

## Opening Words

For about a year, I've had a new mantra – it goes something like this, “Say the words. Say the words. We've got to, got to say the words.”

Early last spring Janet Ellinger and I were at Garrett-Evangelical for a panel discussion on Homosexuality and Church Leadership. Four panelists and one moderator – and 45 minutes passed before anyone said the words, “sexual orientation, gay, lesbian.” A forum on Homosexuality and Church Leadership and no one had the courage to say the words.

It is wrong to say that the Church has been entirely silent on this issue. Those who oppose homosexuality have been very vocal and very active. And the church has offered them a stage on which to publicly proclaim their narrowness and ignorance.

Unfortunately, it's supportive people who are too often deafeningly silent. Part of our problem is that progressive folks just don't want to offend anyone – we want to just get along.

Well, now I'm offended. The silence offends me.

So, let's begin to repent of this sin of silence.

*Will somebody say the words?*

And look, your first fear has been quelled – these words can be spoken aloud, even in a sanctuary and there was no lightning bolt, no catastrophic power failure, nobody had a coronary.

I truly believe in my heart that a strong majority of people know that our sexuality is a good gift from God – that homosexuality, just like heterosexuality, is intrinsically good and worthy of great celebration. Most people know this because so many glbt people are out and proud – and willing to share the beautiful truth of their whole lives with others.

And now the biggest battle is getting people comfortable talking about it. We all know stories about the pastor who finally musters up the courage to speak favorably about homosexuality in a sermon and afterwards is quietly thanked by the organist whose grandson is gay, and who is loved very much by his family – or the dad who tells the pastor about his lesbian daughter and her partner, now long gone from the church because it is so unwelcoming.

Sexuality, in general, remains such a difficult thing to talk about – but we will never get anywhere in the struggle for inclusion if we don't say the words.

Will you turn the page of the back cover and join me in our Gathering Liturgy

[Gathering Liturgy and Hymn]

From Laura Dillon:

“I would be delighted to have you use my text for your conference. I'm a United Methodist layperson and amateur musician/composer and have had such fun seeing this text take on a life of its own. I hope it will add to the collective positive energy around loving inclusion! Thanks. “

See now, we've only been together for 15 minutes and already we are engaged in what Audre Lorde calls the “Transformation of Silence.”

As I was preparing for today, I gathered courage by reading a little bit of Audre Lorde, from *Sister Outsider*. Don't read it, it will ruin you.

“What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day... Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself – a Black woman warrior poet doing my work – come to ask you, are you doing yours?”

And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger. But my daughter, when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said, ‘Tell them about how you’re never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there’s always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don’t speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside.’” (41-43)

She’s right. There are words we need to say. Truth must be spoken out loud. And hear me say that this is not work just for gay people. It’s for all people. It’s straight people who need to come out of the closet and help end the tyranny of silence.

And Audre is right again when she says that this is terrifying work. This kind of self-revelation, this kind of truth-telling makes you so very vulnerable.

Those of you who know me know that I love to go camping. The deeper into the wilderness the better. There’s something about being out in the elements – at the mercy of the wind and weather and darkness and all the creatures of the night – that awakens my soul.

I remember a trip I took when I was in college. I went camping with my roommate, who is now my sister-in-law. It was early spring – April or May – and still very cold. When we arrived at the campground, Laura and I set up camp, made a nice dinner over the fire, sat around most of the evening talking, and then went to bed.

We had no sooner turned off our lanterns when we heard footsteps just outside our tent. A sickening dread coursed through our bodies. We didn’t know if what lurked outside was human or animal – and we didn’t know which we hoped it was.

The footsteps grew closer and closer and closer until we could see in the shadows an indentation in the tent wall. The Thing was poking at our tent – and then we heard sniffing.

At least now, we were pretty sure it was an animal. Sniff, sniff, sniff – inches from our heads. Then the nose went all around the tent. Our imaginations kicked into overdrive. Was it a bear who had just come out of hibernation and was looking for a feast? Was it a fox, a coyote, a wolf – or worse, a skunk?

We were so quiet, we could hear only sniffing and the beat of our own hearts. And as I lay there, one thought kept passing through my mind. “Nylon is very thin.” Nylon was all that stood between *us* and *it*.

Nylon is great for tents. It’s lightweight, it’s portable, it’s fast drying, it’s breathable. It will keep some of the warmth in and most of the rain out. It is a very good thing until you need real protection.

When there is nothing but nylon between you and the wild beasts, you feel very vulnerable. In a tent, you have only the thinnest membrane for protection – which is no defense at all, really.

As a camper I know what it’s like to be vulnerable to the wild beasts in the wilderness. As a lesbian, Christian clergywoman, I know what it is like to be vulnerable to the wild beasts in the church. It is here where my well-being is most at risk. It’s been a year and a half since I left pastoral ministry and still I get physically anxious, uneasy deep down inside when I walk into a church.

There is mandatory silence here – and when we break the silence, we make ourselves vulnerable to what our friend, Bishop Minerva Carcaño calls “the violence of an unrepentant church.”

I heard this joke recently at the Clergywomen’s Consultation.

“Knock, knock.” “Who’s there?”

“You’re not supposed to ask and I’m not supposed to tell.”

When Audre tells us to transform our silence into words and actions – she is asking us to cloth ourselves in nylon. She asks us to set up camp with nothing but our truth and our voices and the skin on our bones as protection – which is no defense at all, really.

But I will tell you what I know to be absolutely true – and that is that the silence is no less frightening, no less deadly. In fact, it's worse because it eats away at you from within, like a cancer, and you are dead before you even knew you were sick.

Audre Lorde says, “The machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters [and brothers] and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid.”

So my prayer for this weekend is that together we will take a step in the journey to transform silence into words and action, in the journey to vulnerability, to opening our hearts and our lives, our mouths and our ears so that truth can be spoken and heard and known in the very core of our being – and then carried out into the world.

This poster is hung in churches all over the country to remind people to sign up to have their picture taken for the church directory. I want what it says to become true.

“When it comes to our family, we don't want anyone left out of the picture.”

Is good for us to be together. What saving work we are about.  
Welcome.