

So they know we are here  
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Sermon Notes:

Sermon delivered at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House  
[www.janhus.org](http://www.janhus.org) for bulletin and readings (or [raybagnuolo.net/sermons.htm](http://raybagnuolo.net/sermons.htm))

New Member Sunday; Pride Sunday;  
on the Way to the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly

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Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!  
This from this morning's reading of Paul in Corinthians.

This from 1900 years later, in the writings of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., responding to his critics, fellow clergyman, suggesting he is going too far, needs to slow down in his protests and actions. King wrote this while imprisoned in Birmingham for his disturbing the peace in April of 1963. It is an excerpt from is well known "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every [Black person] with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

It's simple. The time for justice is always now.  
Always now.

Trying to find more elegant or sophisticated ways to say this is unnecessary, it just can't be made any clearer. There is never, ever any good reason for any delay for justice and the mounting violence oppressive delay always produces.

No gospel would ever suggest such a thing.  
No God would condone such a thing.  
No one should ever call themselves faithful and accept such a thing.

Yet, we are in such a time, in our church, when we are debating, again, whether justice and love are  
important enough to us, or  
integral enough to us

to take actions --  
actions that would allow pastors to welcome in the church and marry in the church same gender loving couples in states where that is legal, without threats of reprisals or charges being brought against them for violation of ordination vows.

Next week the 220 General Assembly of the PC(USA) will meet in Pittsburgh. It meets every two years to gather in worship and prayer, community and conversation, as well as considering changes within the church; overtures and other business sent to the assembly for consideration.

Jan Hus has sent two overtures to our own Presbytery of NYC which were approved by our presbytery and sent on to the General Assembly. They are for an Authoritative Interpretation of W-9.4000 and a change in the language in the Directory for Worship that defines marriage as being between a man and a woman. This is a section of the Directory for Worship, along with our Book of Confession and Book of Order that completes the Constitution itself. I and others will be there addressing the committee in favor of both of these overtures.

As a bit of further explanation:

Passage of the Authoritative Interpretation or AI, is a decision that can be made at a General Assembly and have immediate impact, in this case, providing relief for pastors to legally marry same gender loving couples in states where that is legal to do and using church facilities for these marriages.

The second overture, the change in the constitution is a larger and more complex process that begins with a recommendation from the committee for an of an amendment to do so, which is then voted on by the commissioners in the plenary. that comes out of the committee after hearing testimony and reviewing the overtures it received. If an overture passes the vote of the commissioners at the plenary sessions, it is then sent to the all 173 presbyteries that make up the PC(USA) for a 2/3<sup>rd</sup> ratification vote by the presbyteries. This can take a very long time to accomplish. In the case of the passage of 10A which removed the restrictive language of G-6.0106b, used to prevent people who were LGBT from being ordained in the great majority of cases, this took nearly 16 years.

So the immediate relief of an AI, coupled with the start of the work of constitutional change makes sense to begin right away. Sounds like the right next things to do. Right?

Well, not everyone agrees.

One of the largest of the Progressive Movement Groups, the Covenant Network, believes that constitutional change is too large of a step for the church to take at this point in time, especially following the recent ratification of 10A. They are concerned it puts too much stress on the church. So, they will only support the AI, and by their silence, at least on the overture for constitutional change, will stand against it. And, theirs is a strong voice – whether in spoken word or silence.

If not now, when?

Thankfully, there are several groups working toward both. More Light Presbyterians, of which we are a member church, and That All May Freely Serve, which I serve as an Evangelist, are both clearly supporting the two. For us, and others, it is difficult, confounding even – to think why a delay can make sense, considering how many are hurt by such delays.

Once again, Dr. King:

“Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation.”

Still we do our best to work together in places where we agree and disagree in respectful terms when we do. But, not be silent...

Being silent, when holding back the Good News is never a good thing, especially for churches: a case in point.

In 1993, the pastor Dan Smith of West Hollywood Presbyterian Church preached a sermon by telling a story about Nancy Wilson, the then pastor of Metropolitan Community Church of Los Angeles<sup>1</sup>. It's a story about an evening she spent with a dying man at a hospice.

Although it is nearly 20 years old, the story makes the point, I think, of why now...(LGBT – hear LGBT)

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<sup>1</sup> Edited by Janie Adams Spahr, Kathy Poethig, Selisse Berry, and Melinda V. McLain. Called Out. The Voice of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Persons. Chi Ro Press, MD. 1995

It was Christmas Eve, last year, when I received a call from a hospice. I was asked to visit a young man, named Michael. When I arrived at the hospice, I met a young man who was about 25 years old and dying of AIDS. He had tubes going in and out of his body. He could not speak because he had tubes in his nose and mouth; and he had tubes coming out of his abdomen. The young man was very distressed and was having seizures. The staff at the hospice had told me Michael *had been hanging on for dear life* – anxious, afraid, and angry. He couldn't let go.

When I entered his room, I found Michael lying on his side. He could not talk, but he could write. He had a pencil and a large tablet. It took him an excruciating long time to write even one little word, and so for 40 minutes he wrote little words and things.

I felt increasingly distressed and ineffectual. I didn't know if it frightened him to see me—I was wearing a clerical collar—or if he just didn't know who I was. But what was even more distressing, was the concern of whether I was being more hurtful than helpful.

I sat there for several minutes and finally he wrote the words, “HELP ME.” I said, “Michael, I don't know how I can help you, but I can pray for you. Would you like me to pray for you?” He sort of nodded “yes,” so I touched his head and began to pray for him. As I prayed, tears came down his eyes and I began to pray as well. When I had finished praying, he looked at me and wrote on his pad—very clearly—“this is a hospice, what are you doing here?”

That was a profound question. It was Christmas Eve. This is a hospice, what am I doing here? I just looked at him and said “Well, right now I am crying with you.” That was about all I could manage.

He wrote, “What church?” and I said “Metropolitan Community Church.” He didn't know what that was so I told him the story of MCC and Troy Perry. I told him I was a lesbian—and I could see all this was news to him!

Hours, days before his death, he first hears of this possibility of gays and lesbians and church! I was filled with a sense of poignancy and pathos. Here was a dying gay man, who had never been able to put his sexual orientation and faith together, and now, because of his

situation, we couldn't even speak about that! So, I began to talk to him, about God's good gift of his sexuality and our spirituality as lesbian and gay Christians. I could see he was listening intently. Then he kind of looked up at me and wrote on his tablet:

“GAY ANGELS?”

The smile on my face was immediate and I said, “Yes, Michael, there are gay angels. I know many, in fact one died in the room next door to you just a few months ago. His name was Ben. But there are many, many others in fact, you, Michael, have the name of the greatest angel.” All of a sudden he had this look on his face, and I just sensed him begin to relax. The last thing he wrote to me was:

“SEND THEM!”

I felt like I was in the presence of the Divine through this incredible experience of knowing that Michael could not let go until he knew that gay angels would accompany him to the throne of God, in some way. He wanted the kind of company that he *trusted* on this last piece of his journey. And he did not want to go anywhere that he was not welcomed as a gay person.

I was touched and humbled by the fact that Michael thought I could send these gay angels, but in fact they came for him the next morning. Early that next morning I called the hospice and they said, “Oh, we're sorry to tell you Michael died.” I said, “Don't be sorry in the slightest, what a wonderful thing that he could die on this wonderful day and that the gay angels came for him.

Nancy Wilson concluded her story by saying that “I tell you this story because I think, whether you are gay or lesbian, or heterosexual or bisexual you need to understand the kind of fear and need that gay and lesbian people have to believe that the religious symbols and systems of our life that are articulated in the Bible must be gay and lesbian friendly for gay and lesbian people to really trust and believe that this is our God and that this is our Bible, too.

I, Ray, tell you this story today, on this Pride Sunday and on the eve of the beginning of our General Assembly to say that the uncomfortability of the church is always better than the distance, disenfranchisement, and violence the church imposes by those who believe “there is time, later...”

There can never be a “time later for violence to end, unless one chooses to become complicit in the violence...”

There can never be a “time later for change, unless one wishes to become part of the suffering and pain of others...”

There can never be a “time later for the full welcoming of folk who are LGBT, unless one wishes to be part of the greatest of sins, dissing God’s creation.”

There can never be a “time for silence, unless you give your voice up in the non-verbal rebuke of standing idle...”

Paul, in the gentlest of way says it: we wish you would open your hearts to us the way we have opened them to you...  
It’s not your hearts...it’s **our** hearts.

And Jesus places the punctuation in this morning’s gospel:

“Why were you so frightened of the storm? Have you no faith.”

We can never be frightened of the storm that clears the skies for justice. No matter how badly or threatening it first looks.

We can never set our prophetic voice aside and in its place assure our comfort or plans for long term, progressive change at the expense of others...

We can never be part of a conversation or church that keep the Good News and GAY ANGELS from anyone.

At least, I think, we can never do these things and be what we and others call “church.”

There is much ahead of us, but today on this New Member Sunday, this Pride Sunday, this Day that God has made – you have been, are, and will always be welcome here!

Please keep this church and those who will gather in Pittsburgh in your prayers; please pray for us that we witness the prophetic breath of the Spirit filling the committees and plenary halls in Pittsburgh, and pray that the PCUSA move another step closer to full inclusion, at the edge of God's gracious love and wildly abundant hospitality! With a voice that makes it clear people know "we are here, and yes, some of us are queer, of course!"

Amen.