

“Claiming Our Inheritance”

A homily for the people of St. Nicholas by Ethan Jewett

Genesis 21:8-21 + *Taking a Chance on God* + Matthew 10:24-39

The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

My life, like the lives of many queer people, has been filled with memories of brokenness and vulnerability. Today’s reading from Matthew’s Gospel is poignant for me, evoking the Ethan of my adolescence who lived in fear and darkness. I remember the pain of my stepfather calling me pansy, sissy, and faggot, while he made me throw the football around shirtless in winter to teach me to be a man. I remember the overwhelming sense of wrongness when I forced myself to kiss girls. I remember the tremulous desire and longing I felt as I tried not to stare at other boys changing in the locker room. I remember the terror of Gary Cardosa taunting me on the schoolbus and threatening to beat me up if I came to school the next day. I remember the shame of not hitting my bullies back and staying home from school, because I **was** a pansy. For many years, I hated that boy—was ashamed of him, as if his very existence was a source of never-ending humiliation—in being him at the time and in remembering him later. I had to learn to forgive and love that fragile teenager, and to claim him as my inheritance, as God does Hagar’s son in the reading from Genesis.

Part of claiming him as my own was accepting him as me, not referring to him as some other person, as I just did. For a while, it was convenient to just strip off my shameful self, bundle him up, and discard the worthless teenage Ethan like an old skin. If I could have set this skin on fire and reduced it to ashes, so that I wouldn’t have to admit that he had ever existed, I would have. Instead, I banished him to a place where one would ever look for him, just as Abraham banished Hagar and her son to the wilderness of Beer-sheba. Yet Jesus instructs us that

“nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.” Refusing to be rejected by me, as he had been in the past by his teenage tormentors, the broken and shameful Ethan emerged from my imposed exile, and demanded to be dealt with.

All people wrestle with parts of themselves that they’d like to discard, but I believe that queer people have a unique set of obstacles in claiming themselves. I suspect that many of my queer sisters and brothers here today can recall similar memories of pain and difference and rejection from their own adolescence. It is in our adolescence that we begin to really individuate, to explore our unique identities in all their complexity. Sexuality is certainly one of the most potent and tumultuous dimensions of our selves, one that has the power to kill both the body and soul, as Jesus says in the Gospel. But as John J. McNeill noted in our second reading, God breaks in in the weak and unlikely places, in the poor, broken, and humble places. So, I’d like to reflect for a moment on how God breaks in in our sexuality, when that sexuality is the weak place.

For me, it certainly was. The hardest and scariest thing I ever had to do was to tell my wife, Ali, I was gay and wanted a divorce. I was heartbroken by the pain I knew I was going to cause her, and I was terrified of all that I would lose—her family, her friendship, my financial security, my sense of self. It was so clear, though, that our broken relationship was hurting her and me, preventing us from developing into the people God wanted us to be. My sexuality was a source of brokenness for both of us. It was only when we accepted the painful truth of incompatibility that God was able to emerge in our lives. Ali went back to Todd, the highschool sweetheart that I had stolen her away from in college, they got married, had a son, and went on to lead a happy life in Portland. I learned to be self-sufficient and strong, to love and embrace my gay identity, and to share my whole self with the world. I met and fell in love with Mike, who brought me to the

Church, and through them both, I came alive for the first time, and through them both, I continue to feel God's love at work within me. My sexuality was the place of God's emergence in my life.

It is vulnerable and risky to share these intimate events of my life with you here this morning, but my hope is that in sharing the most broken parts of myself, I can convince the rest of you to risk telling your own stories of brokenness, to be vulnerable with each other. Mutual vulnerability is the basis of mutual trust, and this leads to justice, peace, and the kingdom of God. Sharing our stories of brokenness with each other will allow us to become the therapeutic community McNeill urges us to be. "If we can heal the wounds of self-hatred and self-rejection," he says, "then we can let go of the neurotic anger we feel toward those we see as having inflicted the wounds." It was only when I let go of my anger, self-hatred, and self-rejection, that my teenage self and his harrowing experiences became a source of strength for me. McNeill ends his book with a similar confession:

"It was in the profound sharing of my pain that I began to experience liberation. Out of that process came a renewed power to love, to throw off self-pity, cynicism, and despair, to give myself joyously to the work of God's kingdom and above all else to experience my gayness as a blessing."

Amen.