

“Compassion at the Intersection”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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One hundred and four years ago, President Woodrow Wilson designated this date, June 14, as Flag Day. The holiday commemorates the adoption of the flag of the United States on June 14, 1777 by resolution of the Second Continental Congress. The Revolutionary War had begun two years prior in 1775. Before the adoption of the first U.S. flag, the various militias flew the flags of their particular colony during battles with the British Army. The idea for having one flag for all of the colonial fighters was to provide a heightened sense of unity. It was thought that increased unity would be beneficial when the newly formed Continental Army went up against the well organized British troops.

Unity is sorely needed in our country today. We are no longer at war with troops of a foreign power on this land. Yet there are many battles occurring—battles for rights which were set out in this country’s founding documents. And today the U.S. flag is not providing the unity that is needed or for which it was intended. We are at a pivotal time today. A time that I hope will lead us to more compassion, more justice and eventually equity for all. That is my hope. Only the future will tell whether that hope becomes a reality.

Some people who have been denied basic rights, in particular people of color, have adopted actions such as kneeling during the National Anthem to express their concerns. People who have been seeking equal rights for those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer have taken a different approach. Instead of taking actions directly related to the U.S. flag, this group has adopted a flag that they believe better represents and includes them. Any of you who have been in the social hall at church in the past year have likely seen such a flag. We have one hanging on the wall by the kitchen. In the not-too-distant future we hope to install a flagpole in front of the building where we can fly a modified version of this flag for all who pass by to see.

The “rainbow flag,” as it is sometimes called, was created by Gilbert Baker at the urging of Harvey Milk. The rainbow flag was first displayed on June 25, 1978 at the “Gay Freedom Day” parade in San Francisco. It was estimated that over 200,000 people turned out for the parade that year. Harvey Milk, who was very open about being a gay man, was on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors at the time. Five months later Milk and Mayor George Moscone were assassinated by a former member of the city’s Board of Supervisors. June, by the way, is gay pride month.

People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer have experienced prejudice, discrimination and persecution from the dominant culture of this country since Europeans first began settling here. As far back as the 1600’s laws were enacted that made certain sexual acts between consenting adults illegal. In Virginia, the maximum punishment for violating one such law was death. Whether or not such laws were enforced, they have posed a significant threat to people whose sexual identity and sexual behavior have been considered to be abnormal and unacceptable by many people in the dominant culture. I want to be very clear here. I am not saying the behavior covered by such laws was or is abnormal or unacceptable. What I am saying is that those who have had the most influence and power in this country’s history have sought to restrict the rights of those who didn’t fit neatly into their perceptions of how a person should feel, act, look or be.

It has taken hundreds of years for such laws and attitudes to change in this country. In my lifetime, people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer have worked tirelessly to get oppressive laws overturned and anti-discrimination laws enacted in their place. The very first anti-discrimination law intended to protect the rights of those who identify as lesbian or gay was enacted in East Lansing, Michigan in 1972. At the time the law was adopted I was an undergraduate student at Michigan State University, which is partly within the East Lansing city limits. In the spring of 1971 I was involved in a situation that the yet to be established law was created to address.

I was in my freshman year that spring and living in the dorm. Growing up in a small town hadn’t prepared me for my time in the dorm. There were about 1/3 as many people in my dorm, which covered less than half a city block, as there were in the small town I called home. Almost everyone in

the dorm was 25 or younger. The dorm residents came from every part of Michigan, from many states of the nation, and a few residents were from other countries. It was in the dorm that I first met someone who openly identified as gay. This person lived in the room right next to mine. The two rooms shared a very small bathroom that connected them. This arrangement of two very small rooms and a shared bathroom had a very appealing and upscale name. It was called a suite. It was definitely not an appealing or an upscale arrangement however. Two roommates shared one 10 foot by 12 foot room. The residents of one room referred to the people in the other room as suite mates.

One day, when all four of us were together in my suite mates' room, an incident occurred that could have lead to a very bad outcome. While the four of us were having a lively conversation, my gay suite mate touched me in a manner and in a place on my body that he shouldn't have. I had witnessed and experienced touching that was similar to this incident numerous times in my young life. I had even witnessed such touching while living in the dorm. It had been my experience growing up that young males would sometimes inappropriately touch other young males to show dominance. As someone who has always been slight of build, there were times when other young males would let me know they had more power than I did by touching me to see if I would put up resistance. But I could tell this particular touch wasn't a show of dominance. It was different somehow, and I felt very uncomfortable about it. I let my suite mate know that I didn't like what he was doing and that I didn't want him to do it again. He apologized, expressed remorse and let me know it wouldn't ever occur again. With that, I thought the situation was over and done. That was what I thought. The touching ended but the situation continued to develop.

The following day the Resident Advisor on the floor said he needed to talk with me. He asked if I could meet him in his room so we could have a talk in private. This was a first for me. I hadn't ever been summoned to the Resident Advisor's room. It reminded me of the one time in high school that I got called to the Principal's office. I was apprehensive as I entered his room. He began the discussion by stating that he had been informed about the incident the day before involving my suite mate and me. I was surprised to discover that someone in the room that day felt a need to tell the Resident Advisor about what had occurred. I didn't know how to respond or what to say. Before I could say anything the Resident Advisor informed me that he would gladly have my suite mate expelled from the dorm and restricted from university housing. All that was needed was for me to tell him that was what I wanted to happen. His statement stunned me. I couldn't believe what had just been said. My response was quick, clear and decisive. "No, I don't want that to happen," I replied. With that response it seemed like the tables had been turned. The Resident Advisor seemed surprised and didn't know what to say next. I went on to tell him I felt my suite mate and I had come to an understanding and I trusted that understanding would be honored. The Resident Advisor reluctantly accepted my answer while letting me know that if I changed my mind, or if another situation came up, I should let him know and he would take immediate action.

I left that brief and troubling discussion knowing that I had just practiced what my parents had taught me, namely, to think of how my action would affect another person. I had imagined myself having acted inappropriately in some situation and as a result being expelled from the dorm and university housing. That would have put an end to college for me I am sure. I say that because I wouldn't have known how to find alternative housing. And I didn't have the money to pay for other housing even if I had been able to find some.

This incident brought me to an intersection on my life's path. I could have decided to follow the narrow path I had come to know so well growing up in my home town. That path would have led me to shun anyone who didn't seem to fit conveniently into my perspective of the world and how it should be. Instead, I chose a much broader, more inclusive and yet far less defined path, a path that was based in the values my parents had taught me. I am grateful that my parents, in their own way, taught me to have compassion for everyone I encounter. At some point or points in our lives all of us have come to an intersection where we had to choose between the path we were familiar with and a path that would take us to new levels of awareness and expanded openness to ways and perspectives unknown to us before. This nation, it seems to me, is at such an intersection today.

So on this Flag Day, it is my hope that the people of this country can find their way to an intersection similar to the one I just alluded to. As I stated earlier, unity is sorely needed in our country today. By unity I am not suggesting that everyone needs to think alike, feel alike, look alike or act alike. That isn't unity, it is conformity. In order to really have unity there must be diversity—diversity of belief, feelings, looks and actions. Unity arises when a person is able to perceive that each person they encounter is different than themselves and at the same time that every person shares a common humanity.

While flags are important symbols—symbols that may unite, motivate and educate—the flags we identify with cannot accomplish what is needed in our country and around the world. Only we can do that. What matters more than the symbols we identify with is how we are able to recognize, appreciate and respect the common spark of life that is in each and every one of us.

As we go forth, may we carry our spark into the world and share it with others, just as the young girl in our Story for All Ages did with the fruit of the kiss she had planted. Through sharing our spark and by practicing compassion, this country and this world can become a gentler, kinder, more considerate place for all of us to live. A place where everyone enjoys the benefits of equal rights. A place where justice is the rule for all, not just for some. And a place where we can live in peace with one another. That is what I want our flag to stand for, our country to strive towards and our world to someday achieve. That is my hope and my prayer on this Flag Day.

So may it be.