



Sermon preached by Revd Dr Carla Grosch-Miller on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2022

Readings: *Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11*

## LGBT History Month

*I am what I am: beloved, forgiven, free*

Our readings this morning are about vocation and being. In the first, the prophet Isaiah has a vision that is the moment of his commissioning as a prophet (*Here I am, Lord*). In the second, the apostle Paul writes about the foundation of his calling as an apostle (*unfit, but by the grace of God redeemed*). Finally in the gospel, we are given a picture of the fulfilment of human being when yoked to the divine (without God, empty nets; with God, full to bursting).

Vocation is a big word. It comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, name, invoke. It is often used to signify a sense of calling to ministry. But its meaning is far broader and deeper. It is about living truthfully into who we are. It is about the fulfilment of being in the deepest sense of the word.

The inspiration for today's service is a line from Paul's letter *By the grace of God, I am what I am*, bringing to mind the song that swept the disco scene in the 1980's and became an anthem, Gloria Gaynor's *I am what I am*. If you are of a certain age, you may have sweat-drenched memories of it. 😊 It is a proclamation of the power of authentic being and self-acceptance. With a driving beat, compelling lyrics and a fabulous callout at the end – I am good, I am strong, I am worthy, I belong; I am useful, I am true, I am somebody, I am as good as you – you can see the appeal. It's like a booster jab, delivering immunity from the toxic shame and belittlement the LGBT community long suffered. We can't play it this morning but you'll hear a riff on the tune after the sermon.

It is one thing to feel good and empowered on the dance floor. It's a whole other thing to hold one's head up day to day in a world that still struggles to accept and bless lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people. We've made important legal strides in the UK in recent decades: decriminalisation, anti-discrimination legislation, equal marriage (despite opposition from some parts of the church). But still there is ignorance, prejudice and violence here. And we know there are other places in the world where people are hounded, hunted, imprisoned or murdered simply for being who they are.

Yes, it is a whole other thing to be oneself when one's context is not too keen on it. That's why safe communities and relationships where we can be ourselves and experience ourselves as acceptable are so important. *An old Hasidic tale tells of a disciple who asked his rabbi the meaning of **community** one evening, when they were all sitting around a fire. The rabbi sat in silence while the fire died down to a pile of glowing coals. Then he got up and took one coal out from the pile and set it apart on the stone hearth. Its fire and warmth soon died out.*<sup>1</sup>

I teach and write in the area of trauma. One of the most important things I have learned in my research is that the human species is profoundly relational. We are made for one another. Connection to other human beings *nourishes us in a literal, physiological way, regulating our heart rates, boosting our immune systems, modulating our stress responses. We literally sicken*

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<sup>1</sup> Newmark, H.B. (1994) *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*. Boston: Beacon Press, p. 61. Referenced by Dunham, Robert E. (2010) "Ephesians 1:11-23" in Bartlett, D. and Brown Taylor, B. (eds.) *Feasting on the Word*, year C volume 4, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 233.

*and die without connection.*<sup>2</sup> What the physiology of the human being tells me is that we are made for love. We thrive in relationships of mutual care and respect; we shrivel when neglected or abused. Being made for love is a theological statement of the highest order. Our vocation is to love; it is where we find the fulfilment of our being.

This understanding is reflected in the Zulu concept of Ubuntu, which you heard about last Sunday. The late beloved Archbishop Desmond Tutu spoke of Ubuntu as the essence of being human – to be in relationship, open, affirming, available, recognising our essential interdependence, knowing that what diminishes one diminishes all. With the pandemic and ecological crises, we now know that to be true for the whole earth: our connection is with all of life, all of the planet. Our vocation is to love all of it.

It's not an easy vocation, to love it all. The world is a scary place, as well we know. And our love is always imperfect. There is a tension between being open and available and protecting oneself, times when one or the other must take precedence. Nourishing communities can give us what we need to engage a larger, more challenging world.

But in these days of great polarisation and cancel culture, we are aware that communities can also create a closed loop that perpetuates fear and maybe even falsehood. To some extent we all live in comfortable bubbles: our mates read the same kinds of newspapers, engage the same media, hold roughly the same views on the important things. Having an open heart towards those who hold very different views can be very difficult – with the result that our polarisation broadens, the fierceness of self-righteousness preventing the kind of conversation that can teach us how to live in a diverse world.

I come from a conservative evangelical Republican family. From an early age I had a different sensibility. Mostly I kept quiet – avoided the hot topics: religion, politics, race, sex. There is an anger management deficit in my family line; I had to lay low for safety and sanity. In 1996 I took a post as senior minister in Oak Park, a multiracial urban community on the western edge of Chicago; my parents were living in northern Wisconsin, 6 hours away. Early in my ministry the church, after a long period of education, discussion and discernment, recognised a vocation to be open and affirming to lesbian, gay and bisexual people (transgendered people weren't on our radar at that time). One of my parents' friends was the former postmaster of Oak Park and still took the local papers. So my parents knew a lot more about my church and my work than I would ever have told them. I credit my dad with starting the conversations we had over the years. The first one began with *Well, honey, you know, smart people need church too. We may not understand what you are doing but we are proud of you.* The last conversation – just months before he died 7 years ago – began out of nowhere with him saying *this thing about nuptials.* (He couldn't say 'same-sex marriage' but I knew what he was talking about). I took a deep breath and ventured to explain my support for same-sex marriage in the gentlest of ways. He said, *You know when we were growing up it was all so different. It's really difficult to try to change. I don't think I can go this far.* It was one of the most civil conversations we'd ever had about a 'hot' topic. We both took the risk of being and revealing our authentic selves.

Being our authentic selves, not hiding. By the grace of God, I am what I am. Here I stand.

Every 4-5 years I re-read this little gem of a book, Parker Palmer's *Let your life speak: Listening for the voice of vocation.*<sup>3</sup> In his second chapter 'Now I become myself', he talks about how the great movements that transform the world *emerge from the lives of people who decide to*

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<sup>2</sup> Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski, 2019, *Burnout: The secret to solving the stress cycle* (London: Vermilion), p. 134.

<sup>3</sup> Parker J. Palmer (2000) *Let your life speak: Listening for the voice of vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.), chapter 2 "Now I become myself", 'Selfhood, society, and service' pp. 30-36.

*care for their authentic selfhood.* He writes of a moment of existential truth, of reclaiming the birthright gift of being who we are, not who the dominant culture says we should be. Suffragettes demanding the vote; Rosa Parks not moving to back of the bus; gay and lesbian activists around the world... women and men who dare to be who they are transform the world.

The journey to becoming who we really are is the journey of life. It takes us toward the place of discovering our vocation, the place where – in the words of Frederick Buechner – our deep gladness meets the world’s deep need. Isn’t that marvellous? Joy and authenticity tell us we are on the path; the gift of who we are is what we were born to give to the world. Our vocation is where our deep joy meets the world’s deep need. Our being is meant to be a gift to the world.

Back to this morning’s scripture readings: we are given clues about the journey of becoming. Isaiah: Awe; humility. We are not the centre of the universe; it is something far greater that calls us into fulness of being. Paul: Acceptance; forgiveness. We are all flawed; some of us have done some rotten things, maybe all of us. In Christ we are met in mercy and lifted in love. Luke: We have choice. Saying yes to God, listening for the still, small voice of love, we are led into abundance – of life and love, of peace and power and possibility.

At its best, the Christian community is a place where the journey of becoming is nourished and accompanied; a place where the dignity and authenticity of the person – each one made in the image of God – is held tenderly, acknowledged and affirmed; a place where we are challenged and comforted, lest we become stuck in a bubble and blinded by self-righteousness, lest we suffer alone. In the community of Christ, we are swept into the great flow of the Love that is God, finding in the Great I Am that we are good, we are strong, we are worthy, we belong. We are useful, we are true, we are somebody, as good as every other somebody.

Thanks be to God for the love that will not let us go, that grows us up into who we are – a gift to the world –, and grants us courage and peace. We dance on. Amen.

Carla Grosch-Miller

6th February 2022