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World Day of Prayer for Healing Homophobia:

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Was there ever a point when you were growing up when everything changed?

You know, when I went into fifth grade, which in Canada meant that I was about 11 years old, things suddenly changed. Suddenly I was no longer a leader of my friends... this laughing outgoing kid who led a circle of friends in play, in creating our secret clubs... in all the stuff that as a mildly nerdy 11 year old, I used to do. Suddenly, things changed, and I found myself on the outside.

My very best friend - someone I'd originally befriended because no one else would talk to her... she suddenly rejected me almost overnight and all of a sudden she was the leader of the fifth graders... and I was on the outside.

as the next couple of years went on, it became clearer to me that somehow I was missing some vital something- it was like all the other kids had access to some secret information or clue to how to make this whole school thing work- that I was missing. it got worse in junior high and high school and turned into bullying, exclusion, and verbal violence.

I know now, that I was a kid trying desperately to find my identity... having come out at the age of 26, that a lot of what was going on then was homophobia. Especially as kids got more and more aware of sexuality, dating, all that stuff. They knew I was different and they punished me for it.

Now eventually I found my voice, dyed my hair purple, dressed like a punk rocker, and fought back. but for several years I was miserable and scared... school was a scary place... I didn't really have anywhere that was safe... that was a foundation. Even then... whether we knew it or not, as kids, we were acting out- and in my case- like many of us here- experiencing – homophobia.

Today, all around our denomination is the international day of prayer to end homophobia. UFMCC has asked our churches all over the world to join together in prayer to end homophobia. It's interesting to me that the call is to END homophobia. Not to lessen it or make it a bit better or negotiate with it... but to END it.

We heard from a number of voices today who have been affected by homophobia around the world... children of gay parents... lesbians with HIV... Brandon Teena... Matthew Shepherd...

These are our voices. You. Me. Our friends. Our lovers. Our children. Our parents.

I want us to get really real today about homophobia and how much it costs us ... each of us individually and all of us as a community- and truly as a world. and I want us to get really real about the costs it takes out of our souls. out of the very foundations of our lives.

What are those foundations? On what do we build our house... whether it is the house of our own lives or the house of our church... or the house of our world? What are our foundations? I want us to really dig deep today and really take a good look at what our foundations really are... what Jesus calls us to in the building of our homes. And I invite you to start this deep work with me in a prayer...

PRAYER

Prayer is such an interesting thing isn't it? I think as Christians we all agree just how central it is to our lives... how very much it is the heart of what we are as a people of faith. But how often do we stop and really take a look at the MEANING of prayer in our lives... and the ways that Jesus calls us to pray ??

Today's reading gives us some really important clues as to what kind of foundation Jesus is calling us to build our lives- our communities- and our world upon.

Matthew 7: 21-29

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the commonwealth of heaven, but only the one who **does** the will of my Parent in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers." 'Everyone then who hears these words of mine **and acts on them** will be like a wise person who built their house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine **and does not act on them** will be like a foolish person who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell--and great was its fall!' Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Also in Luke 6:46- one version reads:

Why do you call me 'Lord Lord' and not do what I tell you? every one who comes to me and hears my words and **does** them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a person building a house...

But he who hears and **does not do** them is like a man who...

We know without a doubt that Jesus was a man of deep deep prayer... that his very life was founded on prayer - on an almost constant conversation with his Abba- with his God.

But Jesus doesn't stop here... Jesus was not simply a man of prayer... he was indeed a man of action... and our reading today speaks to this.

Everyone who acts on... everyone who does these words...

immediately after this reading, Jesus goes and heals three people- a leper, the centurion's servant, (which as we know, may well be one of our own gay stories in the bible.. but that's another sermon!) and Peter's mother in law, and many nameless others. He is a man of action as well as a man of deep prayer.

Jesus tells us very clearly that it is not enough to hear his words... we must DO his word.. we must ACT his words.

I translate this in my own faith life sometimes by reminding myself that in fact, MY LIFE IS A PRAYER. that sometimes, the very most powerful way I can pray is in my actions... is in the things that I say and that I do to try to bring God's common wealth a step closer to being here and now.

I've been studying nonviolence lately... both the spiritual foundation of it, and the many ways it has been used - and is being used- to find injustice around the globe. It's actually quite extraordinary how many places have been radically changed by the power of active nonviolence. And not just the ones we know about... Gandhi, Martin Luther King ... but many other situations that have been transformed... that don't make the mainstream news.

I'm not talking about pacifism here.. which I think some people mistake as passiveness... I'm talking about active NONVIOLENT resistance to the unjust powers and situations that oppress our people.

Troy Perry, our founder, is someone who has done this with his life... his life has truly been a prayer that has freed hundreds of thousands of lgbt people and their friends who have come to learn that they can be fully sexual AND fully spiritual as Christian people.

Our people have lived this out in Romania this week...

When the mayor of Bucharest, Romania canceled plans for Romania's first-ever Gay Pride Parade, stating that they couldn't provide adequate safety for the marchers- and also stating that now was not the time for such a march, MCC in Romania and one of our elders Rev. Elder Diane Fisher focused world attention ... inundating the mayor with emails and faxes... Within one week, the President of Romania announced his support for the Gay Pride Parade -- and ordered Bucharest officials to issue parade permits and provide police protection! More than 300 persons took part in the public march. The event received major press coverage. The threats of violence and bombings did not materialize -- all marchers were unharmed.

I'm coming to believe more and more that Jesus calls us to both aspects of prayer...

That time of deep inner prayer- in whatever form it takes for you... for some of us it is that place of incredibly deep prayer that we experience in praise and worship...

For some of us it is that incredibly deep place of prayer that we experience in contemplation and silence...

For some of us it's both or something else..

And some of us are still learning how to pray. I often have people ask me as a minister, "how do I pray?" and I do think there are perhaps as many answers to this as there are people here tonight. but if you are not sure how to pray... I guess I encourage you to think of it as a conversation between you and someone who knows you and loves you well... because it is! and if that's not enough and you still aren't sure where to start... then I suggest asking. I still do oftentimes... after years on this journey, I will sometimes just say, okay God... now what? how do I do this prayer thing?

But whatever way we pray... I think it's about both aspects of the prayer journey... the inner, speaking or listening between you and God... but also the ways that we live out that prayer in the world. I believe pretty passionately that our prayers need to lead us into real doing in the world as well. and I believe our reading today speaks to this. those who do not DO... etc

But you know this is one of those wonderfully wise and clever gifts that Jesus has given us here... both the challenge- and the tool to meet it! in praying to and with God... to and with Jesus, we find the strength, the courage, the spirit, the heart... to LIVE our prayer in the world.

By praying to and with Jesus, Jesus helps us to find what we need in ourselves to actively work towards justice in our world. The two- the inner prayer- and the outer prayer- are like the two threads that always weave throughout Jesus' life- and they are both – the inner prayer and the outer action- absolutely essential to Jesus' life and his ministry.

In fact, not long before this passage, Jesus spends 40 days in the desert..

Nonviolent activist John Dear tells us that Jesus retreated to the desert to pray and to connect with God in order to prepare himself for what was next. Dear encourages each of us to go to the desert to learn to pray.

Dear tells us that Jesus' identity is challenged throughout his life... in the desert by Satan, by Herod, Pilate, and those who pass by as he dies on the cross. Dear reminds us that culture challenges our identities as the beloved sons and daughters of God."

And I would add to this, our culture... the many tempters out there today challenge our identities as beloved lgbt children of God. and this is when prayer becomes even more important in helping us resist those voices.

Walter Wink has done some fascinating writing on Jesus as the epitome of nonviolent activism.... Wink tells us that Matthew 5: 38-41 is actually a primer for Jesus' brand of active nonviolence

'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

in fact much of what has been interpreted in the Bible as instructions for passive acceptance is in fact Jesus' very wise ways of turning the tables... of using nonviolent resistant to challenge oppression and the powers that be

Turn the other cheek...

in Jesus' day, to strike with the right hand would land on the left cheek... the left hand was only used for unclean tasks – even to gesture with the left-hand was considered unclean... so when Jesus told his followers to turn the other cheek, he was in fact forcing the oppressor to strike with the back of their hand- a very subtle way of resisting the oppressor- of diminishing their power- of almost ridiculing the person inflicting the violence. It was the victim's way of saying "you do not have the power to injure or diminish my soul".

giving the shirt off one's back... related to a time where debt was one of the greatest problems and injustices facing Jesus' people... for the person owing to give the very shirt off his back was a way of making a very public statement- almost a bit street theatre, if you will, to expose the corruption of the person seeking to claim the debt. Kind of " alright... if you are going to take my last penny, you might as well take my clothes as well- in fact I'll just go naked, how's that?"... Again, a way of exposing the injustice with humor and ridicule... of saying "you cannot diminish me... and I challenge this injustice publicly."

go the extra mile...in Jesus' day, Roman soldiers could force subjects to carry their packs for a mile- but this was the limit. When Jesus told them to go the extra mile, it was again a way of making public the injustice... kind of "that's alright... I'll take it another mile..." a totally unexpected response for the soldier- and in that moment, a way for the oppressed subject to take back the power and kind of put the soldier off balance a bit... again a gentle nonviolent ridicule designed to unmask the injustice at play.

Wonderful examples of humour and action in nonviolently resisting and exposing injustice and oppression...

That Jesus was in fact not advocating passive acceptance of violence or injustice- but that in actively resisting it, we do so with love and in nonviolence. Wink calls Jesus' nonviolence the "third way" and he suggests that Jesus calls us to this way with our own lives....

And Wink also reminds us that a key to the heart of this way of life is to love our enemies... that we must actively seek to love our enemies into transformation... to know that by living this life of loving resistance, we are helping to create openings to change the hearts and minds of the people who inflict homophobic violence on our lives.

he reminds us too though that in order to do so, our own internal oppressor must also be challenged- that sometimes when we meet that oppression out there, it reminds us of the oppression inside us and that that internal oppressor- or perhaps in our own cases- our internalised homophobia- must die.

By choosing nonviolence... by ACTING on and DOING Jesus' word in this way...we can bring the reign of God here and now. no longer are we at the mercy of those external powers who wait to grant us permission to live fully.. if we are ALREADY LIVING FULLY IN THE REALITY OF GOD'S LOVE, AND ACTING WITH JUSTICE FROM THAT LOVE... then heaven is already here. we are building it... we are creating it- with Jesus, with God.

is not this not the strongest foundation on which we can build our lives... is this not the strongest foundation on which we build our world? a foundation where each fifth grader... where every Matthew Shepherd and Brandon Teena and you and you and you ... know that we are truly beloved children of God here and now.. and that we are called by Jesus to go out and put that love into action in the world.

Are you ready? Let's pray... and let's make our lives a prayer...and right now we are going to put this into real action with community prayers. Will you join me...