

3 Epiphany & RIC Sunday
Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10
Psalm 139:7-18
1 Corinthians 12:12-26
Luke 4:16-21

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Holy Spirit Lutheran Church
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Jimmy Neil Smith once said *"We are all storytellers. We all live in a network of stories. There isn't a stronger connection between people than storytelling."*

Yet, when I was a teen, I didn't think I had a story worthy of being shared with anyone at all.

I was a good student, a good athlete, and a good sibling. I was someone who tried to do the right thing.

But there was a part of my story I kept hidden away.

A part of my story that the world told me wasn't okay.

That part of my story was that I am gay.

Growing up in Southern Alberta in the early 90's – I quickly learned by the way people talked and joked about, even harmed people in the LGBTQ2SIA+ community - that being gay was not something to be proud of.

In fact, I distinctively remember thinking as young as 5 that if any one ever found out that I was gay – I would have never been seen as good, worthy, or loveable by anyone ever again.

I felt this way because when I was a youth - our towns and communities were still fighting over whether gay marriage should be legal in Canada. Which meant that often I had to hear what my friends, family, and church thought of people like me. And it wasn't pretty.

They would tell homophobic jokes that would make my stomach turn inside, they would make disgusted faces while sharing their thoughts on gay people like me, and they loved to bring out their bibles to point to passages they felt told gay people that they weren't right.

Back then it felt like the world around me had decided that people like me shouldn't exist – and even though from a very young age I had always heard about God's love – I began to wonder if God could really love someone like me.

So I did the only thing I felt I could, I hid my true self away so no one would ever know who I was.

For decades I lived in a constant state of fear that someone, anyone would find out that I wasn't like the rest of the kids I knew.

That someone would figure out I had a crush on that girl from youth group, that I really hated wearing dresses and make-up to church, or simply that I wasn't who the world had made me out to be. A deep fear that would cause me to hide these important parts of me away in shame - hoping and praying that no one would ever find out my secret.

Part of the reason behind this feeling was that when I was growing up I didn't personally know any other members of the LGBTQ2SIA+ community. No one else was really "out" where I lived. And as the years passed by I began to feel like I was the only one who had ever felt this way.

Like I was some kind of Gay Lutheran Bigfoot – often spoken about, argued about, even wondered about, but never truly seen.

That is, until the day I met Tyson.

Tyson was from a small town in Southern Alberta. He came from a loving tight-knit family that had attended a Lutheran church. He loved to laugh, he loved to sing, but the best part of all was that he was gay like me.

But unlike me he had found a way to embrace his story in a way I never had. He wasn't afraid or ashamed of being gay and Christian. He had simply had enough of hiding his God given truth from the world – and so he had chosen to embrace it.

Seeing someone reflect for me who I had always longed to be, lifted a weight off my chest I can't even fully describe to you.

I was no longer that lone "*Gay Lutheran Bigfoot*" I had always thought I had been – I was part of a new and growing family of queer Christians.

And in that moment, I knew two things would always be true:

that I would never be alone in how I felt about being gay ever again,

and that nothing God had ever created was a mistake.

Tyson and his story were a gift to me. A gift that helped me to start living out the truth of my own story – that I was a beloved child of God, no matter what my sexual orientation or gender identity might be.

This was a truth I heard wash over me again and again through the words of Psalm 139 we read responsively this morning – a psalm that declares “you search me and know me God – I am fearfully and wonderfully made!”

This was the truth that finally came to set me free. If God had knowingly and lovingly created me this way - there was no way that anyone could ever take that away.

Through meeting Tyson, I had been introduced to a whole community of supportive and loving LGBTQ2SIA+ people, as well as affirming pastors and priests right in my home town. People who took the time to listen to my story, hold it carefully in their hands, all the while affirming that I was a beloved and gifted child of God and that nothing would ever change that. It was the message I had been longing to hear and with their support I began to come out.

And as I did - I realized that I had a story to share after all. A life changing story of God’s love, acceptance, and grace when I least expected to find it at all.

A powerful story that I had been set free to tell when I had taken the risk to listen and hold my friend Tyson’s coming out story.

A story that would come to unite both Tyson and I, our families, and our friends in an effort to bring hope others who had lived in fear and shame of being queer and Christian.

So Tyson and I began to share our stories of finding love and acceptance whenever we could.

And today as a Queer Lutheran Pastor, I am honored to hold the stories of many people who have walked a similar road, and I am blessed to be able to remind them that their story is a needed and important part of God’s story for us all.

I’m excited to be a part of a church community that doesn’t simply welcome people on its sign but that celebrates each and every one of us for who we were fearfully and wonderfully created to be!

No matter our gender identity or sexual orientation, our ability or age, our ethnicity or status in this life ... we are all children of God with important stories to tell and so many stories yet to share.

And what I have learned about sharing and holding others stories throughout my life is that there is an important story behind everything.

Like how you met your best friend - or how a scar got on your face!

Sometimes the stories are simple, and sometimes they are hard and heart breaking to hear - but every story has an important and celebrated place with us here – because every one of our stories has been fearfully and wonderfully made by God.

And it's my hope and prayer, that whether it is your first Sunday with us here at Holy Spirit or you have been here so often you have lost count – that you would have a chance to have had your stories heard and held in the midst of this caring community of faith.

Because your light and your truth are needed in this world today.

Your story, its joys, its sorrows, and even its pain are an essential part of our story as God's people.

And when we take the time to listen, and hold space, for others stories, we choose a whole new way to see, experience, and know our world.

Because if we can truly listen across our differences – we might just find ourselves in the presence of not only a new friend but also of God.

God is still speaking and moving and breathing within the world in the people and stories we come to meet, hear, and hold.

And as we come to share and know one another's story - we also come to know more deeply the way our lives are intertwined within the beautiful tapestry of God's love.

Because each and every one of our stories has been fearfully and wonderfully made by God.

Amen.