

**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2009**

***Sermon by Thalia Johnson - Deacon***

**ST. MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS, CAMBRIDGE JUNCTION**

**MARK 9:30-37 BECOMING A WELCOMING AND AFFIRMING CHURCH**

SPIRIT OF THE LIVING GOD, FALL AFRESH ON US. MELT US, MOLD US, FILL US, USE US. AND THEN SEND US OUT IN WITNESS. IT IS IN THE NAME OF JESUS WE PRAY. AMEN.

HOW OFTEN HAVE WE SUNG THOSE WORDS TOGETHER HERE BOTH WITH GUITAR AND WITH THE ORGAN OR KEYBOARD.

IT'S A JOY TO BE BACK AND WHILE LIFE IS UNFOLDING VERY WELL ON THIS NEXT ADVENTURE, I DO MISS YOU AND CARE DEEPLY ABOUT WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE. IT IS ALSO A JOY TO BE BACK HERE WITH JOE. HE IS THE PRIEST I'M NOW WORKING WITH AT CHURCH OF THE INCARNATION IN ANN ARBOR. AFTER THE ALMOST 25 YEARS OF WORKING WITH SANDY IT SEEMED IMPOSSIBLE TO EXPECT THERE TO BE ANOTHER PRIEST WHO COULD BE AS MUCH FUN AND SUPPORTIVE. THERE IS – AND IT'S JOE. HE AND SANDY ARE VERY DIFFERENT PEOPLE YET IN THE WAYS THAT MAKE THE TRUE DIFFERENCE IN A POSITIVE CLERGY RELATIONSHIP THEY ARE MUCH ALIKE. AND I'M GRATEFUL TO GOD FOR BOTH.

WE ARE HERE FOR A SPECIFIC PURPOSE AND I WANT TO START WITH A BRIEF EXERCISE SIMILAR TO ONE WE OFTEN USED IN 4-H. IF IT'S HELPFUL CLOSE YOUR EYES SINCE I NEED YOU TO DO SOME IMAGINING BECAUSE WE DON'T HAVE PAPER AND COLOR MARKERS.

YOU HAVE A BIG PIECE OF PAPER IN FRONT OF YOU AND YOU DRAW A CIRCLE IN THE VERY CENTER. THAT REPRESENTS YOU. THEN DRAW ANOTHER CIRCLE AROUND THAT ONE AND PUT 2 OR 3 OR 4 BOXES ON THAT CIRCLE REPRESENTING THE MOST KEY PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE – THE ONES YOU CAN'T IMAGINE POSSIBLY LIVING WITHOUT. WITH A BRIGHT COLOR DRAW A LINE OR SPOKE FROM EACH OF THEM INTO YOUR CIRCLE IN THE CENTER. THEN ANOTHER CIRCLE AROUND THE FIRST TWO. ON THIS ONE PUT BOXES FOR THE NEXT 3 OR 4 PEOPLE THAT YOU KNOW WELL, SEE FREQUENTLY AND WHO WOULD ALSO HAVE SOME IDEA OF WHAT YOU ARE DOING ON A REGULAR BASIS. RELATIVES, CLOSE FRIENDS, WITH A DIFFERENT COLORED MARKER DRAW SPOKES FROM THEM INTO YOU.

THEN ANOTHER CIRCLE AROUND THE FIRST 3 – THE BOXES ON THIS REPRESENT THE PEOPLE YOU WORK WITH OR TEACHERS AT SCHOOL. AGAIN A DIFFERENT COLORED MARKER DRAWING LINES INTO YOU.

THE NEXT CIRCLE IS FOR ALL THE RESOURCES PROVIDING HEALTH CARE – DOCTORS, DENTISTS, PHARMACISTS, INSURANCE COMPANIES, VETERINARIANS, CHIROPRACTORS, EYE DOCTORS, MORE LINES INTO YOU.

NOW ITS STARTING TO GET MESSY WITH DIFFERENT COLORS. ANOTHER CIRCLE REPRESENTS ALL THE FINANCIAL RESOURCES, BANKS, MORTGAGES, CREDIT UNIONS, CREDIT CARDS.

ANOTHER CIRCLE IS ALL THE SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE COMMUNITY FOR BASIC NEEDS. UTILITY COMPANIES, GARBAGE COMPANIES, GAS STATIONS, CAR REPAIR PLACES.

ANOTHER CIRCLE IS FOR LEISURE ACTIVITIES. PARKS, LIBRARIES, RESTAURANTS, NEWSPAPERS, INTERNET SERVICES, THEATERS,

ANOTHER CIRCLE MAY BE YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY – THE CHURCH – OR YOU MAY ALREADY HAVE IT IN ONE OF THE EARLIER CIRCLES.

THIS IS THE WEB OF COMMUNITY SUPPORTING YOU. THERE CAN BE SOME STRANDS MISSING AND STILL HAVE ENOUGH TO MAKE SURE YOU GENERALLY HAVE WHAT YOU NEED AND ARE CONNECTED WITH A SOLID BASE OF RELATIONSHIPS.

NOW I WANT YOU TO IMAGINE THE WEB FOR A GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL OR TRANSGENDER YOUTH 15 YEARS OLD LIVING IN LENAWEE COUNTY.

THE FIRST CIRCLE SURROUNDING HIM OR HER IS NOT A SOLID CIRCLE – THE BOXES ON THAT CIRCLE – THE PARENTS, BEST FRIEND IF THERE IS ONE, SIBLINGS DON'T KNOW THIS CHILD IS GAY. BECAUSE OF THAT IF THERE ARE LINES COMING IN THEY ARE DOTTED – THEY ARE MISSING KEY INFORMATION NEEDED TO BE SUPPORTIVE.

THE NEXT CIRCLES ARE THE SAME – THERE ARE USUALLY FEWER BOXES ON THEM AND IF NO ONE KNOWS, TEACHERS, SPORTS TEAMATES, FRIENDS, DOCTORS, DENTISTS THEN NO SOLID SUPPORT LINES OR CIRCLES. THERE ARE ALMOST NO BOOKS AT LOCAL LIBRARIES AND NONE IN THE SCHOOL LIBRARIES. THE LOCAL THEATER WILL NOT SHOW MOVIES LIKE BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN THAT MIGHT PROVIDE SOME ROLE MODELS. MOST CHURCHES AND FAITH COMMUNITIES HERE ARE NOT SUPPORTIVE.

THE ISOLATION IS VERY VISIBLE. HOPEFULLY YOU CAN ALSO FEEL A BIT OF WHAT IT IS LIKE AND THIS IS A CHILD AT UNNECESSARY RISK.

THE FAITH COMMUNITY, OUR CHURCH IS MAKING MAJOR STRIDES IN HELPING TO PROVIDE KEY LINKS FOR ALL FAMILIES IN PROVIDING A SAFE PLACE FOR LGBT YOUTH AND ADULTS. PEOPLE IN THE CHURCH ARE ALSO TEACHERS, LIBRARIANS, BUSINESS OWNERS, UTILITY WORKERS, PHARMACISTS – ON EVERY ONE OF THE CIRCLES I MENTIONED.

I HOPE YOU HAD THE CHANCE TO READ THE ARTICLE I WROTE FOR THE NEWSLETTER THIS SUMMER EXPLAINING MORE OF MY OWN STORY AND WHY I WAS SILENT SO LONG IN THE MIDST OF THIS INCREDIBLE CHURCH COMMUNITY. I WAS NOT WILLING TO RISK LOSING RELATIONSHIP.

IN A SERMON HERE TWO YEARS AGO I QUOTED THE PRESIDING BISHOP TALKING TO THE DEACONS AT A GATHERING I'D JUST ATTENDED. SHE REMINDED US THAT WE ALWAYS DEFINE OURSELVES IN RELATION TO THE OTHER. IT'S ONLY IN THE EXPERIENCE OF THOSE WHO ARE DIFFERENT THAT WE KNOW WHO WE ARE.

IN 2003 AT THE TIME OF THE PARISH MEETING AFTER THE ELECTION OF GENE ROBINSON AS BISHOP OF NEW HAMPSHIRE, I KNEW OF 11 FAMILIES HERE WITH LGBT MEMBERS. ALL WERE SILENT FOR THE MOST PART ABOUT IT, FOR THE SAME REASON I WAS. WE DON'T WANT TO RISK LOSING EACH OTHER.

SINCE THEN, WHENEVER I'VE BEEN IN A SETTING WHERE IT'S SAFE, I HAVE ASKED PEOPLE IN THE GROUP WHO HAVE LGBT RELATIVES TO RAISE THEIR HANDS. ALMOST EVERY HAND GOES UP AND I'M GUESSING THE SAME WOULD BE TRUE HERE.

FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE NEW, OR THOSE WHO MAY NOT REMEMBER, THE SUPPORT HERE IS SUCH THAT I CANNOT IMAGINE MY LIFE WITHOUT THIS PLACE IN IT. THERE WERE 4-H FAMILIES WHO I ALSO KNEW THROUGH WORK. YOU WERE A KEY COMPONENT IN THE CREATION AND SUCCESS OF CAMBIOS, A NON-PROFIT ADDRESSING RACISM HERE IN THE COUNTY. YOU WELCOMED MY MOTHER WHEN SHE MOVED HERE IN 1994 – EVEN THOUGH SHE FRIGHTENED ALMOST EVERY CHILD WITH HER OWN FEAR IN BEING BUMPED OR HURT – SHE HAD RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS. SHE WAS SCARED. AND THEN WHEN I LOST VISION AND HAD NEARLY TWO YEARS UNABLE TO DRIVE OR READ MUCH, THERE WERE PEOPLE HERE WHO WOULD COME INTO ADRIAN TO GET ME FOR CHURCH, AND THEN BRING ME HOME - TWO HOURS OF DRIVING! OTHERS BROUGHT ME WITH THEM FROM ADRIAN, AND TOOK ME TO THE VARIOUS PLACES I NEEDED TO GO. DURING THAT TIME MIKE STEVESON DID MOST OF THE TRANSPORTING OF MY MOTHER IN AND OUT OF ANN ARBOR – AND SHE CAME TO CARE ABOUT HIM AND OTHERS HERE DEEPLY. AND THEN THERE WAS ALL THE HELP DURING THE PROCESS OF THE TRANSPLANTS RESTORING VISION. ALL AGES – KIDS YET IN SCHOOL AND DELIA FISHER WELL INTO HER 90S.

THERE ARE 33 CHURCHES IN THE DIOCESE LISTED AS WELCOMING AND AFFIRMING. THAT MEANS THE WHOLE PARISH HAS THOUGHT AND TALKED ABOUT THE ISSUES AROUND SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY. IT DOESN'T MEAN EVERYONE HAS TO AGREE ABOUT IT – IT DOES MEAN A GAY OR LESBIAN COUPLE CAN SIT TOGETHER IN CHURCH WITHOUT BEING STARED AT, OR CHILDREN OF A GAY PARENT OR COUPLE WILL NOT BE TREATED ANY DIFFENTLY THAN OTHER KIDS – AND NOT HAVE ANY NEGATIVE REMARKS MADE ABOUT THEIR FAMILY – OR BE TOLD THAT GOD DOESN'T LIKE OR APPROVE OF THEIR FAMILY.

IT MEANS WELCOMING AND AFFIRMING THE BASIC HUMANITY OF ALL OF GOD'S PEOPLE. WE ARE ALL DIFFERENT IN SO MANY WAYS AND WE MANAGE TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO TREAT EACH OTHER WITH BASIC RESPECT, KINDNESS, DECENCY AND DIGNITY.

WE ARE CALLED BY THE RADICAL JESUS TO RADICAL HOSPITALITY. ALL ARE GOD'S CHILDREN AND IF WE TURN ONE AWAY WE ARE REFUSING TO ACCEPT JESUS. ITS PART OF OUR BAPTISMAL COVENANT – TO SEEK AND SERVE CHRIST IN ALL WE MEET AND TO RESPECT THE DIGNITY OF EVERY HUMAN BEING.

JOE IS GOING TO SHARE A BIT WITH YOU AS WELL AND AFTER THE SERVICE WE ARE MORE THAN WILLING TO TALK WITH PEOPLE INDIVIDUALLY. EVENTUALLY WE WOULD LIKE TO BRING THE DOCUMENTARY MOVIE “THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO” AND SHOW IT.

I'M GOING TO FINISH WITH A GREETING FROM JANE BASSETT. SHE HAD HOPED TO COME ALONG TODAY WITH HER TWO KIDS, CAMERON WHO WILL BE 5 THIS WEEK, AND TASHI WHO IS ALMOST 4. SHE ATTENDED HERE FOR MOST OF TWO YEARS. WE BECAME ACQUAINTED THROUGH CAMBIOS – SHE WAS OUR ATTORNEY WHO DID ALL THAT WORK PRO BONO. JANE HAS FOSTERED 3 KIDS AND ADOPTED TWO – ALL FROM LENAWEE COUNTY. I'VE WORKED FOR HER IN THE LAW OFFICE NOW FOR 3 YEARS AND IN ADDITION TO HER MAIN PRACTICE IN ELDER LAW SHE IS A MAJOR VOICE AND EXPERT ON ADOPTIONS FOR LGBT FAMILIES STATEWIDE.

JANE'S MOTHER WAS THE CHOIR DIRECTOR ALL THE TIME JANE GREW UP. JANE HERSELF WAS WORKING ON A PHD IN MUSIC WHEN SHE DECIDED TO GO TO LAW SCHOOL. BUT SHE LEFT THE CHURCH COMPLETELY WHEN SHE AND HER PARTNER WERE REJECTED. THE FIRST CHURCH SINCE THEN THAT SHE FELT COMFORTABLE IN, WELCOMED, USEFUL AND SAFE WAS ST. MICHAELS. THAT IS THE PIECE SHE WANTED ME TO SAY FOR HER.

SOME OF YOU HAVE BECOME FRIENDS, YOUR KIDS BABYSIT FOR HER CHILDREN, AND OUR LIVES ALL CONTINUE TO INTERSECT. CAMERON WAS BAPTIZED HERE AND WITH MIKE SHE SANG FOR THE SERVICE WHEN SANDY RETIRED. SHE AND SANDY WERE WITH MY SISTER AND ME AS MY MOTHER DIED.

YOU ARE SUCH A KEY PART OF MY WEB OF COMMUNITY – ONGOING PERSONAL CONNECTIONS AND SPIRITUALLY. PLEASE CONSIDER TAKING THE NEXT STEP IN PROVIDING THAT FOR OTHERS IN THIS AREA.

JOE.

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1987-2005