**More Light Sunday**

**Grace Presbyterian Church October 27, 2019**

Lucy Curzon – “All This Work”

Quite a few years ago, one of my dearest friends, Julia Hartman, told me that if I ever decided to return to church, she knew one that I could go to. At that point, I hadn’t been a regular church goer for over a decade. I went to an Anglican Church of Canada college as an undergraduate and kept up the practice of weekly service while completing my MA. But when I moved to the United States to start my PhD, there were—not surprisingly—no Anglican Churches of Canada, so I quickly fell out of practice. To be honest, it seemed one less thing to worry about while trying to juggle school and life a new country.

Years passed. I came out, got my degree, got married, and moved to Georgia. At that time, living in Carrollton, a semi-rural community about 20 miles south of the interstate on the Alabama line, I couldn’t reconcile the concept of “religion” with thoughts of “acceptance” let alone “affirmation.” Indeed, when I first moved there, I assumed, not without reason, that “church” was synonymous with “hatred” – particularly, hatred for people like me. I would bristle with fear when my colleagues asked me, “What church do you go to?” I assumed that they were trying to subtly point out that they disapproved of me. Indeed, by asking that question, I supposed that what they really wanted to tell me was that I was going straight to H-E-double-toothpicks.

By the time I moved to Tuscaloosa a few years later, I had—much to my relief— figured out that the question, “What church do you go to?” is about as innocuous and, in fact, regular as, “What do you do for a living?” “Where do you buy your groceries?” or “Does the toilet paper go over or under?” It is fairly harmless, in other words; and usually it is part of a well-intentioned effort to be friendly. So I pretty quickly learned to say, “I don’t have one yet,” or “still shopping around,” or—if I was feeling a little sassy, “Wait? What church do you go to?” Eventually, if people pressed me for an answer, I’d just tell them “I’m Episcopalian,” since I had figured out that this was closest to the Anglican Church of Canada and, besides, I’d been to a handful of funerals and a few Christmas Eve services at Christ Church downtown.

But then something happened. In November 2016, I lost faith in my chosen homeland and faith that fairness, diversity, and inclusion were essential to American life. At five o’clock in the morning on November 9th, in fact, I woke up terrified. I said to my partner, “We have to leave. We can’t raise our children here.” She replied, “We can’t leave. If we leave, if we take our education and privilege elsewhere, who will be left to do all this work?” What she meant was, who will be left to stand up for the queer kids? People living in poverty? The environment? Women? Who will protest? Who will stand up and say, “Not on my watch.”

It occurred to me, after thinking long and hard, that I needed to find a community of people who firmly believed in the necessity of “all this work.” Weeks passed, however, and I gained little insight. I found various groups whose objectives didn’t quite match up with mine or individuals whose busy schedules meant well-meaning words but little time or energy to put those words into action.

The Christmas season finally rolled around and I still hadn’t solved anything. Making matters worse, by December 24th, I had another very pressing issue at hand. While my religious practices had significantly waned, I had never missed a Christmas service. Indeed, since childhood, I’d gone to church on Christmas Eve in the early evening and celebrated with an over-the-top dinner on the 25th. But I married into a family that ate their festive meal on Christmas Eve before going to 11pm worship *that same night*. Conflicting traditions had caused no end of inconvenience. I couldn’t enjoyably stay up past 9 pm. But I also needed to eat a healthy serving of cranberry, mashed potatoes and Brussel sprouts at least once a year, so I couldn’t risk missing a family dinner that had been hours in the making.

For whatever reason, I remembered—at that moment—Julia’s church. I found the website of what was by then called Grace Presbyterian and, to my delight, I discovered a late afternoon, family friendly service. Had the answer to decade-old conundrum suddenly presented itself? Would there be no more bickering over cold potatoes and burned sprouts on Christmas Eve?

My family received a warm greeting at 3 o’clock that afternoon. Beyond friendliness, however, a single moment stills stands out very clearly to me. Cathy was discussing, with the children, the feeling of being scared (like Mary must have been, she said, waiting in the stable). Trying to make the feeling relatable, Cathy explained, “You know when you’re afraid after having a nightmare and you go climb into bed with your mom and dad? Or both your moms? Or both your dads?” She didn’t pause or stammer, as if she’d added that last part about two moms or two dads as an awkward afterthought or her correction of an oversight. Indeed, she didn’t waver for a moment. It has taken me some time to put words to the feeling I had at that instant, but I think it was recognizing—actually, feeling—the difference between acceptance and affirmation. Perhaps I also realized that, if this was the season for guiding stars, maybe I’d found something worth following.

More weeks passed. January and February were filled with protests against the new administration. And we were out there, as a family, marching for women. Marching to unequivocally declare that Black Lives Mattered. And remarkably enough, I kept seeing Cathy. And Leslie. And Sherry. And Angelica. And Gilly. And Neville. Indeed, it seemed like every time the Brickman-Curzons showed up to do “all this work,” a little white church bus pulled up behind us and all of Grace Presbyterian rolled out. My Christmas star, as such, began to burn a little brighter. The Grace community, it seemed, knew just how much “all this work” really mattered.

So here I am on 27th October 2019 – “More Light” Sunday.

But I want to emphasize that, though my story—so far—isn’t tragic, it isn’t perfectly warm and fuzzy either. I haven’t fully reconciled my fears, my apprehension about organized religion. And I still firmly believe, given how the church is so frequently used as a weapon to viciously attack the LGBTQ+ community, that I have very good reason—in fact, it is my right—to be skeptical. Yet I also believe, now, there is good reason to let faith in. To understand it and to value how faith works in individual lives; to believe, even trust that it is a powerful force of love in a community, a state, or a nation.

Indeed, I now relish those moments at 10:55 on any given Sunday, when I see a member of our community come through those doors behind us for the first time. They are apprehensive; they don’t want to be seen; they wonder how they got here. “It’s okay to be afraid,” I want to say. “But it is also okay to be relieved. To take comfort in this place. To rest. To listen. To stay.”

Thank you.

Adam Brooks – “We Belong”

When I was in graduate school I coached the college speech team where I met an amazing man named Dexter. Dexter was studying to become a pastor of an African American Church in Huntsville and decided to join the team his senior year. We were a wild and odd but wonderful bunch and Dexter had his eyes opened in many ways. At the end of the year as we celebrated a national championship and the hours we spent driving across the country sharing stories about the world and our thoughts on faith. Dexter, it turns out, had never interacted personally with someone was gay and over the year our friendship grew strong and Dexter confided that our friendship had transformed so much of the misinformation he had received. He also looked at me and said words that would vibrate with me for years to come.

He told me that his friendship with me had altered so much of what he understood about the role of LGBTQ people in religion, then he put his hands on me and said.

“Adam You Belong in the Church”

I scoffed. Belong in the church? That was not me.

Belong and church; two ideas that from the time I was 18 could not go together for me.

Belong is an interesting word to me. It’s made up of two syllables that are words in and of themselves that together don’t make sense.

First, Be. As in just be, as in being, as in to exist, be as in to occupy a space. How could I “be” in the church as a gay man when for so long my faith and my being were at odds with each other, a paradox never resolved and fraught with pain.

Then there’s long. Long as in distance. Long as in an unusual degree of difference. Long as in longing a strong desire for something unattainable. Longing I understood, it had been my relationship with Christ and the church for as long as I could remember.

It is said that before we can come out of the closet we have to be put into one, and for me religion was the wood that built and sustained so much of the closet I would live half of my life in. Raised to be a good catholic boy I went to church and Sunday school, did all the things good Christian boys are supposed to do but I understood two conflicting ideas that would take me years to unlearn. First, I was gay, and second I desperately didn’t want to be.

How could I? Gay was something to be whispered, hushed, accompanied with the shake of a head. Gay was the thing kids called me in middle school before I even knew what the word meant. Gay was the thing that drove the boy who spit on me and another boy who threw me down stairs. How could you be something so much of the world seemed to hate. After 9/11 at my high school I attended a see you at the pole rally where pastors from the large baptist church in town would get up and say we are going to take this country back from the homosexual ruining it. I knew, they were talking about me.

In the language of faith we sometimes construct god as bathed in light, but light can also cast shadow.

I spent what I would later call my junior year with Jesus through FCA and morning worship songs with a continued prayer to god and whoever would listen that I wanted, begged to be changed.

Take this from me.

Fix me.

I searched the bible to only find the stories of fire, of brimstone, of hands being cut off, of abomination.

On Sundays in Mass I took communion and understood that this was Christ’s body which had been given up for you, yet my own body was something I would willingly give up.

My body was an act of betrayal, it would betray me again and again, a Judas without even the comfort of silver, and again that longing to be whole.

With the understanding that if I came out the world would reject me, overtime I chose to reject the world. I withdrew from friends and family, better to cast them out then be cast out.

In time I learned to love who I was and I better understood who I wanted to be, but I knew could never be in the church. So I walked away. As a young adult, the performance of faith would anger me, the people who would pray before meals, the convocations at public events.
I found myself irate at the language of conversation that underscores so much of modern Christianity.

In this I saw faith as a means of escaping this world, the rhetoric of transformation at work in every testimony I’d hear from friends and students too mired in the idea that people are changed. I understood faith as an act of personal transformation, He changed Me they’d say, and I knew that transformation could not be true for me.

I’d already tried too hard to be transformed.

Time passed and I found myself in Tuscaloosa Alabama, where the first question you are likely to hear from folks is “have ya’ll found a home church”?

Not which church, or what do you believe, but there is an answer and you’d better not make the wrong one. I was happy, married outside of a church, and yet there was still that longing for something more, something deeper.

Then 2016 happened.

In the wake of that darkness, that unexplainable hole in our country’s psyche I knew I had to seek something to fill that void. Something that made this experience meaningful in some way. So I gave myself a new year’s challenge, I’d come to a different church every Sunday. Let’s see what happens. My journey was as you’d expect, fraught with failure, until I came here.

This place. Ya’ll.

This place is special. First of all people talk to you here, which growing up a Catholic I still find weird, we don’t talk to people at mass. I remember the first time I heard Cathy preach and it was the first time I didn’t have to pay attention to how the speech was written or delivered, but I was wholly moved. I was scared when we passed around the bread for communion that I’d drop the body of Christ on the floor!

But I kept coming and learning and growing and I found something I’d longed for here.

I found myself not wanting to be rescued by faith but renewed by it.

Here I found some knowledge. I read the book Love does by Bob Goff which states that what if everything we knew about religion and the bible boils down to something essential and simple: Love.

What if it’s as simple as love one another, and love cannot be mired in shame.
I understood love, after all that is how I identify, by the inalienable right to love who I chose to love and to celebrate that love fully with god, not in spite of it.

What I love most about this place is that Grace taught me a means of faith that help me live in this world, and not escape from it.

Grace helped me understand a way of following Christ more invested in healing the world than finding the eternal ticket out of it. Through this place I have come to understand that the rhetoric of transformation I rejected early on can be replaced with the awareness that god takes you, as you are, exactly as you are, and transform the world through you.

At least once a week I break down in tears sitting in this pew.

Maybe it’s the hymns. The repeated phrases of “you are not alone” or the reminder from Isiah 43:1 “do not be afraid I am with you, I have called you each by name, I love you, you are mine”

or Matthew 22 which says “ love the lord god with all your heart and with all your soul” and that the second commandment above all other is to love thy neighbor as thyself.

Love.

Love is something you surrender to, it does not demand or judge, it simply is. Here I finally found that place of stillness wher I can just be let god love me the way we deserve to be loved.

Oddly enough my experience with coming out of the closet is now being mirrored through my coming out as a person who explores and identifies with my faith. But there is so much pain left to be excavated and dealt with. Every day I encounter students or meet someone in town who grew up in traumatized by the church. Rejected from their family, told they were damned, or worse living in perpetual fear. Even my husband sometimes struggles, sharing the many ways church brings back difficult and painful experiences. Understanding that they expect God to be a place of pain. Telling people I attend a worship on Sunday, even admitting to others that I was speaking here felt like a coming out in a way.

How do we heal the hurt caused by the symbols through which we’ve come to be healed?

How do we be faithful in a world of such bitter contradictions?

I’m not sure of the answers, and I’ve learned here that the power of doubt can also have a role in faith, it’s something we’ll continue to grow together about. Yet there is one thing I do know.

Celebrating this church as a More Light congregation means seeing the full diverse spectrum of people who sit here every Sunday. Just seeing you. That’s godly.

Just your faces, your faiths being in this church.

We can be in this church, without longing.

Because

WE belong in THIS church.

Leslie Poss – “Finding Home”

I was in my early 50s sitting in a couples class at First United Methodist Church when I heard this lesson about John 3: 16 *For God so loved the world.* The curriculum pointed out, very clearly, there were no pre-requisites for God’s love, there were no qualifiers, there was no, God loves everyone, except the Muslims, Jews, or the Gays…God loves everyone. I cannot begin to tell you the relief and release I felt. But I’m ahead of myself.

I grew up in a loving home. Fourth of five children. Faithful attenders of First Baptist Church, Stockbridge, GA. I mean, faithful…Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night GAs/Acteens, and, of course, choir. Fast-forward several years and I’ve graduated from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary with a Masters in Church Music degree. Since the summer after the 7th grade I felt called to church music ministry so when I graduated from Southwestern I was excited to move to Greensboro, AL and Greensboro Baptist Church to become their minster of music and youth.

Looking to strengthen my skills, January 1993 I enrolled at Univ. of AL in pursuit of a doctorate in choral conducting. On faith- no job and very little money, I moved from Greensboro to Tuscaloosa- and began attending church at Calvary Baptist, where, my 2nd Sunday, I met Sherry Kimbro. To say I was smitten is an understatement. Approximately 14 months and a Valentine’s Day Scavenger Hunt later we were in a relationship. During that same time an internship turned into a job and took us to First Methodist, Tuscaloosa where I became Director of Music. In the early years of our dating relationship we rode an emotional roller coaster: We were giddy in love but we were haunted by the “Are we going to hell?” Meeting and falling in love with Sherry brought so much clarity to my life. Past events in my life, including a time, as a young child, I convinced my mom to make me a doctor’s appointment and also convinced my mom to leave the exam room so I could say to the doctor, “I think I was supposed to be a boy…” (that is a conversation for another time), failed relationships, including a broken wedding engagement…falling in love with Sherry and receiving love in return, helped me understand so much about my past and gave me greater understanding and acceptance of self.

BUT, as a church staff member, I worried about my responsibility, especially to the children and youth. Would I/could I be considered a moral stumbling block to those children? Ultimately, my “what if” guilt led me to leave church music ministry and for the next 13 years I worked in music administration, was an adjunct music instructor, and did other, non-church- odd jobs. During that time my faith waned, my church attendance was spotty at best, and I never expected to ever be back in church music ministry. The question of the relationship was settled and we were committed. As Sherry said, “when love, true love, comes your way, you don’t question the gift.” It is a God-given love that walks you through the death of your fathers, that, when your mother is experiencing advance Alzheimer’s, leads Sherry to say, “Your mother needs to come live with us.” This is a love you do not question.

Then, in the midst of it all, a miracle happened. Kay Mutert called and invited me to come to Univ. Presbyterian to direct music until Easter but then the invitation was extended until the new minister, Cathy Hoop, arrived. With Cathy’s blessing I remained at University and got to be a part of the difficult, beautiful process that led to the merger that led to Grace Presbyterian Church.

Maybe it was God’s Spirit radiating from Rev. Cathy Hoop as she arrived and was installed as pastor of her first church. Definitely, that was part of it, but so was for the first time in 50+ years we were part of a church that openly embraced us, not the “don’t ask, don’t tell” acceptance, the true open embrace and affirmation that for the first time in years, I heard God’s call and felt God’s Spirit saying, “you’re back, welcome back to church music ministry.”

As a closing note, I cannot tell you how many times Sherry proposed marriage to me. As individual states would approve same sex marriage she would jokingly offer to drive us to said state for a quick trip to the justice of the peace. But I wanted to be married at home with family and friends and that meant Tuscaloosa. And, so Dec. 10, 2016, less than a month before we officially became Grace Presbyterian Church, Sherry and I had a beautiful church wedding with friends who are family and without a doubt, God’s gracious and beautiful and inclusive Spirit was and is in this very room, and this sanctuary became a safe place, a welcoming place for me. Thanks be to God for this church family, this body of Christ, Grace Presbyterian Church.