

Welcome and Reminders

Welcome to any visitors and welcome back to the group members. It is important to remember that everything said and done in this group is confidential. The expectation is that there will not be discussion about our conversations to anyone outside of the group that is represented here and now. We understand that sometimes personal insights or information may be shared by someone who feels comfortable doing so in this group and not around others. Let's be respectful of that and carry our commitment to confidentiality as we leave this group. (*Pass out the confidentiality reminder to anyone who has not yet received one*).

Prayer and Praises

Introduction

Over the years, the term "Coming Out" has helped me to understand that there are many different ways one can come out. As we learn more about who we are to God, to one another, and to ourselves, we begin to appreciate our similarities and differences. And, as we share with each other who we are as individuals, we can better understand who we are as the body of Christ, collectively.

As we come out as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, or Ally (LGBTQQIA), we learn that "coming out," as such, is a process, a journey that includes opportunities for us to discover for ourselves and reveal to others what it means to be gay. Over time, when we learn that homosexuality is a gift and a blessing from God, we also learn to trust God to release us from various stereotypes that only encourage us to be and become people we are not. In Psalm 139 we read, *"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well"* (NIV).

As Christians, we learn that Jesus died to release us from our sins as well as the power of sin itself. In our church, we understand that the same God who unites all other churches as one through the blood of Christ unites us with them as one body through that same blood. No longer do we need to fear the sting of rejection, abandonment, and hate, but instead we can

begin to live through the Spirit of God who created us for God's pleasure and to celebrate who we are as the liberated children of God.

Acceptance

As we learn to accept ourselves, one another, and God's love, we discover that the mystery of our humanity gradually reveals itself to us and others through Christ, who loves us more than we may ever know. In Colossians 2:2-3, we read, *"My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"* (NIV). As we embrace Jesus Christ as the mystery of God revealed to us and the whole world, we touch upon our beloved nature and learn to grow and thrive as the mysteries that God created us to be, mysteries to be revealed and cherished, not feared and shunned. In Colossians 1:27 Paul wrote, *"To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory"* (NIV).

In his book *Spiritual Direction – Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*, Henri Nouwen writes, "Remember: You belong to God from eternity to eternity. You were loved by God before you were born; you will be loved by God long after you die..." (p. 49). We each have the hard-wired capacity to listen to, respond to, and embrace the voice of God's love speaking to and empowering us to be more the children of God we were created to be, whether we encounter God's voice and presence through Scripture, preaching, service, prayer, meditation, etc. Henri continues, "Listening to that voice with great inner attentiveness, I hear at my center words that say: 'I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am ours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests... I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you... I have counted every hair on your head, and guided you at every step. You belong to me. I am your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, your lover, and our spouse. Yes, even your child. Wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one'" (pp. 29, 32-33).

Therefore, as we continue to love others, God, and ourselves for who we are we can also continue to thrive as the LGBTQQIA Christians God has always known and loved since and before the beginning of time!

- *Share with the group how growing in your relationship with God has helped you to better appreciate who you are as a LGBTQQIA person of faith. What challenges have you experienced that led you to come out to others and deepen your own awareness of what it means to be Christian and LGBTQQIA?*

Belonging

When we receive salvation offered to us through Christ, we automatically become a part of Christ's body. The New King James Version translates Ephesians 5:30 in this way, *"For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones."* Although we already belong to Christ's body and enjoy the benefits of Christian fellowship, our understanding of what it means to belong to God and one another deepens over time.

Years ago, we sang a song during communion that includes these words, "One bread, one body, one Lord of all. One cup of blessing which we bless. And we, though many throughout all the earth, are one body in this one Lord." And although we can sense the presence of God among us as "one body" most profoundly during communion, we can also live our lives through God's presence each and every day. In 1 Corinthians 12:12, 19, 22-25 we read:

"The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ... How strange a body would be if it had only one part... In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care... So God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other" (NLT).

As we grow individually and become more aware of we are in Christ as individuals, so too, do we grow together as one body and become more aware of who we are in Christ as the family of God. We are all works in progress and strive to become more of who God created us to be. I believe that as LGBTQQIA Christians we have an important part to play in helping the body of Christ as a whole become more aware of its own belovedness. And as we respond to God's call on our lives to just be ourselves and let God be who God is through us, we can receive opportunities to experience the love of God with others regardless of where we live, how we worship, or what we do.

- *Have you ever recognized the joy of God's presence in someone you barely knew or had just met? What was that experience like?*
- *Have you experienced the joy of God's presence in someone else in such a way that it changed your perception of the Body of Christ and who you are as a child of God? If so, how?*

Growth and Maturity

What does it mean to grow and mature in the Christian faith and become more the child of God that God created us to be? There are many examples in the scriptures that illustrate spiritual

truths that deal with growth and maturity. One example comes from Mark's Gospel: Jesus also said, *"The Kingdom of God is like a farmer who scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, while he's asleep or awake, the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not understand how it happens. The earth produces the crops on its own. First a leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are formed, and finally the grain ripens"* (Mark 4:26-28)(NLT).

As we live out our relationship with Christ in our community of faith through listening and responding to the Word of God, giving ourselves to others through acts of service, and spending time with God both individually and through Christian fellowship, we become more of who God sees us to be. And, although we do not know how we will become who God created us to be, God knows. In 1 John 3:1-2 we read, *"Beloved, now we are the children of God, and it does not yet appear what we will be. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Christ, for we shall see Christ as Christ is"* (NTILB).

I'd like to share with you the following illustration that has helped me to understand the importance of being patient with myself as I strive to grow and mature into the child of God that God wants me to become:

Hangchow is a city of silk-weavers. Come with me into one of their sheds. Look at the reverse-side of the brocade that is on the loom. To the untaught, the many-colored warp and woof seem only chaotic, a meaningless crossing of colored threads. But turn it over. Look at the front side of the finished fabric. It is beautiful, a tasteful design of people and trees, flowers and mountains. The work in progress was confusing, but the end product has meaning and purpose.

When our lot appears puzzling to our eyes, remember that we do not know to what design God is working. For each thread, bright or dark, has its function, and each change of pattern follows a prepared plan. What matter if life's experiences seem disorderly and we cannot grasp what they are all about? God's Word assures us that all things without exception work together for our good.

-- The Joyful Heart Daily Meditations—Watchman Nee (January 16)

Here, as with Mark's parable, we read about spiritual parallels that illustrate a process that happens when God first begins to work within us, helps us to grow, and then finally brings us into maturity, both as individuals and as the family of God as a whole.

- *How has Valley Ministries helped you to deepen your relationship with God and others? What tools do you use to help you discern the difference between what God expects of you and what you expect of yourself?*

Providing

Providing is a term I'm using to describe what we give to the generation(s) of Christians who will come after us. In various scriptures, the Bible likens our walk of faith in Christ to a race. I'd like to think of it as a relay race. Each competitor begins and ends their portion of the race with a baton in hand. Once a competitor has finished that particular portion of the race, that competitor hands the baton to the next competitor who is reaching to receive the baton, who then begins to run the next part of the race. To use this example, when we look at what gifts and callings we receive from God, what we do with those gifts and callings, and how we grow in our faith, our view can include the idea that the Body of Christ is more than we know. We begin to understand that what we do here and now will affect those generations of Christians that will come after us. In his book, *Our Greatest Gift*, Henri Nouwen writes, "In our dying, we become parents of generations to come... We, too, must see to it that our deaths become fruitful in the lives of those will live after us. Without care, however it is difficult, if not impossible, to let our lives bear fruit in the generations to come... But, as a community of care, we can remind each other that we will bear fruit far beyond the few years we have to live" (pp. 97-99).

We live as one body, dependent upon the work that God is doing in each of our lives. And, as we die to our own agendas and allow God's agenda to come to full fruition, the fruitfulness of how we live for God is revealed to others. In Philippians 3:12 we read, "*But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me... Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us*" (NLT). So, when we reach the end of our course of faith, we can die fruitfully, leaving behind the full benefits of the gifts and callings that God has given to us that can now bear fruit in the lives of generations of Christians to come.

- *What does living as the Body of Christ mean to you? How can you live your life of faith more fruitfully as a testimony to both the Christian and gay communities?*
- *Open Discussion: Further thoughts and reflections you'd like to share?*