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The famous Beatitudes include nice platitudes about people who are down and out. I've always thought the most curious is the last one: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

And the others seem straightforward enough — but what does this one really mean?

That is, the plain meaning could be, I suppose, *if you are persecuted or reviled* for being a Christian, then *God bless you*. But I think it must be seen *more broadly* than that, even as the hungry, the poor and the meek must be understood more broadly. Jesus is talking about people who are reviled because his way, his teaching will cause disruption, disagreement and controversy. People did *not* automatically accept what he teaches; they "get their shorts in a knot." People are divided over him, and that has always been the case.

The controversies which divide our world today come from a long line of religious battles down through the centuries. St. Augustine, for example, had huge disagreements with the Donatists and Pelagianism in North Africa 1600 years ago, and he called in Roman soldiers to settle the dispute by force. . . . Mohammed *led armies* to enforce his view of religion on Arabia . . . which led to the Crusades which lasted for centuries. . . . In the 16th century the Reformation led to the Thirty Years War that also wracked Europe.

When are we going to learn that we should not make enemies of one another over our views about God and our faith? Over values and morality? The greatest human folly of all is that which divides peoples up into armed camps, when *we think* that our views of what makes for noble beliefs or high standards *are better than* other's views, and so ought to be pushed, even forced on them.

Today our world is torn up with two other enormous religious-based controversies, which are all over the news every day. One of course is the political, social and military battle of the Christian West with Middle-Eastern Islam. The uprisings this last week in Tunisia and Egypt are actually a diversion—aren't they?—from this West vs. Middle East conflict.

And the other is the complex controversy over human sexuality and homosexuality. It is because of Jesus that our society—and this has spilled over around the world—is not of one mind about what to do about sexual minorities. Sadly, we are all forced to choose sides in this controversy. We are part of the struggle, even while we plead for understanding.

Now, I need to put a disclosure in here. For the last 30-something years, I have been a combatant in the sexuality wars. Not in high profile, but deeply involved, and what I say now comes out of that. I have spent heaps of energy trying to help my church, the Lutheran Church, to accept me and my sisters and brothers who are sexual minorities—that is, lesbian and gay, bisexual and transgender. There has been both pain and progress.

And I have come to the obvious conclusion that we cannot fix the whole world, but we can follow Christ. I am reminded of the Serenity Prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr, the first part of which is a kind of invocation for 12-Step meetings:

**God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.**

Discernment is required! The progress—the change—within the Lutheran church about human sexuality has required serenity, courage and wisdom. Over the last two generations, many Lutheran Churches have gradually become sanctuaries for those who have been reviled and persecuted for being gay or lesbian, bisexual or transgender, especially if you're also Christian.

It began with a lay-led organization, Lutherans Concerned for Gay People, in 1974 in Minneapolis, and then shifted to Los Angeles when Howard Erickson moved here, and published its newsletter. Lutherans Concerned served as a support group for gay people, and tried to educate the larger church about things which were hurting people of faith. Howard died last September, but he lived to see his life's work put down real roots and bear fruit.

In 1983, the Reconciling in Christ program was started, to help identify congregations as sanctuaries that would welcome gay and lesbian people into full participation without judgment. *This congregation* adopted the official "Affirmation of Welcome" in 1999. In the meantime, studies were done, and our Synod and our national Conference of Bishops repeatedly adopted statements that welcomed openly gay and lesbian people into the life of the whole church.

But much of this was wishful thinking. People don't learn new ways easily. Human beings resist change, *especially* in God's name. In 1985, I was asked to help write a public statement about what it means to be gay and Christian in the Lutheran Church. Two of us wrote a 12-page paper titled "A Call for Dialog" which went through three printings and 15,000 copies. It was sent to every bishop and district president in the Lutheran church-bodies in North America. But I didn't dare sign my name to it.

But not many churches were ready to welcome a gay man, or *worse*, a gay or lesbian *couple*. The reviling, persecuting and uttering all kinds of evil continued *unabated*. Even more, the larger church adopted its own "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy for pastors that did not allow well-qualified gay or lesbian people to serve the church *if they didn't promise* to be celibate for their lifetimes. Like the military equivalent, it led to hypocrisy and ruined lives, more reviling and persecuting. For decades Carl and I were trapped in hypocrisy, and it crashed my career as a Lutheran pastor.

Throughout this process Lutherans Concerned had to do some growing up too. Only eight years ago, I served on a national task force to try to understand bisexual and transgender people as *also included* in God's wide embrace.

Through all of these years, under pressure, the Lutheran Church did study after study of human sexuality and homosexuality. Over 20 years ago, I personally addressed the entire ELCA Commission on Human Sexuality for several hours. I was thanked by a few members, and ridiculed by others. Many of us felt these studies were just a "stalling mechanism" against acceptance. Time after time, we saw that the *individuals* who participated in the study had a "change of heart" as a result of deep conversations with sexual minorities, but church policy never changed!

Finally, in this decade, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was pressed to "make up its mind" *not only* about whether LGBT people should be welcome in our congregations, but whether LGBT *pastors* would be welcome in our pulpits. In the *midst* of this, Hollywood Lutheran Church sided with the radicals in 2004 and, against the express wishes of our Bishop, called me to serve here as an openly-gay, permanently-partnered pastor. Seven years ago, many of us thought this was about as far as the whole church was likely to go.

But the conclusion of the last big national study forced the larger church to settle several questions at once. Can the Lutheran church affirm the life-long committed relationships of two men or two women? Can the Lutheran church live with disagreement or diversity of viewpoints about gay and lesbian people? Can the church welcome permanently-partnered pastors and lay professionals into ministry *without* hypocrisy and pretense?

And I hear the words of Jesus echoing in my heart: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." Jesus never intended to split the nation, or the church or families into combatants. But it happens.

All of this came before our national Assembly as a pair of decisions in August 2009, in

which, by an exact 2/3 majority, it **adopted** a social teaching which allows congregations to bless and celebrate the permanent relationships of lesbian and gay couples. Secondly, it **revoked** its “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policies to allow people like me to serve openly in the ministries of the church.

The struggle for understanding is not over. *It is still important* for this congregation to openly proclaim its welcome in Christ’s name. We do it not only to celebrate progress, but to let younger generations know that It Gets Better. Last fall, you remember, America was rocked by a rash of teen suicides, teens taking their own lives because of relentless bullying in their schools. Boys as young as 13 were killing themselves rather than to go on facing what they thought would be a lifetime of being hated and harassed, reviled and persecuted for being gay.

I think we are open-hearted enough to say that it is time for decent people to expect every kind of social institution, including schools, to stop the bullying and humiliation, the physical and emotional abuse. But a study which came out last fall proved without a doubt that *the center* of all of the anti-gay hate speech and abuse that spills over not just into public policy debates but into the lives of ordinary kids, *is the Christian church*, where hatred rather than love continues to fester.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil falsely on my account.”

Today’s Readings are a call to conscience and change. Both the prophet Micah and the Lord Jesus call us to rethink what religious faith is, and what it means for our lives. Micah reminds us that empty ritual has no meaning, and does not impress God above. “He has told you, O mortal,” says the prophet, “what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Jesus teaches us that justice and kindness and humility must always be discerned anew in each age. The “Beatitudes” are ironic—the complete *opposite* of what we would expect—that people are blessed when they are suffering all of the stresses and indignities life throws at them. Every one of these sayings deserves a time of reflection and prayer—especially, my friends—*especially* because in some way each of us can be an overlord or master who contributes to another’s suffering, even as we plead for understanding and compassion for our own lives, and we hope for a lighter burden on our own backs.

And the understanding which Jesus asks of us is always about something we may not fully understand. Our congregation today is less than half gay or lesbian. It is still predominantly Anglo. It is going through a change from the days when its member families mostly owned their own homes to the days when most are single living in apartments. Some live in the streets. We have had to learn that the grace of God is there *for everyone*, including the poor and hungry, those with mental challenges, those who are fighting *and winning* the battle over addictions, even those with a RAP sheet or imprisoned. For us, to be a Reconciling congregation means to reconcile our own expectations, our phobias and prejudices, with God’s way of embracing this world. “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” wrote Paul. Over and over we have to set aside what we thought was “wisdom” and truth, and make peace—reconcile—with God’s working in our world, with God’s will to love and bless and include and welcome and embrace *everyone*. As the bumper sticker sums it up: “God bless the whole world — no exceptions!” Amen?