

“A History Lesson”

Psalm 139:1-18

Pastor Liz Miller

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One of the things I love about this church community is that it is hard to tell who has been here a long time and who is newer. You can't go based on age because some folks have been members for 50 years because they grew up in this church and some folks are over 50 years old but just started attending Edgewood in the last few years. When we start talking about our history, we can't assume who lived the history, who remembers the stories, or who is still learning our history. Out of curiosity, with a show of hands, how many of us have been members for 20 years or longer?

Twenty years is a key number for us today. In many ways it does not seem that long ago, but when it comes to LGBTQ rights, a whole lot has changed in twenty years. Twenty years ago, Matthew Shepard was a college student at the University of Wyoming, not knowing that in a few months he would be beaten and left to die because his sexuality threatened another young man. Twenty years ago, Tammy Baldwin was campaigning in Wisconsin but she hadn't yet won the November 1998 election that would make her the first openly gay or lesbian ever elected to Congress.

Twenty years ago it was still six months before the first two states passed constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage and a year until the first state, Vermont, would legalize same-sex marriage.

Twenty years ago Edgewood United Church reached the culmination of years of conversations, prayerful sharing of personal stories, Biblical exploration and education about

LGBTQ issues. This work led up to a congregational vote, right here in this sanctuary, in which the congregation overwhelmingly affirmed a commitment and covenant to be Open and Affirming to all people, explicitly including all sexualities and gender identities. Twenty years ago this decision was as just as it is today, but it was a whole lot less popular in the world, a whole lot more controversial, and had the potential to be a lot more divisive in our congregation.

Fortunately, because of the faithfulness of the leaders of our Open and Affirming movement, and because of the history of standing for justice that Edgewood had practiced since its founding, the vote was not divisive. It confirmed and affirmed who we already were and who we would eventually become: a church where all people are welcome and a church committed to continuing to expand our ideas of who “all people” includes.

There are moments in our lives when we make decisions that years later when we look back we say, “That one decision fundamentally shaped the next chapter in my life.” We rarely know what impact those decisions will have. Sometimes the big stressful decisions end up being inconsequential while the small ones bring about the biggest change. Sometimes saying yes to an uncertain new thing creates blessings, growth, and opportunities you never imagined. This was true for Edgewood twenty years ago.

That vote of affirmation changed what happens inside the walls of our church. A few more rainbows went up, and not just during pride month. A stronger welcome was made to folks who walked inside our doors, knowing that not all of us would receive the same welcome in other Christian churches. A commitment to keep learning and changing occurred. For example, twenty years ago we didn't talk a lot about the experience of being transgender, but we have since then, and we didn't yet realize that “one size doesn't fit all” for welcoming LGBTQ folks, but we have since then. Because of that one decision twenty years ago, we have decided over and over again to make this a living, breathing covenant to LGBTQ justice that adapts and grows as our

awareness adapts and grows.

Beyond how the vote twenty years ago changed what happens inside the church, it is even more significant because of the way that vote changed people's lives beyond the church. For twenty years this has been a place where people can bring their full selves – their same-gender loving relationships, their beautiful, expansive gender expressions, their hopes, and their pain. Folks have come here knowing that when they leave this place they will go back in the closet – sometimes all the way, and sometimes just a little bit, modifying their language or paying attention to the pronouns they use to describe their partner, or making sure not to be too fabulous at their workplace. LGBTQ folks have been taught to police their identities when we move through the world, making sure we don't offend and we don't stand out, often as a requirement for personal safety.

So, for twenty years this has been a place of respite and renewal: a place where we can talk about our girlfriends and boyfriends and partners and lovers with wild abandon; a place where glitter and funky hair is not limited to boys or girls; a place where gender identity is not confined to being a boy or a girl; a place where we can use a word like “Queer” and know that it is not a slur but a positive celebration of the huge umbrella of LGBTQ experiences that can't be captured by an acronym; a place where we can be reminded of how deeply we are loved and how magnificently we were made. For over twenty years Edgewood has been a home, a comfort, a place of healing, and a sanctuary for a group of people who desperately needed it as we waited for the rest of the world to catch up.

When we left this place and returned to our factory jobs or our university departments, the strength Edgewood restored in us stayed. The affirmation we received carried us through micro-aggressions, slurs, discrimination, questioning, and periods of invisibility. What happened here on Sunday morning allowed some of us to make it through the rest of the week.

For over twenty years we have been raising children at Edgewood that understand that God loves all people equally and fully, and that those who are disproportionately advantaged need to advocate on behalf of people with fewer advantages. For the first time we are raising a generation of children for whom this is as common sense as A coming before B in the alphabet, kids who don't remember a time in their life when they were told anything different. Earlier this week Beth and I were talking to a friend who has an elementary aged son. He listened to the conversation for a bit and then asked us, "Wait...Are you two...friends?" I replied, "We're married to each other." He excitedly asked, "Does that mean you're lesbians?" "Yes?" "COOL!" And why wouldn't it be cool?

Edgewood's children and youth have grown into young adults and now even middle aged adults who have left this church and gone into the world to start their own lives. Edgewood's open and affirming message has been carried by our children and grandchildren from East Lansing to Washington state, California, Indiana, North Carolina, Texas, and beyond. Our values of justice and hope for all God's people has been etched into the hearts of the generations that grew up in this church – that continue to grow up in this church – and when they leave this place they are equipped to change lives and to love people.

One yes – one strong, decisive vote – continues to impact lives far beyond Sunday morning, and far beyond the walls of this sanctuary. When I think about the meeting where it all went down twenty years ago, I imagine a room full of superheroes. People who were superfast and able to outrun the messages of hate they heard growing up. People with superhuman strength and the ability to fight off prejudice from their neighbors and prejudice that has historically been used and abused by Christianity. I imagine people with the gift of clairvoyance, the ability to see the future and know they wanted to be on the right side of history. People who were armed with shields – a force field of shields to protect them from the anger and insults that surely came

beyond these walls as word spread that this church was doing a new thing in Christ's name.

And in some ways they *were* superheroes, but in many other ways they were regular folks. They were young adults and older adults; parents, grandparents, siblings, and spouses of people who were gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender; people who showed up to a congregational meeting one afternoon, like they had done many times before. But instead of voting on an annual budget or electing officers, they were voting on a justice issue that would come to shape their congregation and their lives. It was one yes that led to many more yeses, one moment of time that transformed the next twenty years and beyond. It was regular people like Chris Root who made the motion and Lynn Jondahl who seconded it. People like Jim Nuttall who spoke before the congregation about how he had moved from speaking against this topic as a matter of playing devil's advocate, to fiercely speaking in favor of it. Pat Jennings who said this would be an important growth experience for the church as it was for her family. People like Bob Hubbard whose wisdom then was as profound as his wisdom is today – telling the church that when people are vocal about hate and homophobia, we must be outspoken about love and acceptance. Frank Dennis who offered a friendly amendment to the motion to change the wording of particular phrase to be more grammatically correct – a true Edgewood amendment. And people like Sally Burroughs who recorded the notes of the meeting because there are many ways to use our gifts, and she was called to be the witness and historian to this occasion.

These folks are still here at Edgewood, many are here with us today. They keep their superhero capes hidden, but they have never stopped working for justice or widening our welcome. They have been our teachers, our leaders, and our friends – reminding us of the power of standing up for what we believe in, the power of taking a public stance on justice issues, and the power one yes can have for generations to come. Marcus Garvey is quoted as saying, “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without

roots.” Edgewood, our roots run deep. My hope is that our roots will continue to support us and feed us for the next twenty years – helping us to continue to grow strong in our commitment to LGBTQ justice for all God's people. Amen.