

David & Jonathan: Promised Love

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I Samuel 18:1-4

Some folks might assume that a liberal church like ours, would want to have LOVE as the theme on the Sunday's surrounding Valentine's Day since (don't-cha know?) the whole secular world is focused on love, romance and Hallmark moments - or are those Kodak moments?

Well, whatever. In any case, I am delighted to bring our attention to the topic of David and Jonathan and their promised love. And Valentine's week or not – LOVE is always a timely message for the community of faith. Probably the very first message that we were given as children in the church was the simple interchangeable phrase: God is Love / Love is God. And surely on the heels of learning that phrase, we were taught in Sunday School the verses of scripture that highlight our need to LOVE each other as we love ourselves. But, loving ourselves in this psychologically complex society seems an increasingly difficult challenge.

We were also taught as kids that to love each other IS, in fact, to LOVE God. OK - so we LOVE God - by loving each other. Well, that seemed easy enough in the beginning when we were small children as many of us were surrounded by well-intentioned, moral, kindhearted Christian people in our churches. And we observed folks caring for each other and making acts of kindness the center of their faith in practice. I know as a child, I started feeling a call to the ministry at a very early age; and clearly, that feeling was motivated by the love that I felt all around me.

The observations that I made of those wonderful people in my childhood country church back in Michigan caused me and my friends to *want* to grow up to be just like them. They taught us our early lessons of spirituality and faith by their loving example. But, while all that LOVE was taking seed inside me I, like every other adolescent, was beginning to have those tingling sensations. Ya know, the feelings nobody ever talked about - the growing awareness that we were sexual beings. Up until then I think I pretty much felt like I suspect most of the other kids felt. But, clearly, I wasn't the same, and though I had no words for it, I knew I was different.

And, in the absence of healthy, positive gay role-models, the culturally negative messages about faggots and perverts were embedding themselves in my young impressionable psyche as they were with all the other gay kids growing up in America, the home of the *Brave*.

Kimeron Hardin, author of *The Gay and Lesbian Self-Esteem Book* writes:

"There are many ways that a religion can be directly and indirectly harmful to gays and lesbians, both as growing children and active adults. The public positions that religious organizations hold about our sexuality can themselves be harmful. While the Pope may be a good and moral man in his own frame of reference, his position that gays and lesbians are morally corrupt is in reality harmful to lesbians and gays. When he teaches that homosexuality is a moral "choice" that is wrong, he in many ways gives license to people who look for justification to act out their frustrations by harming lesbians and gays around the world. This harm may certainly be through direct and violent means, but extends more covertly into their homophobic attitudes. At some level, people who are homophobic or heterocentrist can feel validated in their views by their religious institutions when they hear religious antigay rhetoric. Even though he may try to counteract behaviors such as discrimination, stigmatizing and doing physical harm by teaching his followers to "love the sinner and hate the sin," the Pope's practice of describing homosexuality as a "moral choice" ignores many other forms of information that suggest otherwise. Homosexuality is NOT a choice, but self-acceptance IS."

My friends, the negative messages that we gays and lesbians heard as children are related to the negative feelings that haunt us as developing teenagers and on into our adulthood. And, imagine the confusion and despair that plagues us when LOVE shows up in our lives. Our hearts become filled with beauty, tenderness and joy, while our heads play tapes of perversion. It should then come as no surprise

that our struggle for self-acceptance, self-respect and self-love (which is necessary, Jesus said, to love others and God) creates an enormous crisis of spirit in our minority community.

Hardin may have cited the Pope in his book, but we all know that our own denomination and countless other so-called GOOD Christian people are guilty as hell of using rhetoric promoting the kind of bigotry that has caused self-respect to be a nearly unattainable reality for many people who are gay. Jesus said "love others as much as you love yourself" - this of course assumes that we love ourselves first. Sounds like Jesus probably expected self-love to be our standard - our practice.

Thousands of gay teenagers who soaked in the negative messages preached to them by our society and our churches take their own lives every year, before they ever had the opportunity to bless the world with the incredible beauty and gift that surely they would have become in our midst. What a loss for humanity - what a shameful shadow has darkens our land.

A couple years ago when Emmy Bean was placed by Companis to be a mission worker with the Crisis Clinic Teen Suicide Prevention Program, I was stunned by the information she shared with our Companis team. Did you know that over 90% of gay and lesbian minority youth report that they frequently hear homophobic remarks in their schools? And 36 % of those kids report the remarks come from faculty and school staff.

Twenty percent of secondary school counselors report that counseling a homosexual student concerning gay issues would not be personally gratifying and do not consider themselves competent in counseling gay adolescents. These youth are almost twice as likely to be threatened with or injured by weapons at school. They are more than four times as likely to skip whole days of school simply out of fear of sustaining bodily and/or mental harm.

And some studies report that gay and lesbian minority youth are three times more likely to commit suicide than other youths, and 30% percent of all successful youth suicides are related to issues of sexuality. And while these precious kids are ending their lives, the *great* homosexual debate continues throughout most of Christendom as though winning some theological superiority trophy is of greater importance than ministering to our gay kids.

This travesty is not something that will *eventually* cause the church universal to come to accountability. This travesty is already roosting here, my friends!

IT IS SIN and is distracting us from working together on issues that really matter for the survival of the human race. Rather than the religious right talking about how Satan has us in his thrall for including gays and lesbians in our ministry, could it not be the case that the Religious Right's so-called Satan is using this messy debate to keep Christ's real work of love from being accomplished in our time?

When this sermon goes out on the Internet tonight through the Seattle First Baptist Church website, and we hear from those conservatives (and we will) who claim to have a *special* corner on God's truth, and they start waving Leviticus and Romans in our faces, we must be waiting in love. We should be postured *not* for an argument with them, but with an open door and an open heart. We need to let young lesbian and gay kids know (who, by the way, are on every corner in this neighborhood), that they are essential to the story of life and love for all humanity.

Seattle First Baptist Church has been faithful. You have done a great job over the years. Many sexual and gender minority adults have been blessed by our inclusive community of love. And yes, we can and should celebrate that gift. But, my friends, there is more work to be done.

We must let it be known that Jesus *did* have something to say about gender minorities when he spoke about men who didn't play traditional male roles. In Matthew 19 Jesus says: "For there are some eunuchs which were so born from their mother's womb and there are eunuchs which have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it."

And, while Jesus had nothing to say directly about homosexuality, he had plenty to say about the bigots

and their idle words. In Matthew 15 Jesus says: "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies; these (not those) *these* are the things which defileth a person." Wouldn't you think that for those many Christians who need to be about the business of condemning that they could at least focus on the issues that Jesus *did*, in fact, talk about?

And we better hang on tight for the ride that's ahead. With last Wednesday's ruling by the Supreme Court of Massachusetts that will, by May of this year, provide the right for gay people to marry in that state, and with the President vowing to create national legislation to protect the traditional definition (sanctity) of marriage – thereby appeasing the religious right and saving himself some votes in November - no doubt, you may be sure, that the anti-gay percussion section will begin loudly beating again. And they won't just be little bongos, my friends. This time it will be a huge national orchestra full of enormous tympani, bass drums and cymbals pounding in that mean-spirited, negative anti-gay rhetoric once more.

OK, I'll admit it - these folks get my goat – could you tell? I am tempted to exclude people who exclude people. Think about that one for a moment.

But, lest we get caught in that same trap, there *is* a higher calling for us. Of those whom much is given, much is required. God is *always* calling us to a new place of service. Whenever we think we have arrived at the completion of one task, there sits another path to climb in front of us. And, I believe that one of those new paths for Seattle First Baptist Church will arrive at our door next Sunday afternoon when Diverse Harmony begins meeting in our building for their weekly gatherings.

Diverse Harmony is a one-year-old youth organization. It was the inspiration of a dedicated and concerned public school music teacher, Rhonda Juliano. During the past 20 years, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-gendered and questioning students began confiding in Rhonda. She provided the only space where they felt completely safe and free to be themselves - in her classes.

They talked about their fears, isolation, loneliness and depression. Her years as a church choir director and her personal sense of call, led Rhonda to form Diverse Harmony - a gay/straight alliance - a chorus - where these kids have since found safe haven, friendship and affirmation. They finally have a healthy alternative to the many destructive paths that gay kids so often walk in the absence of good choices.

Last night, my partner, John and I joined Heather and Jill from our church at the Diverse Harmony Concert. It was very moving – very powerful! Their message literally moved us to tears. And, this past Thursday evening, I had the joy of attending one of their rehearsals. I met Jason and Carol and Sedrick. These kids take buses from as far away as North Everett and Tacoma, just to share in the fellowship and safe haven that Diverse Harmony provides. And most of the kids still can't believe that a church (especially a Baptist Church) is actually willing to offer them a place to call home each week. So, I am pleased that our building can be a resource for them.

And on March 1, Brook Stanford, the now retired, KOMO-TV People Helper will become a Companis Mission Worker serving Diverse Harmony as its community outreach director. Brook will be traveling a three-county area informing high school counselors of the great resource Diverse Harmony can be for gay youth in their schools who are searching for direction in life.

But opening our doors and providing a Companis mission worker is only the beginning of what this church can do. Having a couple of weekly hosts from the congregation (maybe with a plate of cookies) would be a great idea. Telling our friends, neighbors and colleagues about Diverse Harmony might raise awareness, inviting Diverse Harmony to sing for us from time to time, supporting the kids by attending their public concerts, and generally becoming aware of the needs and concerns of sexual minority youth. All these actions will create a new and loving energy that will spread the news that the *promised love* of our inclusive Christ is for kids like me and kids like Jason and Carol and Sedrick.

Now I have to make a confession. A few months ago when I was asked by the worship planning team to preach this sermon about David and Jonathan and their promised love, my first reaction was that one of the straight ministers should preach it. I thought that they would have more credibility, more objectivity and would be less prone to bias.

And in those weeks, when it was just bumping around in my mind, before I actually began writing the sermon, I decided that I would *only* use the story of David and Jonathan as a launching pad for a discussion with you about how the real central message of the I Samuel text was of course about *LOVE!* And that the same-sex romantic love between David and Jonathan, outlined in the text, was of secondary importance.

But then last week, I finally read the text! I read the story of Jonathan's love for David with new eyes and suddenly found myself crying on the living-room floor in the middle of my morning meditation.

I realize now, looking back, that I was subconsciously avoiding the complete story in this text. My own internalized homophobia was influencing me. The power of self-doubt and lack of self-respect that is mostly an old pattern for me now, had reared its ugly head again. That morning in our living room what happened to me was this: after all these years, I finally found myself in the Bible. I had never seen me, the gay Craig, on those pages before. And once I moved beyond my own tears that morning, I realized – WOW! That is the message here: *we are that story*. God didn't forget to include us after all!!!

Gay and lesbian kids have been searching for themselves in the Bible for eons and people like you and I must show them that their story *is* written on those pages. We must celebrate their love for each other and not permit those who would condemn them, to be the loudest voice. It's not enough to just tell gay kids that God loves them. They must be convinced by our actions that they belong and that their story matters and that when they fall in love, God honors the sacred beauty being experienced by them in their souls, in their minds and in their bodies - just like David and Jonathan.

They need to know you, by name!

You need to know them, by name!

David and Jonathan had *promised love* for each other. Listen to their beautiful love story:

Sometime after David had slain the giant Goliath, he met Jonathan. And, after David had finished talking to King Saul, who was Jonathan's father, the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David and Jonathan loved David as his own soul. And that very day, King Saul refused to let David return to his own father's home. It was then that Jonathan and David made a covenant, because they loved each other as their own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of his robe and gave it to David along with his other garments, his sword, his bow and his girdle.

But you see, David's worldly achievements made King Saul jealous. And, therefore he caused his daughter, Michal, to wed David in order that he might seek control over David's increasing public popularity. And even though the king's daughter, Michal, loved David, nowhere does it state that David loved her. But at the same time, the scripture reaffirms that David loved Jonathan as himself.

Later, King Saul tried to kill David and David fled to Jonathan saying: "What have I done? What is my sin before your father that he seeks to kill me?" And David warns Jonathan that his father knows that they are lovingly connected for Saul had told David not to tell Jonathan, lest he be grieved. But Jonathan said: "David, whatsoever thy soul desires, I will even do it for thee."

Then they discuss what to do about King Saul and leave each other for the sake of Jonathan's safety. But, as they depart, again they make a covenant with each other because of their deep abiding love. They planned another meeting so that David could be warned by Jonathan of Saul's intent. Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan, and he said to Jonathan: "Thou son of the perverse rebellious woman, I know that you have chosen David to thine own confusion, and unto the confusion of thy mother's nakedness. And, as long as David is alive, you shall not be established nor start thy kingdom and family.

Then King Saul concluded his rant at Jonathan by saying: "Wherefore now send and fetch David unto

me, for he shall surely die."

So, of course, Jonathan warned David of Saul's intention, and they once again reaffirmed their covenant of love. David fell on his face to the ground and bowed three times toward Jonathan. They kissed one another and wept with one another until David exceeded. And Jonathan said to David: go in peace, for we have sworn both of us in the name of the Lord, saying: "The Lord be between me and thee, and between my seed and thy seed forever." Then Jonathan went into the city.

Some time later, when David learned of the death of Saul and Jonathan in battle, David said: "I am distressed for thee, Jonathan. Very pleasant hast thou been unto me. Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.

My friends, Jonathan LOVED David. David LOVED Jonathan.

Their promised love mattered not only to them long ago, but it matters to many of us today. Because by telling this story over and over again, it brings to life and hope God's Promised Love for us ALL.