

The Rev. Kerith Harding – Sermon June 28, 2015

About 5 years ago, while traveling in the West Bank, Ali and I met an 80-year old woman who lives in a refugee camp outside of Hebron, a volatile town 20 miles south of Jerusalem. She had been evicted from her farmhouse in the Judean hills by the Israeli army when they occupied parts of Palestine. At the time, she was told just to pack a small bag; that she would be allowed to return in two weeks.

That was in 1949.

When we met her, she was sitting on a mat on the ground outside of the two room shack she shared with her equally aged sister. Midway through our visit, she arose, and hobbled into the doorless concrete hut, her gnarled toes forcing her to walk on the outside edges of her feet.

When she emerged, she was holding a large iron key, maybe 6 or 8 inches long, heavy, rusted and obviously quite old. She looked me straight in the eye, and in Arabic she said, “This is the key to my house.”

Sixty years later, she still had her key. She expected that her farmhouse was standing exactly as she left it, and that if she was ever allowed to return, her key would fit in the door.

This woman taught me something about the value of a key. For her, it symbolized two things: ownership and access. If you have the key to a house, it is yours, and you get to enter it whenever you please.

This past week, those 20% of Americans who did not already live in a state with marriage equality were given keys; keys to enter an institution that had excluded them for years. And those of us who already lived in states with marriage equality

were told our sacred unions and our right to marriage would never be taken away. It was a banner moment; tears of joy were shed across the country. And, it was not only a banner moment for the families who it most directly impacted, but for those of us who are members of churches such as St. John's who have prayed for this day since the first commitment ceremony was performed here over a dozen years ago. Given that long history, it is hard to believe that civil unions only became law in Hawaii in 2012, with same-sex marriage following in December 2013. This past March, Katherine Coelho (who was baptized in this church by Rev. Ault) and her partner Kirstyn Keanen, became the first same-sex couple to be legally married within these walls. Strangely enough, I had done so many same-sex marriages both on Maui and elsewhere by the time I married Kat and Kirstyn that I didn't even realize this at the time!

And there, my friends, is the danger... There is the danger of responding nonchalantly to the news out of SCOTUS this week that LGBT individuals have been given access to marriage. The danger is in thinking that a law on the books equals equal treatment and so we can just move on with our lives. The examples that remind us how un-true this is, are myriad...

"After the U.S. Civil War, the 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870, prohibited states from denying a male citizen the right to vote based on 'race, color or previous condition of servitude.' Nevertheless, in the ensuing decades, various discriminatory practices were used to prevent African Americans, particularly those in the South, from exercising their right to vote" and these practices continue in some places today.¹ Women won the vote in 1920, less than 100 years ago,

¹ <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/voting-rights-act>

and yet even today, women make .78 for every \$1 earned by men. Interracial marriage became the law of the land due to a SCOTUS ruling in 1967, and yet even today, we have a white man who one moment was welcomed into a black church for bible study, and in the next moment, stands up, pronounces “you’re raping our women” and shoots 9 people dead. This is the danger of rejoicing too long over the Supreme Court victory for LGBT rights on Friday or over responding nonchalantly with a “well, we knew this would happen eventually”.... The danger is that we will forget that there is still a long fight for justice and civil rights ahead of us, and that action –in faith– is require.

This morning’s Gospel gives us a glimpse into exactly what kind of action is required. We all just heard the story of the woman who has had a bleeding disorder for 12 years, and who pushes past the crowds for the sole purpose of doing the unthinkable: touching a man’s garment. It was unthinkable because she was a woman. It was especially unthinkable — and illegal! — because she was bleeding, and therefore, by Jewish law, considered unclean. She was supposed to keep herself separate. She was supposed to accept the illness and its social sentence of isolation and alienation, of “lesser than.” She was also probably exhausted — financially, emotionally, and after bleeding for 12 years, physically. No one would have blamed her for giving up.

But she goes out in public anyway, and she looks for healing from the man who tells people not to be afraid, who expels demons from people, who, raises people from the dead.

For 12 years she has been in a situation that must have felt utterly hopeless. Most people would be forgiven for letting

such a condition turn them into cynics and victims. But somehow, Jesus awakens a hope in her, and elicits a longing for more from life — for justice, for health, for community, for “normalcy.” We are social creatures, who thrive in situations and relationships that honor our freedom. And no human being can thrive when the majority are telling them that they must be content with less — with commitment ceremonies instead of marriage, with no access to healthy food, or health care, or with the back of the bus.

And this is what Jesus does — He awakens in us a deeper hope, a longing for a more just world — not only for ourselves but for others as well. Victories along the way indeed must be celebrated, and celebrated in style. But in no way can we be content to let those victories satisfy our deepest longings for justice and for peace. Instead, let them be moments that teach us anew that we do not toil in vain, that indeed “the arc of history bends towards justice,” and that the Holy Spirit labors so that each human can live in freedom.

And this freedom in God is why we are all here. Had St. John’s founders, over 100 years ago, not felt in their bones the unmistakable freedom of spirit that only God can give, it is likely Rev. Shim would have accepted his rather conventional life in China. He would have stayed with his wife and 4 children, doing God’s work where he was. But the invitation to come to Hawaii evoked a deeper longing, and at great personal cost, it drew him out of his small world and into the far wider world of church history. Much like the woman with the hemorrhage, the Palestinian refugee with a key, and the people who fight daily for justice and peace, Rev. Shim knew there was more. And so did his incredible wife who let him go!

This weekend we celebrate St. John’s and its brave founders. We celebrate the freedom to marry that now extends to all

Americans — gay and straight. And we remember that each of us are invited to have a role in this beautiful drama; inspired by the legacy such courageous acts have left for us, may we all go forth with hearts brave enough to do the unthinkable.
AMEN.