

## Closing Challenge and Blessing

Val and I were in Nashville one day headed for a meeting at Scarritt-Bennett. We were lost, really lost. And just then my cell phone rang and it was Beth, one of our friends from Nashville. She said, “I suddenly got this feeling that you were lost. Can I help? Where are you?”

When Beth called, we were at a stop light, right downtown.

“Read the street signs,” Beth instructed. “Tell me what corner you’re on.”

I looked up and saw this.



“I am literally at the intersection of Church and Gay,” I replied.

“You don’t have to choose,” Beth screamed through the phone.

But the tragedy is that I and many, many, many other good, faithful, God-loving, Jesus-following, Holy Spirit-guided people have been forced to choose – forced to choose between honoring our whole-selves, between living an undivided, authentic life and a relationship with the church. And that exiling of God’s children is nothing less than sinful.

In her new book entitled, *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes “As a general rule, I would say that human beings never behave more badly toward one another than when they believe they are protecting God...At Grace-Calvary, a parish with both gay and lesbian members, I grew increasingly weary of arguing over what Paul and the author of Leviticus may or may not have meant in half a dozen passages written a couple of thousand years ago while I watched living human beings wince at the vitriol they heard from those with whom they worshiped...Both in Clarksville and elsewhere, the poets began drifting away from churches as the jurists grew louder and more insistent.”

Soon and very soon we have got to start loving love more than laws, and really believing in the wideness of God’s mercy and the enough-ness of God’s grace.

About six years ago I was at an over-night Advent retreat for United Methodist clergy in my district. The retreat was held at St. Bede’s in Eau Claire.

Some of you know that St. Bede’s is a secluded Catholic retreat center run by Benedictine nuns.

The first day of this Advent retreat, our group work ended late in the evening – about 10:30. And I needed to get out of the building. It had been a hard night, it always is among church people when you can’t be who you are. There had been two especially dis-integrating moments for me.

The first came when we were supposed to introduce ourselves to the person next to us and ask a couple questions about each others' lives. As I turned to my conversation partner he immediately said to me, "Tell me about the most important thing your life." I wanted to tell him about Val, but I couldn't. I wanted to tell him about our children, but I couldn't. So I talked about my cat. The pathetic part is – I didn't have a cat.

My life and my loves had been reduced to telling make-believe stories about a cat I didn't have.

The other moment came when we were asked to get into small groups and talk about how we manage our schedules, set boundaries and carve out time for ourselves and our families.

As we were talking, someone turned to me and said, "Amy, why don't you talk to us about how you manage your time as a single person with no family." What an obscene statement. As if single people don't have families – both biological and of their own making. But, I wasn't single, I did have family – but I couldn't say that. So I lied and made up something. I apologize to all the single clergy for whatever strange and stained answer I came up with.

So when the evening ended, I desperately needed a life line, so I phoned a friend. There weren't phones in the retreat center, and I couldn't get cell phone reception inside the building, so I grabbed my coat and went out into the cold December air.

I was on the phone for about 45 minutes, when our conversation ended abruptly as my cell phone battery went dead. I was actually glad because I was very tired and freezing cold.

As I started back into the retreat center, I discovered that the doors had been locked for the evening. Not to worry, though. Conveniently there was a door bell and a note that read, "Ring the bell when doors are locked."

Perfect. I rang the bell. Nothing. I pounded on the door with my already numb hands. Nothing. Ring, ring, pound, pound – nothing, nothing.

There I stood. My cell phone dead. Nobody in sight. My wallet and the keys to my truck upstairs in the bedroom. No where to go and no way to get there.

Even as I sort of panicked, I thought it was really significant and extremely ironic that I was now *literally* locked out.

I'd sat there with my clergy colleagues all night wishing for a way out, now I wished there was a way in. So I sat there, waiting, waiting, waiting, re-enacting with my body the message of Advent. Waiting for someone to open the door, to count me in. Waiting for a light in the darkness.

And then it came – literally a light in the darkness. Headlights to be exact. A car was coming through the parking lot – a renegade nun, all alone, out late. If the nuns had a curfew, it was clear this one had broken hers – I liked her already!

After chasing her down, explaining my situation, and after actually being believed, the nun mercifully and apologetically unlocked the door. No questions asked, no conditions given – she just unlocked the door and wedged it open with her body, so I could get back in.

Oh, that we could all be like that renegade nun. Wedging our very bodies in the door to keep it open so that those who have been locked out can come in.

And here's a really important message you need to hear. There will be some who will be very angry with you for "letting those people" in. There will be many voices trying to convince you that for comfort's sake, for unity's sake, for ain't-gonna-rock-the-boat's sake, you should leave the doors locked.

And here's the part you need to remember, they might choose to leave the church through the same door you've wedged open for others.

Let them go. If you are serious about including gay and lesbian Christians into the life of your church, you must be willing to lose some folks. Let them go. There are a thousand other churches that will coddle their prejudice and nurture their continued ignorance. Let them go.

Wedge your body in that door and raise your voice.

So, the question Audre Lorde asks becomes ours.

What little piece inside you wants to be spoken out?

If you transform silence into language and action, of what are you most afraid?

If you transform silence into language and action, what will you gain?

The quest here is to help us live what Parker Palmer calls "an undivided life." In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, he offers six signs that you might be living divided. I've turned those into our prayer of confession.

Will you join me?

Forgive me Holy One, when I refuse to invest myself in my work, diminishing its quality and distancing myself from those it is meant to serve.

Forgive me Holy One, when I make my living at jobs that violate my basic values, even when survival doesn't absolutely depend on it.

Forgive me Holy One, when I remain in settings or relationships that steadily kill off my spirit.

Forgive me Holy One, when I harbor secrets to achieve personal gain at the expense of other people.

Forgive me Holy One, when I hide my beliefs from those who disagree with me to avoid conflict, challenge, and change.

Forgive me Holy One, when I conceal my true identity for fear of being criticized, shunned or attacked.

So where's the hope?

I found it in Dr. Suess' *Star-Bellied Sneetches*.

*[Read the story out loud.]*

The IRD, the Confessing Movement, Good New Movement, Transforming Movement, James Dobson and Focus on the Family – they play on our fears, by making small differences feel big, they make the out-group believe that there is something they need to change in order to be acceptable. They tell the in-group what they must do in order to remain dominant. And it's all a lie, and it's all very un-Christian – and, like with Mr. McBean, it's all making them very, very rich.

But there is hope.

There is hope when we get informed, when we do our homework, and most importantly when we stop giving our money to the Fix-It-Up Chappie who creates division for his own political and ecclesiastical gain.

There is hope when we transform the tyranny of silence into language and action – and with our voices and with our lives we expose their lies.

There is hope when we become too wise to let them exploit our differences.

There is hope when we spend time with glbt people, with star-bellied sneetches and with plain-bellied sneetches – and learn in our hearts that there is nothing to fear – that while we *are* different, we all want the same things. To feel safe, to be loved, to be accepted, to belong.

“But McBean was quite wrong. I’m quite happy to say  
That the Sneetches got really quite smart on that day,  
The day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches  
And no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches.”

### *Benediction*

Tender, vulnerable souls, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God.”

Therefore, go in peace. Amen and Amen.