

## PIE Day Sermon Thoughts and Possibilities

By the Very Rev. Gary Paterson

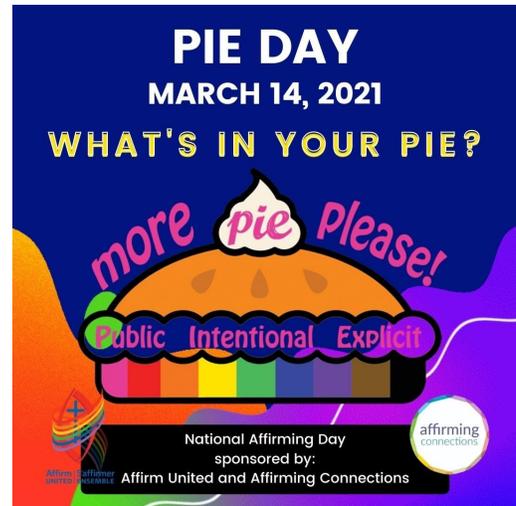
You might begin by unpacking more of the historical context of the time, depending on what was said in the “Introduction of Scripture.”

A major question facing the early church was whether non-Jews could become part of the Christian community without first accepting the Jewish faith. Were circumcision, and abiding by Jewish dietary laws, etc. a necessary “first step?” This may seem like an esoteric argument in our times, but in point of fact, it is very much connected to the reality of Affirming Sunday. Who’s in, who’s out? Who is acceptable, who’s not? And on what basis? Biblical “law”? Social norms? God’s revelation of love?

We humans do not react well to “difference” -- perhaps because of ignorance, fear, or because of our desire to heighten personal status and create “hierarchy.” We seek to exclude “the other.” Our history is full of terrible discrimination based on race, ethnicity, class, religion, etc. In today’s service, National Affirming Sunday, the focus is on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Over and over it seems that social prejudice buttresses itself with religious blessing, and claims that God is judging these differences, so that some groups of people are seen as 2<sup>nd</sup> class humans.

The passage from Acts focuses on the issue of what food is “clean” or “profane” – drawing on the instructions from the Book of Leviticus, and the details established by Jewish tradition. In his dream, Peter recognizes that God’s grace stands above and beyond all rules that try to define some creatures, some people to be unworthy, and therefore excluded. (And note that the details of this dream are presented a 2<sup>nd</sup> time in the Book of Acts, in chapter 11:1-18, reflecting its importance in the development of the early church)



Interesting to note that in Galatians 2:11-14, Paul confronts Peter about his hypocrisy. (It might be useful to have these few verses read out loud... either as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Scripture reading, or in the body of the sermon.) When on “home turf,” and confronted by the conservative wing of the early Christian church, Peter hesitates to speak up about his theology of inclusion – an example of why PIE is so necessary – today, and back then.

The LGBTQ community can, I believe, claim Peter’s dream, his courage in drawing out the consequences, and then his subsequent ducking and hypocrisy as parallel to their own experience and the reality of church life.

As another part of the sermon, it would be helpful to expand on the understanding that we worship a God who delights in diversity. This can be referenced in the Creation story (Genesis, Job, Psalm 104), to the ministry of Jesus, and to the work of the Spirit. And it is implicit in the passage from Acts – is this truly a gospel for all people?!

Again, this delight in diversity might be contrasted to our human proclivity to react negatively to “difference” and to the “stranger.” We create various rationales for our actions – religious, medical, political. We create walls that divide – this might be an opportunity to include parts (or all) of Robert Frost’s poem, “Mending Wall.”

(Frost’s work is part of the public domain, and so there are no copyright issues.)

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line

And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go.  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.  
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it  
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.  
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offense.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. I see him there  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'

Another strand of the sermon might include a brief review of the “history” of the LGBTQ2SI community’s struggle for acceptance, in society and in the church. This may well be a worship service when it would be important to

invite an LGBTQ+ person to offer personal testimony about his/her/their journey towards affirmation.

For example, here is a description of the witness offered by a gay man in an Affirming Congregation:

This man and his family grew up in a conservative evangelical church community. Like so many LGBTQ individuals he struggled to reconcile the faith that he had been taught, with his growing awareness of his sexual orientation. Finally, after many years of struggle, and self-condemnation; and the non-acceptance or judgment from those within the church community he did share with, he left his church; in fact, he left “the church” and the Christian faith. However, his heart still yearned for the presence of God. A good friend, who knew his story, invited him to check out a nearby Affirming Congregation, which he decided to do. When he sat down, in a back pew, ready, if necessary, for a quick escape, he heard a voice speaking, inside/outside, who knows – “Welcome home; I’ve missed you.” In the midst of his tears he knew that he had arrived, finally; he had indeed come home.

Let me speak more personally. When I was a teen-ager, struggling with my sexuality, in the mid/late sixties, coming to realize that I was at least bisexual, probably a gay person, I was told by the government that I was a criminal; by the medical profession, that I was sick; and by the church, that I was a condemned sinner. When I turned 20 in 1969, the Canadian government took the first step in de-criminalizing homosexuality (“The State has no business in the bedrooms of the nation.”) in 1973, the American Psychiatric Society determined that in and of itself homosexuality was not an illness; it was, in fact, social oppression and prejudice that created “mental health” problems for LGBTQ persons.

In 1988 the United Church, at the 32<sup>nd</sup> General Council, declared that all people regardless of sexual orientation are welcome as full members of the United Church, and all members are eligible to be considered for ordered ministry. It also affirms that God's intention for all human relationships (both heterosexual and homosexual couples) is that they be faithful, responsible, just, loving, health-giving, healing, and sustaining of community and self.

Over the years, starting with criminal, sick and sinner, the church has moved to variations on sick and/or disordered; to “don’t ask, don’t tell;” to disabled; to tolerated; to accepted; and finally, to affirmation and celebration.

It is an ongoing journey, and much still needs to be done. Hence the importance of National Affirming Sunday, and being Public, Intentional and Explicit.

Hopefully these suggestions are helpful; blessings in your work of preparing for worship.

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