

Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta
Sermon for Pride Eucharist sponsored by Integrity Atlanta
All Saints' Episcopal Church | October 9, 2014
The Rt. Rev. Robert C. Wright, D.D.

Good evening. Greetings to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Greetings to you on behalf of the Episcopal Church in Middle and North Georgia: The Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta. It is wonderful to be with you this evening and to celebrate life in all its vibrancy, and fellowship in all its dynamism.

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Today we not only prepare ourselves for the parties and the parading of this weekend, but in the church we remember the life and witness of Wilfred Thomason Grenfell, a man devoted to the care and healing of his neighbors. A man whose life and labor speaks to us here and now. I know you all are very familiar with him and are great fans of his, but indulge me.

Grenfell was born in England the year the American Civil War ended. He matriculated to medical school in London and was on his way to a comfortable life as a physician. That's when something interesting happened. His biography tells us he came under the influence of an "American revivalist." Some kind of Renaissance man. Moody was his name.

You know the type: athletic, rugged, passionate. A referential figure. Moody was an exponent of something called "muscular Christianity." A notion inspired by St. Paul's words, "that we press on toward the goal for the prize for which God has called me." The notion that faith is more than an intellectual enterprise but also an athletic undertaking. "Muscular Christianity," as Grenfell came to understand it, meant "a commitment to health and well-being; strength used for the protection of the weak and stamina for the advancement of righteous causes." If that's the definition of muscular Christianity, we need more muscular Christians today. How many muscular Christians do you know? Would anyone describe *you* as a muscular Christian?

At the ripe old age of 22 Grenfell decided to join missionary work among the fishermen in Iceland and the Bay of Biscayne. Think layers of long underwear here. Five years later, Grenfell would visit Labrador for the first time and be "appalled" by the conditions of the workers he met there: starvation, ill-health and poverty. Within one year he would build the first hospital in Labrador, with schools and hospital ships and clothing

distribution centers to follow. Grenfell would stay committed to this work and this community for the next 42 years until his own ill health stopped him. You can almost hear St. Paul's words down the hallway of time, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." And, "to some are given the gifts of healing by the one Spirit." If Grenfell teaches us anything, it is beware of athletic, charismatic, foreigners and the spell they cast. And never underestimate being appalled, it just maybe the way you find your life's calling.

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So let's test this idea about being appalled leading to good works. Open the Bible and travel to Africa: There we see the Hebrew midwives appalled by Pharaoh's order of infanticide. Appalled, they defied the system and saved children. Appalled by his older brothers' cowardice in the face of a giant, David – the original athletic, charismatic foreigner – takes faith and faces and defeats his Goliath. Fast forward and we see Jesus, appalled and kneeling in the dirt with a woman sentenced to death for adultery. Appalled by this He puts himself in harm's way for this stranger.

You could say mercy is better than justice. You could say Karma has a big sister, and her name is Grace. In 2012 rapper Macklemore was so appalled by the homophobia and misogyny in rap music, so appalled at the thought that two consenting adults could not be married in his home state of Washington, he penned with Mary Lambert the song "Same Love."

"When I was at church, they taught me something else. If you preach hate at the service those words aren't anointed/That holy water that you soak in has been poisoned/When everyone else is more comfortable remaining voiceless/Rather than fighting for humans that have had their rights stolen/I might not be the same, but that's not important/No freedom 'til we're equal, damn right I support it"

It was this song that became the first Top 40 song to promote and celebrate marriage equity. This is all well and good, but being appalled is not something we can outsource to rappers or King David or even Jesus. Being appalled is something that's deeply personal. What are you appalled at these days? Not upset by. Not made uncomfortable by, but appalled at?

It's appalling to me that suicide is the "second leading cause of death for young people ages 10-24. With more than 4,000 young people taking their own lives each year. And that for every actual suicide, there are at least 100 suicide attempts." And while this is a complex issue with many nuances, we do know that bullying and depression associated

with being gay, lesbian, transgender or queer increases our children's likelihood of taking their own lives. We hear Macklemore sing again,

*"When kids are walking 'round the hallway plagued by pain in their heart/
A world so hateful some would rather die than be who they are"*

How is it that a God who is love could want this for any of his children? It is appalling that some of us in the faith community could fill God's mouth with our words of hate and bigotry. Appalling that we make Jesus in our own image. There are good people of good faith on every side of the marriage equity conversation. I believe that. I respect that. People who are working through deeply held understandings of scripture and tradition. But there is a bogus narrative that must be identified as bogus.

Marriage equity will not diminish marriage in our country or in our state. What diminishes marriage in America and in Georgia is the 60-hour work week. What diminishes marriage is the refusal to adopt a real living wage that will ease the strain on many working-poor families. What diminishes marriages are antiquated immigration policies and laws and nonexistent training for clergy to more artfully support families in crises. What can we do? Help us, Grenfell!

I remember not so long ago gatherings like this one were unthinkable. I remember when this very church, All Saints', did something revolutionary. We acknowledged the dignity of those who were living and dying with AIDS. They could be spoken of here. They had names here. They could be cared for here. They could be grieved here. They could be commended to the greater life with God from here. And it has to be said again and again, thank you All Saints' Church for your witness. Thank you for stretching us. Thank you for being appalled enough to act. But now there is more for the church to do. We mustn't memorialize our yesterdays so much that we are blind to today's work.

I am so grateful for the work of those who are telling our children, pleading with them that "It Gets Better." Telling them, that if you will just hold on you will make it through adolescence with all of its awkwardness and barbarity. And that you can become a self-possessed gay man or woman. That joy will increase.

But we should, as a people of God, be able to say more to our young people than "It gets better." We should be able to answer for them the question, "Why should they hold on?" We should be able to tell them *Who* makes it better! The church must tell them, you are made in the image of God, exactly how you are. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. Your name is beloved. Not cursed, shameful, worthless, mistake or sinful. Your name is redeemed. Your name is friend. Jesus himself went to his own, and they rejected him. So take courage. Make Jesus your refuge and confidant. Jesus makes it better. And if

in their discovering of their sexual orientation, our teenagers are cast off by their mothers and fathers, as so many are right here in Atlanta. It will be us, Christ's church, that remind them what the Bible says, that "though your father and mother forsake you, the Lord will hold you near....The Lord will take you up."

This, I am sure, is our calling now. Not only to funeralize with dignity, but to fan the flames of life because of human dignity. Yes, to be appalled by indignity and death enough to save lives. Let our attendance this evening confirm this as our purpose.

I am reminded of a story I once heard that makes all of this plain. Bea was in her 80s and much admired for her sweetness and kindness to all. Her priest came to call on her one afternoon early in the fall. She welcomed him into her beautiful Victorian parlor. She offered him a seat while she went to the kitchen to prepare some tea. While he sat he noticed Bea had a grand old pump organ. And on top was a beautiful cut crystal bowl filled with water. He looked closer and noticed, of all things, in the water floated a condom. Right then Bea came back into the room. Were the rumors true, had Bea flipped? He certainly couldn't mention the strange sight. As they began to chat, he tried to avoid the thought, but his curiosity got the best of him. "Miss Bea," he said pointing to the bowl, "I wonder if you would tell me about this." "Oh yes," she replied, "isn't it wonderful? I was walking around downtown two months ago and I found this little package. The directions said put it on the organ, keep it wet, and it would prevent disease. And you know I haven't had a cold yet!" Poor Bea, she was unwise and unlearned in the ways of the world, but we can't afford that luxury.

Jesus set his disciples out on a boat. And as they rowed the course Jesus gave them, they strained and the winds were against them. All night this happened. They seemed surprised by it all, until in the morning they saw him. The One they loved, but were afraid to love too much. Some speak of leadership in the face of change, but I think it's more accurate to speak of faithfulness in transition.

To be a follower of Jesus is to always be straining at the oars. Pulling together. To always be buffeted by winds through long uncertain night times. We are many kinds tonight. We are black and white, gay, lesbian and straight. Some of us have money, others not so much. But we are first followers of Jesus Christ. Because of his coming to us in the mornings and the night times of our lives we persist.

We are first recipients of a love that we neither could win nor deserve. A love that allows us to impinge on it until it has transformed us by its gentleness. A love that knew us in the construction zone of the womb. And we are to reflect this love and light through the

shattered glass of our lives. This was Jesus' only request of us. That we would love the world because he loves the world –with all of its warts and wonders. Just like those disciples then, we are in the same boat now. But just like them, and just like Grenfell, we can reflect a holy sense of being appalled and of being astounded by a God who condescends to have his message of wholeness come through us, the partial and duplicitous.

So as we prepare for the parade, remember the first Pride parade. The one St. Paul refers to: “God has put us apostles on display at the end of the parade... We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings.” It is this love and opportunity and calling that Maya Angelou seemed to speak of when she said (in her poem “In and Out of Time”):

The sun has come. / The mist has gone. / We see at a distance ... our long way home. / I was always yours to have. / You were always mine. / We have loved each other in and out of time./ Before the first stone looked up at the dazzling sun/ and the first tree struggled up from the forest floor/ I had always loved you more.... The sun has come. The mist has gone. /We see in the distance our long way home. I was always yours to have. /You were always mine. / We have loved each other in and out... of time.

AMEN