those are different from them. I INVITE THEM – THOSE LAME EVANGELICAL PASTORS IN OUR COMMUNITY – TO THIS TABLE.

Story Four: Last year I worked with Equality Ohio to pass the Equal Housing and Employment Act in the Ohio House of Representatives. It was the first time in Ohio history that a pro-gay piece of legislation had ever been heard and voted on by either the Ohio House or the Ohio Senate. Basically, this act would make it illegal for a person to be fired, or denied housing, or refused service at a restaurant or other place of business simply because of their sexual orientation or sexual identity. This law would apply to be GLBT people and straight people alike.

The bill was assigned to a House committee and public hearings were held, providing an opportunity for the proponents of the bill, as well as the opponents, to speak. All of the opponent testimony was offered by “Christians.” That’s right, only those who identifying themselves as “Christians” spoke against the bill.

No business leaders spoke against. No parents, no teachers or school personnel, no mental health professionals, no one else spoke against the bill except those who were motivated to do so because they were a “Christian.”

One dear old Christian woman, from Xenia, Ohio of all places, showed up in Columbus to oppose the bill. Everyone offering testimony is required to submit their remarks in writing and printed copies of those remarks are given to the representatives. And often, people put a lot more in writing than they have time to speak. Anyway, after this woman offered her opposition, one of the representatives on the committee asked her where she came up with all of her “crazy stuff.” (that is my paraphrase, I can’t remember exactly what he said) She said, “What, that gay people eat poop?”

When she said that, there was an audible gasp in the room, from both the lawmakers and audience alike...and then there was an awkward silence. It was truly a bizarre moment. And in the silence my heart throbbed: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.” Are some Christians so ignorant of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, so disconnected from human relationships, that they really think being a sexual minority is defined by odd sexual proclivities like eating “poop?” Or, as our song T.A.M.B.O sang this morning, “Can’t you show some love and learn some?” I INVITE THEM - - THOSE BLIND OHIO CHRISTIANS— TO THIS TABLE.

Now, Christians use all kinds of reasons to build walls and to maintain walls and to avoid table fellowship with those who are different from them. Sometimes it is voiced as faithfulness to God. Sometimes it is voiced as their ethical duty and moral obligation. Sometimes they quote scriptures that they think help prop up their walls. But if we are truly “Christian,” and the Jesus way matters us, then you have to wonder what Jesus would say about all of our wall building and wall maintaining activities?

Hear this: Jesus said “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed...”

The poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind can be taken literally. There were plenty of those kind of folks in Jesus day and there are plenty in our day as well. But we are told this is a parable, so I have clue that those words mean so much more than that. Jesus is talking about all those who are considered shamed, dirty, marginalized, unacceptable, and beyond our notions of acceptable table fellowship. Jesus couldn’t have been more clear: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.”

Today in our gospel lesson, we hear Jesus say again his favorite image for the kingdom of God, or reign of God: It is a party! A party! A party...where all are invited and welcomed to the table. A party...where no walls should divide and separate. A party...where all are honored and heard and blessed! A party... where strangers learn to become friends.

Not only does Jesus suggests what kind of host we are to be as we serve and welcome others around this Table but Jesus also suggests what kind of guests we are to be when we gather at the Table. Jesus said we should come with humility, a posture that leaves room for the surprise of grace. Jan Richardson notes that :

The desert folk...understood humility in a rather different way than we tend to in the 21st century. Where we sometimes equate humility with being a doormat, Roberta Bondi points out in her book *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* that “humility did not mean for them [the ammas and abbas] a continuous cringing, cultivating a low self-image, and taking a perverse pleasure in being always forgotten, unnoticed, or taken for granted. Instead, humility meant to them a way of seeing other people as being as valuable in God’s eyes as ourselves. It was for them a relational term having to do precisely with learning to value others, whoever they were. It had to do with developing the kind of empathy with the weaknesses of others that made it impossible to judge others out of our own self-righteousness.”

For God’s sake, can we who claim to follow in the way of Jesus humble ourselves enough to value the “other” and let our walls crumble?

I know that I suggested in my four stories that it was those “other” folks – those folks who are different

from me and think differently than me – that were the poor ones, and the crippled ones, and the lame ones, and the blind ones. I am speaking from where I sit and see. I can speak from no other place. However, the truth is, they probably think of me...and you who gather here...as the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind ones. Fair enough. That is how they “see.” That is how speak from where they “sit.” And if that is indeed the case, and they are really trying to follow in the way of Jesus, then I have to wonder why they are not inviting me – inviting us – to this Table. After all, it was Jesus who said: “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed,” because “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.”

And on this anniversary weekend of Martin Luther King Jr.’s historic “I Have A Dream” speech, spoken on the steps the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963; and in the dark shadow of so much polarizing and divisive political and religious rhetoric that is rampant in our land and in our churches today, it will do us good to hear again King’s dream:

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream.

It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the **table** of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed it. Before him, Jesus dreamed it. “Come to the party,” they said “Come one, come ALL. Come all you are poor, crippled, lame and blind. Come sit at table together and you will be blessed,” because “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.”

Amen.