

## **Grace-Healed Eyes**

Matthew 22:1-10, Philippians 4:1-7 By Patty Friesen (Oct. 15/23)

I spent some time at a family reunion this summer with an aunt and uncle from Tennessee and enjoyed their Southern colloquialisms, like “y’all coming to breakfast?” Y’all can mean an individual or a group. When Southerners want to invite the whole neighbourhood over for breakfast, they say, “All y’all come over for breakfast now.” Our gospel reading this morning from Matthew 22 is about all y’all. Jesus tells a striking and troubling story in which all the invited guests to a wedding at the last minute refuse to come, so the host rounds up a host of street people, who find themselves guests at a wedding feast they had never dreamed of attending. The story circulated widely in early Christianity in various forms as a shaping story. The invitation may have originally been intended for the “chosen” people of Israel and then extended to non-Jewish Gentiles but now the invitation is extended to everyone imaginable. Those who are “gathered in” are both bad and good.

Philip Yancey in his books we’ve been using this fall, *What’s So Amazing About Grace*, writes about his Christian gay friend, Mel. “My friendship with Mel has strongly challenged my notion of how grace should affect my attitude toward different people, even when those differences are serious and perhaps unresolvable. I learned from Mel that homosexuality is not the casual lifestyle choice I had blithely assumed it to be. As Mel spells out in his memoir *Stranger at the Gate*, he felt same sex attraction from adolescence, tried hard to repress those longings and as an adult fervently sought a “cure.” He fasted, prayed and was anointed with oil for healing. He went through exorcism rites led by Protestants and Catholics. He signed up for aversion therapy. For a time, chemical treatments left him drugged and barely coherent. Above all else, Mel wanted desperately not to be gay.”

At Mel's request I attended the first gay march on Washington, in 1987. As I stood on the sidelines, I watched an angry confrontation between Christian protestors with their signs of hell-fire and brimstone and Christian marchers singing Jesus Loves Me, This I know." The stark ironies of this Christian face-off was striking. One side of Christianity defending their biblical understandings and confessions of faith and the other side of Christianity singing of Jesus' love.

Gay Christians explained to me, "We get such hatred and rejection from the church that there's no reason for gays to bother with church at all unless you really do believe the gospel of Jesus is true." Most people there could tell hair-raising tails of rejection, hatred and persecution. Most had been bullied and half had been disowned by their families. I left Washington with my head reeling. I had attended packed-out worship services marked by fervent singing, praying and testifying all oriented around what the Christian church has always taught to be a sin. Also, I could sense my friend Mel edging closer and closer to a choice that I knew would blow his life apart with divorcing his wife and losing his ministry in order to begin a scary new life. He thought he had to be celibate and that made him very lonely - or was there space in scripture for a committed monogamous relationship? It occurred to me that my life would be so much simpler if I hadn't met Mel. But he was my friend. What would grace have me do? What would Jesus do?

My friendship with Mel has taught me much about grace. On the surface the word may seem like the fuzzy tolerance of liberalism: can't everybody just tolerate everybody? Grace is different, though. Traced back to its theological roots, it includes an element of self-sacrifice, a cost. Such profound differences in our understandings of our biological makeup and God's part in that, form a kind of crucible of grace even between Christians. Some of us must grapple with how to treat fundamentalists who have wounded us in the past. Still others contend with the

arrogance of the politically correct...All of us need forgiveness and grace-healed eyes to see the potential in others for the same grace that God has so lavishly bestowed on us.” (p. 164-166, 172, 174, 175 Yancey)

Most of us have had our eyes opened by our relationships with 2SLGBTQ+ friends and family members. In fact, some of us have wondered why we have so many gay kids in our families at Osler Mennonite. Is there something in the Osler water? Whether it is Osler water or God’s trying to work with us, our family members and church members have forced us to try to understand and accept them and have by their courage, shaped the theology and culture of our church. Not that we all approve or even get it but we’re trying to hang in there with them.

Peter Lippeman and his partner Lyle Weber were here a couple of weeks ago for Faspas and Conversations and Peter’s story is quite similar to Mel White’s and I use it with permission. Peter was a Pentecostal minister on Vancouver Island, married with 3 children and also struggling with his sexuality. He pled with God on his knees to take away his orientation and heard God say, “Before you knew me, I formed you in the womb,” with the powerful words of love from the prophet Isaiah.

Peter’s ex-wife outted Peter and he lost his job and family and exiled, had to move back to Saskatchewan and live on his sister’s acreage south of Saskatoon. He felt abandoned by God and family and friends. Every morning at his sister’s house when he opened his curtains on the acreage south of the city, what did he see but the church steeple of Pleasant Point Mennonite Church and he realized he missed church. He noticed Pleasant Point needed their fence fixed around the cemetery so he fixed that and met Pastor Harry Harder and asked if he could come to church even if he was gay and Pastor Harry wryly said, “Sure, as long as you are not asking me out on a date!”

On Sundays, Peter would wait outside church until announcements were over and then slip in the back pew and then hightail it out before the benediction but one Sunday a church lady beat him to the back door and ran interception and invited him for lunch and so Peter became accepted by the congregation. Peter officially joined Pleasant Point and was becoming openly Christian again while being openly gay. As time would have it - he met Lyle while volunteering at Out Saskatoon and they both found a common story of struggle and loss and found a companionship that eased their loneliness but how would Pleasant Point feel about that? Peter brought Lyle to church and the biggest farmer, came up to Lyle with his big hand to shake Lyle's hand and said, "So you're Peter's...., Peter's...." The poor guy didn't have a word for it so Lyle said, "partner." Partner, the big farmer echoed relieved.

Peter believes in marriage and monogamous commitment so again asked Harry if he would marry them in the church and Harry went to every congregation to ask about it and they all said yes and all showed up to the wedding and the wedding banquet - quite like the blow out feast in our gospel reading today where everyone came. It's quite a touching story. For me what is remarkable isn't so much that Peter and Lyle are gay and married but that they are actively Mennonite and are deeply involved at both Pleasant Point and Wildwood and attended our Outdoor Service at the Buhlers this summer with their friends from Pleasant Point.

It's not easy to be gay and Mennonite. It's been a 40 year tug of war in the Mennonite Church between the Confession of Faith and its stand on heterosexual marriage only and our growing experience of faithful gay Mennonites and their desires to be in marriage and raise families. Finally, after 40 years of this conflict, Mennonite Church USA voted last year by a slim margin to stop pulling pastoral credentials for performing gay weddings and finally has apologized for how it has treated ministers, congregations and gay Mennonites. That apology has

split Mennonite Church USA in half. We have less national church drama in Canada but congregations continue to leave conferences, like Laird Mennonite leaving MC SK over discrepancies in scripture interpretation. It's painful to part ways but we have got to find a way through these issues for the sake of our young people.

Here's an email I just received. Hello Pastor Patty - I am a bisexual person, 22 years old and in my final year of university. I am also a Christian and believe deeply in the love of Jesus Christ. I was looking online to see if there was someone I could connect with to speak about sexuality and faith, and I saw that your Church married a gay couple almost 10 years ago on CBC news, and that you are the pastor. I am familiar with the Mennonite church, having attended Rosthern Junior College for my high school. I loved the inclusivity of RJC, it has deeply shaped me as a person. The Mennonite faith at RJC impacted me deeply, coming from a Catholic family I never had experienced deep acceptance and inclusiveness until going to that school. I would love to meet with you as I understand you are the Osler Mennonite Church pastor. I am struggling deeply with my faith as I am gay, but I also love Jesus. If you are able to meet, please let me know. What do we do with these young people? What would grace have us do? Can we be a supportive community for them like Pleasant Point Mennonite Church was for Peter and Lyle?

I remember the sermon I preached about gay marriage after Matt and Craig's wedding 9 years ago - I was so nervous my voice shook through the whole thing. My voice shakes less now but I still feel the need to speak into this intersection of grace and the personal experience of Mennonite gay friends and family. And even more than that sometimes I feel the need to be more of an advocate for them and participate in Pride. I'm still learning. I still don't get all this 2SLGBTQ+ stuff which is why Community Connections are working to build understanding

with our gay/transgendered Mennonite community through guest speakers and discussions at our monthly faspa and conversations this fall. Our next conversation is with Josephine Kroecker on Wednesday October 25 at 6:30 p.m. Josephine has transitioned from male to female. I don't get it but I want to try to find grace.

Let us pray...God, whose grace surpasses all understanding – thank you for the difficult yet important ways you have dragged us along with our gay family members and church members as we find our way in your love and in our intimate relationships. Please help us to stretch our compassion even when we don't understand other people. Amen.