

James Graham's Witness for Reconciling Sunday - January 25, 2009

I feel particularly blessed that I have supportive parents. They were always willing to support what I wanted to do—my gifts or talents—no matter how untraditional. When I was about 5 years old I decided that I needed to have a flower garden of my own, so my parents dug up a plot in a corner of the back yard and let me plant whatever I wanted. When I was 9 years old, I asked to arrange flowers for my grandfather's funeral. During junior high and high school I was responsible for the altar flowers at the Berea church once a month and in college I worked summers and holidays at a local florist. I don't know if my parents viewed my interest in growing and arranging flowers as stereotypical of a gay son, but no matter what they thought, they saw it as a gift and encouraged me to do what I liked and to be my own person.

When I was older and started my relationship with David, my parents also supported me. I recall the first Christmas we were together (and although we hadn't announced our relationship) my mother made sure that he was invited to the house and that she had a gift for David under the tree and a gingerbread boy. In spite of being from a generation when people didn't talk about sex, much less homosexuality, they were never afraid of letting people know who their son was once I came out. In fact, over the years, I actually think that my parents have become more open and unabashed than I am about gay issues. They actively participate in our lives—they are interested in our friends, they are proud of the house that we have renovated and the life that we have created together. They are clearly as proud and loving of my brother, George, and Mike's adopted children as their biological grandchildren. Just this year my father gave a speech after Christmas dinner to say that each of the diverse members of our family, no matter how they came to be part of the family, make it special to him and he really meant it—his eyes welled up with tears at the table.

I know that not every child who is gay or lesbian or transgendered has the chance to live in this type of family. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has reported on an epidemic of homelessness in this country due to coming out. Here are a few statistics:

- 20-40% of homeless youth identify as gay, when only 3-5% of the actual population is gay, showing that there is a very disproportionate amount of gay youth who are homeless;
- 50% of gay teens experienced a negative reaction from their parents when they came out and 26% were kicked out of their homes;
- More than 1/3 of youth who are homeless or in the care of social services experienced a violent physical assault when they came out;
- Gay homeless youth are especially vulnerable to depression, loneliness and psychosomatic illness; and
- 10-20% of homeless youth identify as being chemically dependent, which is exacerbated for youth who are gay.

I realize we cannot change the families of each of these kids who experience homelessness or rejection because of their sexuality, but I think that for us as a church it is important to be intentional in providing a safe and supportive environment for all kids and adults—gay or straight. Church of the Redeemer was not reconciling when David and I started attending 17 years ago—we came here because my brother and sister-in-law told us that this was a diverse congregation with a good preacher. Soon after we arrived, we participated in the period of discernment on becoming a reconciling congregation, but because we were relatively new, we chose not to vote on this issue—we felt that the people who have more years vested here should be the ones to make the decision.

I have to admit that I was pleased with the outcome of the vote. I finally felt like I had a church that could provide the kind of support that my parents have always provided to me. I could be my self here. I could be open about having a partner and be viewed as a family unit in this church. I could share my gifts without being worried that I would be rejected or shut out. I am blessed to have a church that openly acknowledges me, accepts me, and embraces me for who I am--the same way my parents always have. I am happy and proud to be part of this church family.