

“Hide It Under a Bushel? No!”

by Rich Brown

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I've bussed tables at a restaurant.

Cut grass in a cemetery

Played Country music on the radio from midnight to 8 am

I was a news director at a radio station

I taught radio broadcasting.

I was a reporter for a local newspaper

Served as a County Clerk and Register of Deeds

And State Legislator and Clerk of the House of Representatives

But I never ever imagined I'd end up standing in a pulpit in church delivering a sermon

I promise not to make my sermon political, but it will be very Presidential, because it will be all about me.

Truthfully, the sermon I am giving today will be a little different from what you are accustomed to because my journey here today is probably not what you expect.

I grew up in a little town in the western Upper Peninsula called Wakefield.

My mom and dad were members of the Methodist Church. A small church with about 30 active members that is still going strong today.

My mom was in the choir and in the various women's groups. My dad attended regularly and sat in the back pew and timed the length of each sermon so he could complain about how long it was at Sunday dinner. My dad's other claim to fame occurred when we had our first female minister who liked to hug and kiss everyone. My dad wanted no part of that, so when she would try to hug him my dad would straighten up to his full 6ft 6inches and extend his hand. He took great pride in the fact he was the only member of the church who hadn't been kissed by her.

I attended Sunday School, lit the candles, took the offering on occasion and even attended summer camp several times at Camp Michigamee which was camp sponsored by the Methodist Church in the Upper Peninsula.

After my parents were gone I really had no interest in the church. Sunday was a day to sleep in.

As I got older and came to grips with who I really was I began to look at the church with disgust.

I watched as religious leaders condemned who I was.

If you ever attend a Pride Festival there will normally be people, calling themselves religious or Christians, with signs using the bible to tell me I was going to hell or worse. My interest in ever going to church again was wiped away by what I saw and heard from people professing to love God and quote Jesus but hate who I was.

In 2010, I met Tony.

Now you need to know the Tony's father was very religious and extremely conservative. His dad probably agrees with much of the rhetoric that I just described.

Despite that, Tony wanted to find a church to go to. I wasn't thrilled, but I agreed to try.

We first went to the former Methodist Church out on St Joe.

Now at our congregational conversation two weeks ago, Jim was in our group and talked about how he'd like to see a return to more traditional hymns and readings, well that church was not the place to find that.

We spent the hour standing as a rock band played Christian rock songs and we saw the lyrics projected on a screen.

If I was going to go back to church this was not the place for me.

So then we tried Pilgrim UCC. The people were very friendly, almost overpoweringly so but they were nice.

There was a woman there that I knew from working in the legislature. After church we were talking and she asked why we came all the way over to Pilgrim when we had a UCC church in Grand Ledge which had this amazing Pastor named Nicollette.

I didn't really know there was a church out here, but we found it and tried it.

I think we came and spoke to a few people and left. I enjoyed the positive message I heard from the pulpit.

We came again and I stated to pay attention a little more and began to get the feeling that this place was different from what I perceived church to be. The congregation, although not racially diverse, was diverse in other ways. There was something unique about this church, there was something unique about all of you.

Now I'm going to tell you that I am not a spiritual person. I wish I was, but I'm not.

For example, I read today's scripture reading about 20 times and couldn't figure a way to build a sermon around it.

As Moderator and member of the Search Committee I know we are supposed to approach doing the important business of the church in a spiritual way. Me, I just want to get things done.

I will confess to you right now that I struggle with the bible and I haven't bought in on everything it says. That's one of the reasons I never imagined myself doing what I'm doing today. In fact, I keep listening for that rumble of thunder accompanied by a lightning bolt to strike me down.

As we continued to attend this church I realized I wasn't getting a message of exclusion or the need to repent or fear God.

Instead I was hearing about love, inclusion, acceptance and forgiveness.

I had never heard the term open and affirming before, but suddenly I found a place that didn't just say it but practiced it.

Each time we came here I realized more and more what a rare and amazing place this was.

You could have just tolerated us but instead you welcomed us as part of the family.

My god, you were crazy enough to make me the Moderator. By the way, that was kind of a dirty trick.

We met other members of the LGBTQ community, we learned about Charlynn and how she offered to hold discussions to explain who she was and you went and learned and accepted.

You were never judgmental about Tony and me. We understand there is a significant age difference between us but I've never felt any judgement coming from anyone here...ever. In fact one of my favorite moments came when we are getting our pictures taken for the church directory and the photographer referred to us as father and son, which we get on occasion and usually ignore, but Kathy Burt heard the comment and corrected the photographer telling him we were in fact partners. I thought that was amazing and appreciated it so much.

This is a rare and beautiful place filled with incredible people.

I'll be really honest with you, I don't come for the scripture readings or the prayers, I come because this church recharges my batteries. The beautiful music, the positive message and spending time with this wonderful group of people, many who I consider great friends, gets me ready to face another week.

Yes, we are going through a time of change and the person who stands up here each week will be new but this person behind the pulpit isn't the church, we all are.

Leah Horn once described this church as a "Hidden Gem"

I think that's a problem.

This church provides something extremely rare, a place to worship and hear a positive message without judgement or criticism.

I can tell you without question that when it comes to a vast majority of the LGBTQ community there is a belief that a church like this cannot possibly exist.

I remember several years ago I received a call from Pastor Nicolette asking if I could help out on a Saturday night project. The Gay Straight Alliance Group at Lansing Community College was holding their annual fundraiser which was a "drag show". Now, if you don't know what that is, talk to me after church. Our church every year set up a table and passed out free cookies, snacks, chips and soft drinks. So I went along with several other members of the Open and Affirming Committee and passed out the treats before the show and during the intermission. It was one of the first events I ever attended representing this church.

When the mostly college age men and women came up to our table they would ask who were. When we told them we came from a church in Grand Ledge, the looks we received ranged from stunned disbelief to fear. I wonder if some of the people passed on the treats for fear they were laced with some chemical trying to wash away the gay in them. However, when they started to talk to us and we could tell them about this amazing church that actually exists, they became interested. I don't know if we gained any members from it but we did do something as important. We showed that church, this church, isn't a place to fear. That this church accepts you as you are and respects your right to worship or not worship as you see fit. We showed them that the religious world isn't just about bible thumping bigots, there are good and loving people out there ready to welcome you with open arms no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey.

So if you noticed, the title of my sermon today is hide it under a bushel? No.

I think about a song we sang in bible camp and I know you probably are familiar with it.

I won't sing it, so you don't have to look so fearful.

But it goes

This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine

This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine

Let it shine let it shine let it shine

Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm going to let it shine

Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm going to let it shine

Let it shine Let it shine Let it shine

This church, this congregation, each and every one of us here are that light

Young or old, gay or straight, spiritual or just wanting your batteries recharged.

We are a very important light that shouldn't be hidden, we are a light that needs to shine brightly so people can see it and want to check it out, we are a light that needs to guide people so they can find the love and friendship I've found here, we need to be the light that shines so brightly that this hidden gem will no longer be hidden.

So are we going to hide it under a bushel?

Let's let it shine.

Amen