

Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

PRESENTATION FOR LAITY SUNDAY

MAY 31, 2010

“A TALE OF TWO CHURCHES

by John Hawkins

How do you know you have been touched by God? When do you know you have been called by God to act out your faith? This is a story about two churches, one in Missoula, and one in Corvallis. The year was 1987 and our “little brown church in the dell” was doing very well, thank-you. We were completing the construction of Gatton Hall, and the financing for it was in good order thanks to the generosity and faithfulness of our members, as well as a great plan designed by the “Expansion Committee.” Consequently, when I was asked to fill out the vacated term of Vice-Moderator, soon-to-be Moderator, I said “yes.” I mean, how can you say “no, I’m too busy”, when the current Moderator was John Erkkila. I don’t think so.

Subsequent to my “yes” response, our Associate Minister resigned to become co-pastor of a church in Albany. No problem. We elected a great Search Committee consisting of Mark Esary, Gina Massoni, Mike Huntington, Bill Johnson, Mildred Gathercoal, Josh Hadfield, Marge Young, Gloria Buckley, Betty Johnson, and co-chairs Jill Emigh and Russ Youmans. Senior Minister Greg Turner served as an ex-officio member, as did I as Moderator. I thought, “Hey, smooth sailing from here to a ‘call’ sermon and vote.”

To make a long story somewhat shorter, the Committee quickly narrowed the field of candidates to five. At this point we met with the Conference Minister for the purpose of identifying any “red flags.” Who knew about red flags? We soon became more informed than maybe we wanted. One of the top candidates had revealed on her profile, that she was in a “Covenantal Relationship.” It was explained to us that she was committed to someone of the same sex. Well, how about that? Remember, this was 23 years ago. However, the committee did not let that be a barrier, and Wendy was one of the three candidates we invited to be interviewed. She was head and shoulders above the other two candidates. On a nine to two vote, the committee selected Wendy as its choice to present to the congregation.

During the interview process, Wendy mentioned she had experienced a painful process in Missoula when the Search Committee selected her as their Associate Minister candidate to recommend to the congregation. Prior to her introduction to the congregation by the Search Committee, the information regarding her sexual orientation and committed relationship was revealed. The subsequent controversy led the committee to rescind its decision.

After our interview with Wendy she asked that, if we recommended her, that we complete the entire process, including a vote. Completing the process was as important to her as a favorable “call.” Our committee made the commitment to her that we would do so.

In September of 1987, before our Search Committee had the opportunity to present Wendy as our candidate—acknowledging her sexual orientation—it became known to the entire congregation.

Crisis time. The funding for Gatton Hall, the ongoing operation of the Church, and the potential deep division of the congregation was on the line. The Search Committee began to question their decision to recommend Wendy.

Again, moving over much important input and faithful contemplation by a number of people, the Search Committee was reminded of its earlier commitment to Wendy. It was also made known to the Committee that the church bylaws permitted the Moderator to call a Congregational meeting and that it would be done, if necessary, to honor our commitment to Wendy. Eventually, we did go through a rigorous week-long process of gatherings to meet Wendy and her life partner, Ellen; and subsequent to Wendy's "call" sermon, we held the congregational meeting to vote on her candidacy for the Associate Minister's position. The vote was 123 to 123, and we were not able to call her. In December of 1991, four years after that vote, Lois Van Leer was overwhelmingly called to become our Minister to Youth. I am convinced that would not have been possible without the vote we took in 1987; it was a defining moment for this congregation, and we "shook the dust off our sandals" and moved forward. Many in the Missoula Church were upset that the decision had been removed from them, and that congregation struggled for many years before finding stability in the employment of ordained staff.

The many gifts of our faithful lesbian and gay members to me as an individual and to us as a faith community are too many to list. I simply say "Thank you for choosing to be part of our faith journey." Thanks to Wendy for living her life with faith, courage, and integrity. And "thank you" to those who may not have been able to vote for Wendy in 1987 but, for whom, this was—and still is—their church.

How do you know you have been touched by God? When do you know you have been called to do God's business? Well, I know I was touched by God and heeded what I perceived to be God's call right here—in this place—in 1987. Thanks be to God.

Laity Sunday 2010
by Marion Whitney

In 1987 I was praying for a miracle. Our son was fighting for his life. My husband, who has bipolar disorder, was manic and out of control with grief. I came here and for one hour of the week I found solace. I found friendly faces, music for the soul, and lessons of faith from the pulpit. I knew our gay son was welcome here. I was infused with courage to face the following week. I joined the church in 1987, but as a very disturbed person at the time, I contributed nothing, but absorbed the faith and love of others, without their knowing it.

Our son had hemophilia, and had been infused with infected blood and contracted HIV. At that time the medical profession did not know much about treating a person with AIDS, and there was a lot of superstition and fear about the condition. We did not talk much about it outside of the home. My husband was acting in a very irresponsible manner, and I was embarrassed to talk to

anyone about what was happening. Our healthy gay son stood by and was a comfort to me as I struggled daily with the care of our son, often in the absence of a very sick husband. Our son had not come out to the community so I was careful not to talk about him. I was living with a lot of secrets.

At one time when I was afraid and desperate, I called Nancy Klingeman to come over to sit with me. She does not remember this, but I have fuzzy notions that I went through the church directory looking for someone to be with me. Nancy came to mind, although I could not remember her last name at first. Remember what Liz said, "Showing compassion is 90 per cent showing up." And Nancy, you did show up.

About the same time Nancy Orcutt invited me and a couple of women to her house. We were all working through some difficulties in our lives. We shared and discussed scriptures, readings, ideas, books, and we talked about our spiritual journeys. I asked at one time if anyone believed in miracles, and one person replied, "Oh, yes I do." That response lifted me for a short while, and I continued to pray for a miracle that would make our son well.

Sometime later Nancy started the Spirituality group. Seven of us met each month, and together we explored our spiritual journeys. Each month we had a theme, a subject for which we read specific scripture, articles pertaining to the subject and questions for us to think about and answer. Some of our subjects were: Greed, Patience, Mercy, Grace, Criticism, and Praise. My intellect was challenged and my spirit was nourished.

I came to my first PFLAG meeting here at this church. That is Parents, Friends, and Family of Lesbians and Gays. Through this group I learned about understanding and supporting our gay and lesbian sisters and brothers, sons and daughters. I learned to be brave, and I found the courage to speak out in a sometimes hostile environment. I walked in the Gay Pride parade in Portland, proudly holding the PFLAG banner with John and Ann Hawkins. There were folks of all ages there: mothers, fathers, grandmas, grandpas, and little children, also six foot queens in very elegant gowns. When we started marching I thought, "What am I doing here?", but we turned the corner and I heard a great uproar. People on the sidewalk stood and applauded and cheered for us. It was a very emotional time for me. My son came out from the crowd and walked with me. I believe everyone should have a standing ovation once in a lifetime. I have had mine!

I did not get the miracle I prayed for. I did get miracles that changed my life. With excellent medical help my husband is now fine. And I found this church, and through all of you I found my faith renewed, and the courage to get through a very difficult time. I survived.

I'd like to end with a poem:

Miracles 2010

Where are the miracles today?
Where is the healing of the sick,
The raising of the dead, the curing of the insane?
The water into wine, where is that well?
Show me a sign, the doubter prays,
A burning bush, a lightning strike,
A dream perhaps, a Jacob's ladder,
A voice in the wilderness, or maybe a vision.

The doubter ponders the mysteries of life
And looks to her faith for answers.
Where are the signs, she wants to know.
Are there miracles now as there were before?

The sunflower reaches for the sun.
The spider weaves its web.
The Blue Jay scolds in the Oak.
And she is looking for miracles.

A job is lost. A life is found.
Brother talks to brother,
A tall boy smiles, a little girl hugs her.
And she is looking for miracles.

"Alleluia" the choir sings,
The peace of God be with you,
And she bows her head in prayer,
"Thanks be for the miracle of life."

Amen