

Living Authentically, Santa Rosa , October 11, 2020

May the God who creates us, redeems us, and sustains us, be with us this day and always. Amen.

Good morning. For those who don't know me, my name is Paul Mallatt. Most people call me Pauly. I've been a member here since my husband, Allan and I moved to Santa Rosa from Chicago over two years ago, and today I am preaching my very first sermon. Ever.

Today is National Coming Out Day. My coming out story is a story of being LOVED, being LIBERATED, finding LIFE, and living AUTHENTICALLY. What I've come to know and believe with all my heart is that God never stops seeking and searching for ways to be in relationship with us.

So, won't you join me as I tell you about my wedding story?

It was a very hot and very steamy Chicago afternoon in late August, 2014. My husband and I were married at All Saints' Episcopal, an old church building, built in 1883 and much like our beloved Incarnation, it doesn't have air conditioning. Allan and I had invited all our family and friends - a very diverse group of young, and not so young, gay, straight, some very religious, and some folks who were on that spiritual highway. Everyone was there, dressed to the nines in their summer finest! It was a beautifully traditional ceremony - officiated by our good friend,

Fran - a lesbian priest who just happens to be a huge, HUGE Lady Gaga fan. As a surprise to her, Allan and I recessed to an original rendition of Gaga's "Born This Way" sung by my sister Cynthia, my niece Megan, and our good friend, and local opera sensation, Jessie Oliver.

"I'm beautiful in my way
'Cause God makes no mistakes
I'm on the right track, baby I was born this way.. born this way,
hey... born this way, hey..."

You know, to get the full picture let's back up. Let's back wayyyy up to 1982.

I was driving from Paradise California to San Francisco, Abba "The Album" was on repeat on my tape deck, and everything I owned was packed into my little yellow 1976 Honda Civic. I had been transferred to San Francisco to attend flight attendant training and to start living my own life.

Several months before this, everything I had known about my faith in God and all that I held true came to an abrupt end when I came out to my family and my church. I grew up and faithfully attended the church of Christ. if you've never heard of the church of Christ, or if you're unfamiliar with its doctrine, The church of Christ is an ultra-conservative, evangelical-style church or as some have referred to it as "a Baptist church on steroids" and it is much, much different than the more widely known and much more liberal, United Church of Christ, or UCC. My life

centered around church and faith, anytime the doors were open I was there. Three times a week: Sunday morning worship, Sunday night Bible study, and Wednesday night Bible study.

As a high school young adult group leader, I assisted in worship services, I organized a before school prayer group, I attended weekend youth rallies, and overnight Bible studies. But that all came to an end when I came out to the church and was told by the elders in my congregation, “That to choose to live a gay lifestyle was an abomination and it’s incompatible with Christian teaching — If I wanted to remain in the church I would have to choose not to be gay.” As if being gay was a choice like would I prefer beef or chicken tonight? I found myself smack in the middle of an existential crisis. I was not going to give up being who I was, so I left the church of Christ and basically took a break from all organized religion for a decade. Although I never gave up on God, and thankfully God never gave up on me. I found God in nature, and in relationships with friends, and in volunteering with various community outreach organizations.

Fortunately for me, my parents grew accepting (over time) and I never stopped searching for a place to worship where I felt accepted and fully loved for person I was. I knew in my heart that I was “fearfully and wonderfully made,” to quote Psalms 139, but that was juxtaposed against the deep shame I felt about who I was as a young gay kid sitting in that pew ... always in the back of my mind a small voice kept whispering, “you’re an abomination. You’re not worthy.” I couldn’t help but wonder,

Maybe ... was this all part of Gods plan for me? Am I really invited to this banquet?

Now, going back to the parable in today's gospel, The king came in and noticed a man who was not wearing the right clothes, and ultimately had him tossed out on his butt. I WAS THAT GUY!! I was deemed unworthy by standards of the world, and especially by standards held by the elders of the church of Christ. I didn't fit in because I wasn't wearing the "official wedding robe" ... and so I had to leave the feast.

The good news is after 30+ years I eventually found grace and love and acceptance AND my ticket in. Do you know what that invitation looks like?

I found it right here in our Baptismal Covenant on pages 304 & 305 in the Book of Common Prayer — That my friends, was my invitation to join the wedding feast! Our Baptismal Covenant is yours, it's mine, and it's ours together. It is more than words on a page. IT IS beloved community, it's the kingdom of God.

We promise to seek and serve Christ in ALL persons, not just the ones WE deem acceptable, the ones wearing the "right clothes". We promise to love ALL our neighbors as ourselves, not some neighbors, you know the pretty ones, who have the best education, and who wear the latest fashions and drive the newest cars, and we promise to KEEP striving for justice even when justice seems unreachable, AND we promise to respect the dignity of Every. Single. Person. — it's super easy to respect the dignity of people who look like we do, act like we do, and who

believe like we do. Lesbian poet Mary Oliver says it best, *“There are a hundred paths through the world that are easier than loving. But who wants easier?”*

I remember seeing an interview with Reverend Peter Lane, rector of St Paul & the Redeemer, Hyde Park, Chicago. Peter was talking about the church, Chicago Gay Pride, and Christianity. Peter was looking straight at the camera, and saying (what felt like directly to me) that it was OK to be gay AND be a Christian, that God loves me exactly as I am. Words I heard for the very first time WOW! POW! The two weren't incompatible after all! I mean I knew it. I had been a practicing Methodist for 20 years before joining the Episcopal Church but actually HEARING those exact words spoken for the first time made an incredible difference. Words of acceptance, spoken in love, from a priest wearing a collar - a person of “authority” — which in my mind represented the Elders of the congregation. Something deep within me shifted, broke loose, and broke open. I was crying like a baby. It was as if a giant weight that was holding on to me had been lifted.

Dear friends, Our Baptismal Covenant is crafted and deeply rooted in love and it is the ESSENCE of who we are - and it gave me the right clothes to wear and a seat at the banquet table! Finally, finally I was home.

My coming out story isn't that different from many kids. Hundreds of kids, and young adults who are told that they are worthless or “worth less” I was fortunate. I have a loving family.

My family didn't kick me to the curb when I came out and was deemed "other" by my church. They stuck by me, and after a while, after a looong while, I found my way back to church and back to worshiping God with others who don't look like me, think like me, or believe exactly like me, and that's OK because every human being — every lesbian, every gay person, every bi person, every trans person, every person who's questioning who they are and every straight person has the divine image of God superimposed on them, and the light of Christ in them, and they are sealed as one of God's own... Forever. We are ALL created in the image of God.

My friends, know this. You are so loved by God. So loved by God.

No exceptions.

AMEN