

Brenda Harrison Memorial Lecture

6th July 2012

at St Martin in the Fields, London

All God's Children: Believing, Belonging, Beloved

by Rev Sharon Ferguson

I would like to start by thanking Pam and Jeremy for inviting me to give this first memorial lecture. It is truly an honour.

It is very appropriate to have this first lecture the evening before World Pride as so much of Brenda's work through Changing Attitude and the European Forum involved reaching out to people across Europe and the wider world.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the opportunity to get to know Brenda as well as many of you here tonight.

My first real memory of Brenda was when I attended the Women's Preconference of the European Forum shortly after I had started as Assistant Chief Executive of LGCM.

I was very aware that I was the new kid on the block and quite frankly was very nervous and concerned about attending what was my first conference as an LGBT activist.

Brenda immediately put me at ease making me feel not only truly welcome but also that I belonged in the group and had something positive to contribute.

It was this memory of the all embracing acceptance of people that Brenda made a reality in how she lived that inspired my thoughts and title for this lecture.

Please pray with me.

In Galatians 3:26 we read – 'For you are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.' Now of course Paul was writing to the Galatians to resolve issues between the gentiles and the Jews, but the principle's the same. People are different! We are different heights and widths – different ethnicities and skin colours – different genders and sexualities – different experiences and different theologies!

But none of these differences matter in Christ. As Christians – as followers of Christ we are all equal – we are all children of God. No-one is better or worse than any other and God doesn't have any adopted, foster or step –children. We are all children of God!

Unfortunately, we are also all human and as humans we don't cope very well with difference. We like people to be like us and if they're not then they become a 'them', an

‘other’. And in order to maintain and justify our ‘us’ness, being ‘other’, becomes wrong or bad and needs to be eradicated.

Our understanding of difference/otherness changes. We have seen this with regards to attitudes around ethnicity and slavery and even to some extent towards women but until we can change our thinking from us and them, either/or to both/and we will always polarise people and demonise categories that we perceive as different.

Now I realise I am preaching to the converted when talking about how sexuality and gender have been demonised by certain sections of the Christian Church and many of you spend much of your time working to change attitudes and hearts and consequently laws and practice.

The reality is that we all have a part to play and what we do needs to be directed and influenced by Christ if we are truly followers of the Way.

One constant in all that Christ had to share with his disciples was that we should all be working to bring into being the kingdom of God. Those who follow Christ are supposed to desire, live and partner God to usher in the kingdom and bring the good news to earth.

The human way of trying to bring about change is to fight against what is wrong, to depose bad leaders, to vilify those we disagree with and discard those who aren’t prepared to align themselves with our views and opinions.

But Jesus’ idea of bringing in the kingdom of God was very different. Instead of fighting against the Romans, he fought **for** the Jews. Rather than shedding blood, he **promoted** peace. Instead of inflicting pain on the oppressor he **offered healing** to the oppressed. Rather than marginalising those who oppressed him, he **accepted** those who were marginalised.

He modelled for us the well known adage that we are called to love, the Holy Spirit convicts and God judges.

So, as the oppressed, the marginalised, the downtrodden – how are we working to bring about change and make God’s realm a reality in our world today?

My experience has shown that we often try to do God’s job and judge our oppressors in the same way they judge us, or we try to convict them of the error of their ways. If you’ve fallen into that trap – how’s it working for you? How many hearts and minds have you changed through conviction and judgement?

One of the reasons that I love the little book ‘Reluctant Journey’ by George Cooper is because it is clear that his change of heart came from the lived experience of LGBT people loving. It is through our expressing God’s love for one another as Christ commanded that the Holy Spirit can be seen at work in us.

But this is not easy for us to do – especially when we are ousted from our communities of faith.

Ousting is a typical tactic employed quite frequently in the history of the church – if someone has different thoughts or convictions we declare them an anathema. We cut them off and along with them anyone who supports them or likes them or seems to be leaning in the same direction. Sound familiar?

The result is an insulated group in an isolated echo chamber where conservatives become more conservative and liberals become more liberal and no-one has permission to think for themselves.

An example of this is the recent reaction to the government's same-sex marriage consultation. Letters have been read out in churches telling congregations what to think and how to respond with petitions being pinned to notice boards for all to sign.

I have received so many calls lately from people both lgbt and straight who have been horrified by this demand to demonise and discriminate against a section of society and who have refused to follow these instructions and are questioning whether they truly belong in that faith community. Some of these people may not agree with same-sex marriage for all sorts of reasons including their own personal theological understanding but the lack of love that church leadership is showing towards the LGBT community is a greater concern.

Their response has been that if we say we love our gay and lesbian neighbour as we have been commanded to do but allow our leaders to speak hatred toward them then our hypocrisy is exposed and people suffer.

More and more people are becoming tired of an entrenched public witness that seeks to villainise, demonise and destroy those who are perceived as the enemy, rather than listen to, learn from and love our neighbour.

Jesus hit the nail on the head when he said in John 16:2 – ‘For you will be expelled from the synagogues, and the time is coming when those who kill you will think they are doing a holy service for God.’

In 2007 a survey was conducted in America by Dave Kimaman and Gale Lyon on people's perception of Christians. 91% perceived them as being anti-Gay, 87% as judgemental, and 70% as insensitive to others. Christians are regularly understood by what they stand against rather than what they stand for.

Jesus said that Christians would be known by their love for one another but today they are more likely to be known by their hatred for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people.

As LGBT Christians we often have to struggle with both sides of the equation to uphold what we believe and find a place to belong. But how do we do it? Are we also spending our

time and energy fighting **against** those who oppress us or are we following Christ's example and loving our enemy whilst fighting **for** our right to be recognised as children of God.

The media love a good fight and fuelling a divide between faith and sexuality provides good stories. It is so easy for us to get caught up in the emotion of the moment and end up employing the same tactics. All this does is further marginalise us.

When Jesus asked Peter three times 'do you love me' and Peter replied Yes – Jesus asked Peter to feed and tend his sheep. Jesus did not ask Peter to picket the wolves! Peter was to fight for the believers of Christ not fight against non-believers.

How can we employ this positive rather than negative approach and still achieve our objectives of being fully included in the church as LGBT people and being fully included in the LGBT community as people of faith?

I'm sure most of you will be marching tomorrow in the Pride parade in your purple T shirts. And it's a pretty safe bet that at some point on the route there will be a small group from Christian Voice or the Evangelical Alliance standing on the side with placards telling us that we are an abomination and going to hell.

Anyone who knows me will be only too aware of how much I abhor this sort of thing because of the damage it does. Statistics show that gay teens are six times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight counterparts and this is largely due to these negative religious messages.

But we all know that if someone starts throwing stones at you they are not likely to stop if you start throwing stones back, In fact, they are simply likely to just find bigger stones to throw.

What if we looked at it from a different perspective. Given what the Christian Voice believe the Bible has to say about homosexuality they are trying to show love by saving us from the eternal damnation they believe to be in store. So instead of shouting abuse back what if we showered them with love by thanking them for their concern and blessing them!

After all, they too are part of the body of Christ and if we want to be accepted then we too must accept those with different views to us. Paul makes it very clear that although we are all different with various skills, gifts and talents, we are all needed to make up the body of Christ and each one of us is as important as any other.

This also includes our different theologies and we need to learn to live with differences.

The Bible contains 66 books, 1189 chapters, 31,103 verses – each one expressing something of our Creator's character. What we all have a tendency to do is put chosen verses in a theological juicer and condense it down and then expect everyone to drink from our cup.

Again we might do well to heed Paul's advice. In Romans 2:25-29 Paul talks about the requirement of circumcision as some Jews are claiming that in order to follow Christ Gentiles must comply with the ritual of circumcision.

This is what he says:

Circumcision, the surgical ritual that marks you as a Jew, is great if you live in accord with God's law. But if you don't, it's worse than not being circumcised. The reverse is also true: The uncircumcised who keep God's ways are as good as the circumcised – in fact, better. Better to keep God's law uncircumcised than break it circumcised. Don't you see: It's not the cut of a knife that makes a Jew. You become a Jew by who you are. It's the mark of God on your heart, not of a knife on your skin, that makes a Jew. And recognition comes from God, not legalistic critics.

What if we swapped 'circumcision' for heterosexuality:

Heterosexuality is great if you live in accord with God's law. But if you don't, it's worse than being homosexual. The reverse is also true. The homosexual who keep God's ways are as good as the heterosexual. Don't you see: It's not heterosexuality that makes a Christian. You become a Christian by who you are. It's the mark of God on your heart, not sexuality, that makes a Christian. And recognition comes from God, not legalistic critics.

The point that Paul was making, as he did in many different ways in several of his letters, is that it is our belief in Christ that ensures we belong to God and become beloved children.

But it's all well and good knowing this and we can quote scripture after scripture as proof that sexuality and gender have no bearing on our ability to be Christian and be loved by God. The fact still remains that no theological argument is going to change the hearts and minds of those who disagree – they will simply quote other scriptures to justify their position.

For those struggling to reconcile their faith and sexuality or facing exclusion from their faith community because they have been honest about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, scripture wars has no relevance and is of no help in dealing with the pain that they experience.

This is where those of us who have been able to resolve these issues are so important. You are needed to be the role models, needed to show in positive terms how to live a life that honours who God created you to be and follows the great commandment that Christ gave us to love God and one another as ourselves.

We need to do this not only to support and encourage LGBT people to embrace their spirituality but also as a witness to the wider world that the Holy Spirit is moving in and through us. Because this way we are likely to see the same awakening that Peter had that led him to socialise with and baptise the gentile Cornelius in Acts chapter 10.

We need to be visible. By this I don't just mean once a year donning a purple T shirt and walking the streets. I also don't mean that everyone should become an activist – God calls us all to different things according to the gifts and talents we are given. I mean we need to live each moment of every day expressing God's love in everything we do. Gently touching the lives of those around us – giving witness to God's love for all people – this is how hearts and minds will be changed – one at a time.

It is always easier to hate the faceless enemy – a few years ago I received a hate filled email telling me I was going to die and burn in hell because of my sinful ways etc. You all know the sort of thing!

Of course, this wasn't the first email or letter I had received with these sort of comments and it certainly wasn't the last. What made this one stand out for me however, was that it had been sent on a Lewisham Government email. This concerned me as I had no way of knowing in what department this person worked or whether her views were affecting how she performed her job. She obviously had no issues with sending vitriolic emails in work time so would she also be prepared to discriminate against a gay or lesbian person in her work remit.

Having worked for Lewisham myself in the past I was well aware that they have very strong policies on equality and discrimination so contacted the council and informed them of the email. They immediately investigated the situation and it went to a tribunal.

I had to give evidence at the tribunal and at this point I got to meet the young woman who had sent the email.

During a break she approached me and apologised for causing me any distress and informed me that she had never met a lesbian before and certainly not a lesbian Christian.

She had been totally brainwashed by her church and had never stopped to think for herself about this issue. It was clear from her reaction that she expected all lesbians to have two heads and horns or something and was not prepared to see a middle-aged, overweight, woman in a dog collar!

Whilst this was a painful experience for her to go through I also pray that she learnt something important about the love of God for all God's children and that it is not our place to judge.

The truth is that none of us truly know – maybe she was right – maybe when I get up to those pearly gates and Peter comes out to meet me, I will be told sorry Sharon, you can't come in. Yes I know you love God and gave your heart to Christ, I know you have tried to follow the way throughout your life and done many good things but lesbians have no place in heaven. Surely you read Leviticus.

Now, I don't think this is likely to happen – certainly not by the God I know in my heart – but the simple fact remains that for now we see dimly as through a clouded mirror – this is why we should not judge.

And this is why we should not judge our oppressors – we are called to love.

Of course, that's very easy for me say standing up here. But I am very aware that for the person on the receiving end of judgement, oppression, discrimination or the long standing activist facing the same argument once again it is hard to see the Christ in the other person.

This is where you now expect me to tell you how to do that!

Unfortunately I don't have the answers. Because I don't think there is a simple answer. This is where I look to people like Bishop Gene Robinson, Rev Troy Perry, and Brenda Harrison.

All I can offer is that we need to depend on the grace of God each and every day and remember what Christ told his disciples in John 14:26 that the Holy Spirit will teach us what we need to know and remind us of what we have forgotten.

Being a Christian is often referred to as a journey of faith. I would rather say that it is more an adventure or an expedition. We need to take one step at a time relying on the Holy Spirit to guide us.

But we do not walk it alone. We may no longer have Brenda to lead the way but there are many others willing to share the adventure with us.

And we must never forget that no matter what trials or tribulations come our way as long we believe, we belong to the body of Christ and we are all the beloved children of God.