

From Mercy to Justice
A Plenary Address for
Believe Out Loud
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What a sight you are to take in. Christians and secular organizers—we have not known each other for very long and we have not trusted each other for longer still. If you saw Glee this week, you saw the young gay man listen to his Glee Club members talk about how important it was to have someone to lean on, someone like God to lean on when times were tough, and he looked at them and said, I don't believe in God and I don't go to church—because I'm gay and the Church makes it hard to be gay.

The church makes it hard to be gay. It makes it hard to be gay in the church. It makes it hard to be gay in the world. And it makes

it really hard to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning in any place at all.

And so here we are. Two groups, secular and faith who have more in common than we know, but very different at the same time.

Secular organizers—are nice, but they aren't church nice. They aren't church nice because they feel a sense of urgency and push back on timelines, and outlines, and asks that pin things down.

Church people aren't used to things being pinned down or urgent or so planned. We have grown accustomed to the way things are, and working around the way things are to change them here and there, with the right connection and the building of relationships overtime. And time is something secular organizers never have enough of. And I could go on, and I will in a bit, but my point is we need each other. We are in a movement moment—an historical movement moment where the expertise and clarity of purpose of the secular organizers and the uniquely suited language of belief of the faith organizers must come together and work together to bring

more people, more relationships, more outreach to and with all the people in our heretofore separate worlds because our life and our love depends on our working together.

That is why we are here. We need the expertise, the language, the culture competency that will take us through direct political involvement and the shaping of political agendas to the really essential work of creating a transformative world view. It will take our collaboration to do this, because the secular world is hiding behind the Church and the Church is hiding behind the secular world. And it is the work of Queer people, as Rebecca so powerfully named us, to bring it all out into the light and demand that what is hidden be seen.

I am bi-organizational. I have shared life with both the faith and secular organizing communities and I love you both. I know much of the woundedness and wholeness you carry. I've been sitting in the dissonance of it particularly since November 4, 2008 when

Prop. 8 was narrowly defeated in California and I want to talk to you about it today, and place it in the context of mercy and justice.

But before I do. There is a tradition – surprisingly enough - in both the church and in the community of secular activists – when we acknowledge the work, the leadership, the courage, and the faithfulness of those in our midst who have organized armies out of phone books and phone banks and those who have spoken truth to power and I want to do that right now. I invite the leaders of the faith movements and the leaders of the secular movements to stand. Stand up and stand out for this moment to be recognized for your leadership and what you have done to build a better world and a better church. As we make history, let us thank those who have gotten us this far on the way. Really take each other in. See the humanity and recognize the commitment you commonly share. Don't assume because they are a faith organizer they don't know about big asks and leveraging power. Don't assume because they are secular organizers that they are not people of faith. Don't

assume, be curious. Thank every one of you for living your life to better ours.

If we were the whole world, we could sing a hymn and head off to coffee hour and celebrate all that is right with the world.

But we are so not the whole world. And I planned to invite a whole list of folk to stand for being counted when it counts, to rise and speak a word or two of thanksgiving for their actions.

To thank you. To encourage you. And to inspire the rest of us.

This morning, however, it can't be business as usual, not even here, because our work isn't finished yet. There are people here today for whom it still isn't safe to identify fully as who they truly are, and so I invite you all to stand, as you are able—because only by all standing together do we make it safe enough for any one of us to stand alone.

Take a breath. Look around. And thank the person on your right for their leadership. Acknowledge the person on your left for their

faithful service. Speak a word of encouragement to the person behind you who is afraid of what might be asked of them. Pat somebody on the back. Cross the aisle and give an alta girl to someone you don't know –

Would everyone please take a seat.

We truly don't do that often enough – thank each other, encourage each other. And we definitely need to do it more, in bigger numbers to create safer spaces. Because, in 2010, in the Church, even in this gathering, there are those who are not out. And by asking people to stand as individuals, we explicitly assume that they can and will. My friends, we have more work to do. Even in as safe a space as this. And it is this dissonance that we must live with, and hold sacredly to lead us to our deeper places. It is a dissonance I have lived with for over 30 years, which is why I was invited to speak to you today. Let me tell you a story.

My brand new spouse and partner of 21 years and I were sitting on the balcony of our hotel room, talking about how precious our wedding the day before had been. How amazing it had been to be surrounded by family of origin and family of choice and repeat the same vows we had spoken 21 years earlier at our covenant in Seattle. We were basking in just how far our families had come in those 21 years of sharing meals, vacations, and holidays with us. We were reveling in how our family of choice and family of origin had fallen in love with each other throughout all our wedding activities. It had been so powerful to be surrounded by them, when all but one of my brothers had been absent in 1987.

In the midst of talking about how time and sharing life together had changed us and brought us all together, we slowly began to talk about how being married felt different. How it made us feel a part of the culture in a way that our coming out had severed. By the end of that conversation, we knew we wanted to protect our marriage from those who denied its value and validity.

We began to wonder what we could do to fight for our marriage and whether we had anything to offer in the fight. So we did a brief life review.

I had gone to seminary in 1978 as an open lesbian. I was the first open self-avowed practicing homosexual to be ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1981. That made me one of the first openly gay or lesbian clergy in the country. The congregation I served for 10 years became the first Open and Affirming Congregation in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1987 and members of Findlay Street Christian Church helped to found the national movement called GLAD—Gay, Lesbian and Affirming Disciples. I'd been ordained in Northern California and by 2008 it was now an Open and Affirming Region. I'd gone to seminary with hundreds of clergy who were now serving congregations through out the state.

We pulled out the computer and started identifying all the welcoming and affirming congregations in California and our excitement really began to grow. It seemed we could help to leverage that network into an army of Christian activists who would support equality for same gender couples by working together to fight Proposition 8.

Candy too had much to offer. She had been on the Task Force Board and been Managing Partner of an ad agency that had put the first and only HIV/AIDS ad on the Super Bowl. She knew the community, she knew messaging, and she knew how to move public opinion.

And together we had time! So we called our friends and offered to relocate to California for 3 months and volunteer full time if they wanted us. And so we moved – with the cat and the dog – into a basement – and became full time volunteers.

Imagine my surprise and heartbreak when I started making calls and learned that it would be nearly impossible to engage Christians and Christian congregations against Prop 8 except for in pockets and handfuls throughout the State. Except for pockets and handfuls from Hollywood to Sacramento the church was not prepared to take its place on the right side of history and publicly and politically embrace an issue of justice and equality. Not only was the Church not ready to stand up and stand out for justice, but it was the Church that led the fight against us.

Please don't miss my point, whoever you are, rapidly trying to identify which of your congregations were the exception to what I am saying right now. Every denomination, including my own, had exceptions but out of the hundreds of welcoming congregations throughout the state there were only pockets and a handful here and there ready and willing to roll up their sleeves and get to work.

It told me then and it tells me now that while the welcoming and affirming movements had provided sanctuary, and even engaged some of their members in the struggle for justice within their denominations, they were not ready to engage in a justice issue in the public square on either their own behalf or the on behalf of others.

This conference, in many ways grew up out of the frustration that came from our inability to rally LGBT people of faith to stand up and be counted in that moment of history. It grew up out of the cultural barriers we discovered between secular activists and people of faith. It grew up out of the barriers we encountered – the different languages we spoke, we certainly did not experience a similar sense of urgency, and we did not share a sense of responsibility for what we must do to help make a just society. And it grew up from the widely circulated and believed myth that Christians are not political.

Can you honestly say that there are no politics in the Church?

Please. Have you ever tried to change the color of the carpet?

Attempted to select a new hymnal? Or tried to introduce inclusive language? Where more than one person is trying to accomplish something - and not using war as their strategy - politics are involved.

I posit that political involvement, by people of faith, in a democracy is not optional – but rather that, especially when matters of equality and justice are at stake, when the tyranny of the majority might do harm to the minority, our active participation, far from being optional, is required.

A quick trip through scripture reminds us that our faithfulness and reverence for God is demonstrated through our actions in community.

In Isaiah 58: 6 – 9a we read:

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

and your healing shall spring up quickly;

the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;

you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here am I.

The prophet chastised the people, not for neglecting their religious rituals, but for their failure to actively participate in the creation and maintenance of a just society. He reminded them that they were ever and always to Believe Out Loud.

In Amos 5: 21 – 24 we read

I hate, I despise your festivals,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them;

And the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals

I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters,

And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Let justice roll down like waters – This is no small task that can be accomplished for believers by secular activists who are willing to talk to voters or draft legislation or rally or make phone calls or circulate petitions. This is not a call for secular activists to get enough of the work done on this justice thing so that it is safe and inviting enough for us believers to enjoy. This is our task – this is ours to do – to Believe Out Loud and do the work required to let loose a flood of justice.

And lest we forget, we hear in Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;

and what does the Lord require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness,

and to walk humbly with your God?

What does the Lord require of you – Well, Micah tells us – It is to Believe Out Loud and to act – to do justice. We hear this same lesson in the gospel of Luke -

Luke 10: 25 – 37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” he said to him, “What is written in the law?” “What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as your self.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a

priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Now Jesus talked about mercy here – not justice, an individual having mercy on a fellow human being and acting to relieve suffering. It is what we must always do when we encounter suffering. And we are also responsible for moving from mercy to

justice – from the individual to the system that causes and/or allows the suffering to occur.

Just imagine if the story continued and the Samaritan organized with his fellow Samaritans, and Jews and Greeks and said there are too many people attacked on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, we need to change that. And together that is exactly what they could have done. Let us be the end of that story and while being merciful continuing to work for and to demand justice.

We are here today because together we are people, every one of us, who can “Believe Out Loud” louder than we have. We must believe in justice, in personal responsibility to do what we can, and we must continue to act. All of us have been using the political process because it is the only one a minority has against a majority that is smugly satisfied with the status quo. God is not about the status quo, especially an unjust one—never has been and never will be. We cannot, dare not be either.

We cannot be satisfied with our comforts—hard won as most of them have been and leave the politicking to someone else. We cannot be satisfied that we are safe and leave someone else to fight another day. We dare not only see the mercy of God—because mercy while directly from the heart of God comforts Matthew Shepherd’s parents, but it does not change the system that left Matthew alone to die. As always, God relies on us to create that change.

There is a story in the Hebrew scriptures – the story of a beautiful Jewish girl who was chosen to be the Queen to a non-Jewish King. We don’t know a lot about her life as Queen – but we do know that this particular royal court was full of intrigue, backstabbing, and dirty politics. The naked ambition of one of the King’s officials culminated, through trickery and bribery, in the issuance of a decree that on a certain day, all Jews would be put to death. Esther’s uncle rushed to the street in front of the palace and sent in

a messenger to beg her to intervene on behalf of her people.

But Esther was afraid. It just wasn't done. Royal protocol dictated that she be summoned into the King's presence. She knew, like all of the King's subjects, that entering the King's presence without being summoned was punishable by death – unless the King showed mercy. And so she sent back a message to Mordecai, her uncle, saying “I cannot do as you ask – I would be risking my life.”

Esther Chapter 4: 12-14

And when Mordecai heard Esther's plea

he did not hesitate to reply

returning her messenger immediately:

Esther, do not think for a moment

silently within yourself

that within the king's palace you are safer

than any other Jew
but if you persist in silence
in waiting

at a time so crucial as this
the Jews will still be delivered, yes
saved in another way, by another hand

but you and your family will pass away
like a moment of truth turned away from—
for you are only yourself for a reason

and who can know if you were not brought
splendidly into favor in the palace
for such a moment like this—of action.

And so Esther fasts and prays for 3 days, along with all the Jews in

the land, and then she entered the King's presence. And he showed mercy. And she saved her people.

We are called to Believe Out Loud. We are called to link arms with others that are working to build a just society. We are called to change our churches as well as our cities and towns. For you are only yourself for a reason...for such a moment like this – of action.

To successfully build a just society that welcomes all of us, requires all of us. To successfully build a just church that welcomes all of us, requires all of us. Open and Affirming needs to meet standards of excellence that mean it is safe to go and be who you are. And we still have a long, long way to go.

But we are on our way, and how can we know that we were not brought splendidly into favor in our faith communities and in the world for such a moment as this, of action?

So go to your tracks today and listen and learn and be curious.

Push through your desire to defend and get to something deeper,
less familiar. That is where we create something new together.

Live in the dissonance, it is what we are asking others to do. And
remember Esther. She was one of us, and she stood up and we are
telling her story even now.

Wherever you are. Whoever you are. Whatever step you are afraid
to take next. Whatever you resist the most. Remember. When we
build bigger teams we make greater gains and the world becomes
safer for all of us and gladdens God's heart. Let your light shine.
Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine.