



**Northern Texas - Northern Louisiana Mission Area**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America** *God's work. Our hands.*  
Sowing and Growing Disciples of Jesus

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18 July 2015

Dear rostered and lay leaders of the NT-NL Mission Area:

*+++ Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ +++*

I am writing to you to inform you of my sermon preached to the NT-NL high school youth and adult sponsors at the ELCA National Youth Gathering on Saturday, July 18. More than 400 of our youth and adults were gathered for bible study, reflection, conversation, and prayer around the call of God in each of our lives. Our study was based on Mark 2:1-12, the story of the paralytic man who sought and received healing from Jesus after a long time of suffering. Several of our youth told their powerful stories of God at work in their lives, I was Holy Spirit-moved to tell my story publicly, for the first time. This is, in part, what I shared.

Growing up In Pennsylvania, in a very conservative home and culture, I was taught that homosexuality was a terrible sin. I grew up in an atmosphere where I heard the words "fag" and "queer" often in reference to those who were "not like us," or "sissies," or "just different...you know." And people would nod in sad agreement. By my junior high years and beyond I recognized that they were talking about me, but I buried it deep.

I learned early on that I had to hide my true nature...especially because I wanted to be a pastor and serve in the church. After all, pastors could not be gay and serve Jesus. On the one hand, I felt safety and joy in the church, along with a strong sense of call to ministry. On the other hand, church was also where I felt I most had to hide, the most shame. I lived with low self-esteem, self-loathing, and feelings of guilt and rejection.

When I started college, I became good friends with my future wife, Billye Jean, with whom I developed a close, loving relationship. We married 40 years ago, have had a fulfilling and loving relationship, including two sons and now one grandson. Yet I lived with my sense that I was not being fully honest with myself and others. There was a dark place in my life and it stood between us in ways that I cannot even yet understand.

*Continued*



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Throughout our church's conversations about human sexuality, I was torn. I knew the scriptures that condemn homosexuality and I could quote them well. Yet, I began to recognize the grace of the Gospel and to understand that God loves me just as I am. Being gay is not a sin. My sin was a life time of denying that the God who created me, also accepts me and loves me. It was faithlessness. Still, when it came time to vote on new policies for the ELCA, whereby we would allow the blessing of same gender relationships and remove the threat of discipline for pastors who blessed such relationships, I voted "no," feeling incredibly torn. I was afraid. I was afraid I would have to defend my decision to vote "yes" in congregations that would be strongly opposed to gay and lesbian persons. It was safer to hide behind a "no" vote. I was a coward...another sin for which I needed forgiveness.

Indeed, as I visited congregations considering a vote to leave the ELCA over the next couple years, the arguments defending those few scriptures condemning gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual persons sounded more and more hollow. Christians spoke strong, condemning words about people who were like me, by nature. It did not sound like the truth of the gospel I have been preaching. It was at that time that I spent a great deal of time in counseling where I could verbalize: "I am a gay man. I am a beloved child of God, just as I am, created in God's image and acceptable to God and to myself." What an amazing amount of freedom and deepening faith have developed in my life over these past five years. God created me as I am and God loves me completely and fully.

It took nearly a year or more, along with much good counseling, before I could verbalize it to Billye Jean. It was a moment of fear of possible rejection. For a long time we discussed the implications for us and our future. I wanted to remain married and to try to continue to understand what this would mean for us. She accepted me and affirmed me, despite her fears and questions. We are both committed to our marriage, for which I am grateful. I recognize that this is our decision and it is right for us. However, I can now say I respect those of any persuasion who live out their sexuality in bonds of marital commitment.

I was moved to share my journey with the youth because I know many are struggling with these and other issues of self-esteem, rejection, and self-loathing. I wanted to instill the hope of the Gospel among youth who are defining themselves. I urged that none of them would endure that pain for as long as I did.

I understand that this announcement has significant implications for our churches and my relationship with you. I hope it will promote more open and honest conversation about who we are and whose we are, especially between parents and children. I stand ready to have conversations with you about my journey and yours. May we continue to be a church growing and maturing in our efforts to live out and invite others into the incredible love of God in Jesus Christ

Grace and Peace in Christ,

+ *Kevin S. Kanouse*  
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