

**Stonewall Sunday, 27th June 2004: Rev Pressley Sutherland
When the Body Works “Out”**

The Stonewall Story

In late June, 1968, police did a routine raid on the Stonewall Inn, a bar on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, New York City. Inside was a mix of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who were often harassed in this way. On this night, they had had enough and began to fight their way out of the police wagons, sparking riots for the first time in modern history for the cause of dignity and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. They took to the streets, with the police barricading themselves in the Inn. As thousands joined them facing mounting police force, they stood and sang with liberation in their hearts and began a movement that is still changing the world.

Putting our bodies, ourselves on the line to free one another

Our queer bodies are undeniable - we are not a pathological construct created in the 19th century with the word homosexual, or bisexual or heterosexual; we are not adequately defined by gender stereotypes of man, woman, transgender, sissy, butch, fem. Yet our bodies are undeniable-as many feminists point out, particularly one of our fabulous clergy, Rev. Penny Nixon of MCC San Francisco-“Bodies matter.”

When I think of those trannies and decidedly queer looking folks fighting back in the streets of Greenwich Village, I see the same power as in a story of women in an African village which had been systematically ravaged by military suppression. When the tanks came again, this time they were confronted with a line of women, from the elders to those just entering womanhood, completely naked standing in the line of fire between the forces of oppression and their families and friends. The message was clear-our bodies matter, our strength is in knowing this. You cannot take this from someone when it is fully understood. One cannot help but through stubbornness or willful hardening of the heart to be morally awakened when confronted by bodies which are willing to be put on the line for justice, in both our power and beauty at any age, and in our frailty and interdependence as well.

In our reading from the Epistle of James today, the author is correcting those who have spiritualised the message of grace by faith to such an extent that they are ignoring the needs of the Body. In this epistle, James reminds us that the body is not peripheral to the Christian faith. The Body is the site of works of love, both collectively in and outside our communities of faith and individually. By coming “in the flesh”, by stating clearly that “loving your neighbour as yourself” was the “royal law” as James puts it, Christianity has given manifest dignity to our bodies as the place where we encounter Christ-as John puts it, “grace and truth” have been embodied. To add to what James has been saying earlier, When Jesus asks, “Peter do you love me? Then feed my sheep”, Jesus doesn’t only mean say a prayer for them, or sing a praise song with them, he really means, “Love and Feed people who are hungry!” Be known as much by what you do as what you say you believe. For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

We have named ourselves as a church of Being and Doing, understanding that both aspects are essential to a life of discipleship - Being love and doing love together. As a queer faith community, by that I mean one that is learning not to be afraid to reclaim anyone at the fringes or any portions of our lives which have been marginalized, reclaiming and proclaiming all of us as part of the integrity of the Body of Christ “as a queer faith community” we may indeed look a bit queer to most people. We are a church that could be considered an artist’s church, we are a church that could be considered a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender church or even a post-l/g/b/t/s church, we are a church that could be considered to be a charismatic church or a post-charismatic church, we are a church that could be considered to be a traditional, liturgical church or a post-traditional, liturgical church - all decidedly odd or queer to anyone seeking homogeneity as a sign of Christianity. Yet if there is a truth that our bodies have taught us, it is that we are marvelously complex, and we can choose to learn to love that complexity or spend our lives spiritualizing things to such a degree that we name what God has created in our bodies as an enemy - spending a lifetime at war within ourselves and one another, instead of in an embodied faith that says, ?Peace be with you.?

Mother Edder

Maria (Mariaa) Woodworth Edder, or Mother Edder as she became affectionately known, is referred to as the grandmother of the Pentecostal movement. But there is hard-won irony in that title. Maria was born again during the mid-19th century, hearing the call as a young girl "to go out in the highways and hedges and gather in the lost sheep." But one thing stopped her-she was a woman-and at that time, women were not allowed to preach. They weren't allowed to vote. And they were especially not welcome in leadership if they were not married. So she planned to go to missionary school, get married and do work with her husband. But her father was killed in a farming exercise, so she had to stay home and give up her dreams for an education.

During the American Civil war, she met and married her first husband, had six children, and worked on a poorly producing farm. God continued to call her, but Maria, exasperated in her role as a wife and a mother, couldn't answer the call. Then five of her six children died of a disease that swept through their house. Her husband never recovered emotionally from the loss, leaving Maria to try to pull them all through.

For her strength and in order to find answers for her own heartache, she began to search the Bible. And a peculiar thing happened as she read- she saw how God repeated worked through the lives of women in the Bible. She would say, "But Lord, I can't preach. I don't know what to say and I don't have any education." But the more she read the Bible, the more she found to condemn such thoughts. After receiving a vision of angels, she finally said, Yes, and astounded the world by the things that happened in her meetings.

God's Spirit began to manifest in Bodies (not just in academic thought or theology or belief-systems or Bible school) but in Bodies. At her meetings, people first fell "slain in the Spirit", thousands of them, divine healings sometimes happened, people danced, shouted, sang and preached of all genders. The Body had become alive, women's bodies had become alive again with charisma, and nobody knew what to expect next. They were experiencing most of this for the first time - it must have seemed very "queer" to everyone - a woman preaching, all this ecstatic, bodily stuff going on - religion and "religious men" not being able to suppress this movement by "well-reasoned" attacks on her and this new Body of believers. And nobody seemed more surprised than Mother Edder. But she knew enough to know that, as she put it, "the lack of physical manifestation is a sign of apostasy." Or false teaching. During the time of the suffragettes and the beginnings of the modern women's movements, Mother Edder belongs beside the greatest women leaders of her time. To other women she wrote:

"My dear sister in Christ, as you hear these words may the Spirit of Christ come upon you, and make you willing to do the work the Lord has assigned to you. It is high time for women to let their lights shine; to bring out their talents that have been hidden away rusting; and use them for the glory of God, and do with their might what their hands find to do, trusting God for strength, Who has said, 'I will never leave you.' We are sons and daughters of the most high God. Should we not honour our high calling and do all we can to save those who sit in the valley and shadow of death? God raised up men, women, and children of God's own choosing -Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Hulda, Anna, Phoebe, Narcissus, Tryphena, Persis, Julia, the Marys and the sisters who co-laboured with Paul. Is it less becoming for women to labour in Christ's commonwealth and vineyard now than it was then??"

Maria, like the people at Stonewall, and the women in Africa, had to put herself, her body on the line daily for truth and for Christ. Her work crossed so many boundaries set up between different religious movements, from Pentecostal (with its emphasis on speaking in tongues) to holiness (with its emphasis on bodily piety and good works) that she didn't fit into anybody's box - therefore everybody was out to box her in, from Pentecostals to Holiness people. She was arrested four times, men broke into her meetings shouting obscenities at her and threatening her.

She once said, "I have been in grave dangers; many times not knowing when I would be shot down, either in the pulpit, or going to and from meeting - But I said I would never run, nor compromise. The Lord would always put His mighty power on me, so that He took all fear away, and made me like a giant. If in any way they had tried to shoot, or kill me, He would have struck them dead, and I sometimes told them so."

Working “Out” for the Sake of the Body

Like Maria, and the other people we have spoken about today, we have been called to work “out” for the sake of the Body of Christ. By this I do not mean “working out” in the way that we usually mean in a society obsessed with thinking that body image and successful living are synonymous. We have become obsessed with certain body types, paying attention to the externals and not the internals of living a healthy, fulfilled life. We judge books by their covers more so than the writing within and that goes for our churches as well judging a “blessed” church more by whether it is big enough to have a Starbuck’s in the narthex than whether it is doing works of love. or on the flip side of things, judging a church as Christian which chooses to stay small and unassuming because we assume that large church bodies, just as we assume that people with larger bodies, are somehow guilty of the sin of indulgence and are less actualized than smaller people. Don’t get me started on church size queens!

Whatever our size, we are called to “work out”, not remain only inwardly focused on being. And as a queer community, we are called to work “out” in our communities - our bodies, our lives standing as a witness to the greatness, the expanse of the Body of Christ. Works of love and sharing build up the body - that’s what it means to work out as a follower of Jesus of Nazareth.

Feed, clothe, water, listen, teach, learn, love, share, pray, worship - those are the spiritual repetitions that build lasting fruits of a glorious Body. As we go into Pride week, let us resolve to be a church that does not perpetuate the myth of a divide between spirits and bodies. Let us resolve to love Bodies as well as Spirits - both in ourselves and in our wonderfully complex communities. Work “out” this week-and love the Body into wholeness.