

God's Call in My Life

When I look back on my life, I can see that I am very blessed. I have always felt this way. I want to talk today about the blessings in my life, and share with you a bit about myself. We are in the midst of a series of Sundays dealing with social justice, and I think we can all agree that the current hot topic is gay and lesbian rights. It seems that on this topic, the discussion quite often boils down to "us and them." Well, I am "us," and I am also "them," and I would like to share my story in the hopes of creating more understanding.

I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan in the early 1960s. My father Jim was in sales, and my mother Loretta was a teacher. I have two sisters, Melissa and Heather, one older and one younger. When I was born, my birth mother was not married, so she chose to have me placed with a two-parent family. I was considered a challenge to place, since I was a bi-racial baby. My parents Jim & Loretta didn't have a problem with that; they just saw me as Little Billy.

A big part of my growing up was time spent at Eastminster Presbyterian Church. I sang and rang handbells in the children's choirs. I attended Sunday school, and the Wednesday after school programs. In high school, I was active in our youth group. We would have lots of fun together, whether learning, participating in mission projects, or recreating. I attended the first Presbyterian Youth Triennium in 1980. I was a youth representative to the Christian Education Committee and to the Pastor Nominating Committee. I became one of the teachers in the Wednesday after school program. My community internship for my senior year of high school was served at Eastminster. After graduation from high school, I attended Michigan's Presbyterian school, Alma College. During the summer between my junior and senior years at college, I was hired by Eastminster as the Summer Youth Assistant. The following summer, I was one of the chaperones for the Youth Mission Trip.

After graduation from Alma, I was hired by the airlines, and moved away from home. I moved to Utica, NY, where I found Westminster Presbyterian Church. I served as a deacon at Westminster until I moved to Baltimore.

My life in and around church has always been, and always will be, very important to me. One can see that I served a lot, however let me assure you; I have also received a lot. My most memorable was getting off a plane in Grand Rapids. I was spending a semester in France my junior year of college. My younger sister Heather had taken her life that morning, and I had spent 22 long, agonizing hours returning home. Waiting at the gate, along with my father and my aunt Barbara, were people from Eastminster. Jeff, our youth pastor; Annie, our parish associate; some parents of other youth, and Mary Sue, one of the former youth assistants from years past. It was the most devastating time of our lives, and these people, without being asked, were there for us. They were making sure we knew we were not alone, making sure we were trudging through this awful day ok, and making sure we knew we were loved.

I hope you agree that my life has been blessed.

- Being born to a woman who chose life for me.
- Being placed with the Sailors family. Believe me, there is no place, then or now, where I would rather be.
- Growing up surrounded by the people with whom I was surrounded.
- The opportunity to explore my faith at a young age with events such as the presbytery youth mixes and the national Youth Triennium.
- The opportunity to study in France, which to me was a dream come true.
- Finding a job I love, where work is a pleasure and not a chore.

- And of course, finding, or being led to, Roland Park Church.

Well, I think that is part of what makes me, Bill, part of “Us.”

This is what makes me part of “Them.”

During my adolescent years, I began to realize that I was different. No one ever talked about homosexuality. I just had images out of the media that it wasn't something that someone wanted to be. I remember a film from social studies class in middle school. It said that homosexual feelings in people our age were a normal part of growing up, but that these feelings would be out grown, and so if you have these feelings, don't worry about it. I never out grew these feelings. I would get so frustrated. When my mind would wander, my thoughts, or dreams, or fantasies, would be about people of the wrong gender. At night, I would pray, “Please God, take these feelings away. Make me normal.” I couldn't understand why He wasn't helping me. I couldn't talk to anyone about this, because I believed that it would peg me as bad, strange, or a freak.

It took me some time, but I began to realize that God was answering my prayers. While my prayers had been, “Please take away these feeling;” God answered the prayer that I should have been praying: “Thy Will Be Done.” I prayed, “Please make me normal,” and the answer was that I already was normal.

God had already placed into my life people who were examples of good moral people, who also happened to be gay. My Dad's sister, Barbara, had been in a relationship with Carol all of my life. To me, they were always “Barb and Carol.” They were together eighteen years, until parted by death. The evening before I left for the funeral, one of the waitresses where I worked said to me that it was beautiful that their relationship had lasted a lifetime. And it struck me... they're gay! They were two of the most joyous people that I had in my life. Carol had spent many years struggling against cancer, and Barb was there the whole way. They weren't freaks; they were God's gift to each other.

I tried “coming out” in college. It was part of my struggle coming to terms with myself and who I was. I met a cute guy who was studying Arts Administration. What was fantastic about meeting him was that I could talk to him and his friends about myself, without having to withhold anything. And experiences, feelings and secrets that I had while growing up, they had had too! They could relate to what I was saying! I was happy! I was excited! I told Mom!

“What? You can't be! What will the neighbor's think? You won't be allowed to teach Sunday school! You will be lonely the rest of your life! Barb and Carol are the exception, not the norm!” She had told me how much she liked the Arts Administration guy... but that was when we were friends, not boyfriends.

So, I left for my semester in France, where I didn't have to deal with being gay, coming out or having told Mom. When I came back to campus, the Arts Administration guy had moved on, so I told Mom, “I'm sorry to have upset you. It was just a phase.” She was glad that she was there for me, and that I was “better.”

So, I decided that I wanted to be straight. I chose to be heterosexual. I told myself I wanted a wife, kids and family. I wanted a wife, kids and family. However, no matter how hard I tried, no matter how hard I prayed, I realized that my gay feelings were not going to go away. My personality is such that I can't lie about things. I certainly couldn't lie about being gay. And if I were to take a wife, what kind of relationship would that be? What kind of husband would I be, who could not give to his wife what must be the most important part of a marriage, the love of a husband? Being gay would be an awfully big secret to keep from the one person who is to be my soul mate.

And so one day, I decided that I had to combine the Bill who is gay, with the Bill who has a deep faith in Jesus Christ. I bought a book, *Good News for Modern Gays* by Reverend Sylvia Pennington. The author was an evangelical pastor who was part of a team working the streets of San Francisco attempting to change and save homosexuals.

She writes, "Once I believed that the Bible was anti-gay. Through years of prayer the Holy Spirit led me through every supposedly anti-gay scripture proving to me that God accepts gay people just as they are."

Her book is a walk through scripture, looking in depth at the different supposedly anti-gay passages. She addresses Sexuality and Procreation; Leviticus; Sodom; and the New Testament. The book was helpful in crafting some of what I believe, and in combining the two parts of Bill.

Where does that take us today? What is this debate that we are having about gay and lesbian rights, same gender marriage and the like?

We as Presbyterians are part of the Reformed tradition of Christianity. We give ourselves permission to look and look again at scripture and at what we believe. The reformation came about by people who believed that God was saying something different from what the established church was saying. We are radicals. We believe that the Holy Scriptures is the word of God, inspired by God, written by man. We embrace knowledge, learning and thinking. We don't fear it. We know that scriptures were written within the context of their time, and it is important to understand that context to understand scripture.

What understandings have changed since the scriptures were written? Some examples: the earth was flat. Earth was the center of the universe. The sun revolved around the earth. The understanding of human reproduction has changed. It was believed, before the advent of microscopes, that a man planted the seed of a child into the soil, the womb, of a woman. Look at our language: a woman who does not bear children is called barren, like a field that does not produce agriculture. Today, we understand that the woman contributes the egg. A child is still a child, but our understanding of the mechanics of how a child is created has changed.

Here is an idea: when scripture was written, it was thought that everyone was heterosexual. It was not known that homosexuals, as known today, existed. The context in which the scriptures were written was that of a purely heterosexual world. The scriptures were directed to heterosexuals. This is just a thought to consider. However, where could we take this? I like the idea I heard from Dr. Boulton that same gender relationships could be based in scripture, by mirroring the traditional opposite gender relationships that are based in the scriptures written in the context of the heterosexual world.

Some people, who do not understand homosexuality, try to show it as evil and perverted. That homosexuality in and of itself is evil and perverted. Consider this... that which in homosexuality is evil and perverted is also evil and perverted in heterosexuality. Promiscuity exists in both the homosexual and heterosexual worlds. Infidelity also exists in both worlds.

I believe the good things that exist in the heterosexual realm of the world are also good in the homosexual realm. Things like commitment, fidelity, integrity, generosity, faith, family, love of fellow human beings and fellow children of God. Shouldn't society support fidelity and commitment for everyone, and not just for some? Shouldn't there be support for every relationship, and not just some relationships?

I don't think one should "do" Christianity. To me it's not a club. To me, Christianity is not something to do, but something that you are. Christ is in my heart. God and Jesus Christ are infused into the very being of my life. I believe that God has blessed me with everything in my life, and I thank God, and show my joy to God, by making decisions that I think He would want me to make. If

I make a bad choice, I am confident in God's grace and forgiveness. However, I am more confident that God's grace will lead me to making wise choices.

My hope today, in being open about myself, is that I can be an example to others, as others have been examples to me. I would like people who are realizing that they are gay, that it's not a "Life-style choice," but that it is just a portion of what makes them who they are. And more importantly, I would like people who are not gay, who might have no idea what I'm talking about, to realize the same thing. Our sexuality is just a portion of our life that makes us who we are.

The choice in life is not whether to be gay or straight. The choice for us is whether to accept or not accept who we are. I believe that we are all created individually by God. A portion of God's creation is our sexual orientation. And so the question becomes, the choice becomes, do we wholeheartedly accept, or not, what God has given to us, with all its joys, and with all of its challenges? I choose to accept what God has given me. I choose to accept that with which God has blessed me.

Post Script:

Please know that the discussion with my Mom, Loretta, about the "Arts Administration Guy" took place during the summer of 1983. It was part of a process for both of us. She always has been, and always will be, the best Mom in the world! Jim and Loretta Sailors are a gift from God, and the answer to the prayers of Nancy Robinson, my beautiful birth mother (Nancy Robinson, another gift from God). -Bill Sailors