

## **“Would You Harbor Me?”**

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar  
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I have to tell you a story about when I was six years old. It was right before Halloween and my parents had taken my brother and me to Toys R Us to buy costumes. To someone my size, the costume aisle seemed to go on into eternity. My brother and I proceeded to look through the costumes. We tried on a few different things. Eventually my brother, who is a couple of years older than me, found his. It was a skeleton suit, complete with black fabric and glow-in-the-dark bones. It took me a little longer to find the one that was right for me. But then I saw it. Yes, that had to be it! I was so pleased to find it. My parents both smiled when I ran over to show them the one I wanted. I'd recently seen the movie "Peter Pan," and so that Halloween, I wanted to be Tinker Bell.

My parents were careful to ask us both if we were sure we had the one we wanted. I knew I was sure! Being the open-minded Unitarians that they were, my parents figured, if their little boy wanted to be Tinker Bell, then so be it.

When we got home I tried it on. The gown was a satiny, frilly material. There were wings, a plastic mask, and my favorite part was the magic wand. I could hardly wait for Halloween.

Now, I don't remember any specific comments or experiences, but I know there must have been some teasing once I got out in public, because I remember at some point that Halloween, I started to feel small. I began to feel ashamed of myself. What I do remember is looking over at my brother in his skeleton costume and noticing that he looked strong and scary and confident, and I felt awkward. I'd wished I'd picked a different costume. I was no longer proud of mine. That experience taught me, at a very young age, to be careful and check things out for social acceptability before doing anything that might make other people laugh at me.

I tell this story because I want to suggest that you, too, have a Tinker Bell story. It may have nothing to do with gender or physical appearance, but I bet there has been a time when you were made to feel small, when you were belittled, a time when you felt less than beautiful, less than a miracle.

I remembered this story a few weeks ago when I came out of the Sunday service and a few mothers asked me if I'd heard what my three-year-old son Elias had been up to. I found out that when he arrived at Sunday school he immediately put on a pink leotard with an attached tutu and a bright red hat, and he started dancing and spinning around the room. It turns out someone happened to capture it on video, so I got to watch it. What I remember most about the video is the smile on his face. He was as happy as a human being could possibly be. He was free and uninhibited and full of joy. Nobody made him feel bad. If anything, they gave him a lot of positive attention. So, what happens to us that we go from being these non-judgmental, uninhibited little blessings from God, into becoming fearful, judging, critical people?

I've been particularly interested in the gender question, because this weekend our church hosted a transgender conference. Without going into a lot of definitions, transgender generally refers to people who do not fit into our culturally established gender norms.

In our culture we typically think in terms of male and female as if they are mutually exclusive categories and we don't have a lot of tolerance or understanding of gender forms or definitions that do not fit this two-party system. Nevertheless, statistics show that somewhere between .01 % and 1% of births result in a child who either has ambiguous gender or both genders. The term for this is intersex (it used to be called hermaphrodite). If we take the most conservative estimate of .01% that's one in every ten thousand births. Well, there are over seven billion people on earth, which means that there are a lot of people who biologically do not fit into the male/female categories that our culture defines.

Unfortunately, when such a baby is born in this country it is usually considered an emergency. Often the doctors will assign a gender by doing a quick operation, and sometimes with hormone therapy as well. Sometimes the parents are never told. Sometimes the parents know, but they are too ashamed to tell anyone else, including their own child. It is not uncommon that at the time of puberty, such a child's body might begin developing in ways that are inconsistent with the gender they have been assigned.

Intersex persons, along with people who dress in clothing inconsistent with our culture's gender norms, and people who choose to live their lives expressing their gender in ways that are inconsistent with what is considered "normal," whether they do so through surgery, hormone therapy or dress, are typically called transgender. You can think of them as people who transcend cultural gender norms.

I learned a lot about transgender history through a wonderful book by Leslie Feinberg titled *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*. In the book, I found out that transgender people have been around at least since the beginning of recorded history. In many cultures, including many of the Native American cultures in our land, transgender people were not only accepted, they were, and in some cases still are, revered. A look at Native American history shows that Indians who looked, dressed and in some cases even underwent surgery to alter their gender often were considered sacred or holy. They were often medicine people, shamans, and tribal leaders. Today they are most often called two-spirit people.

The stories of European encounters with transgender native peoples is brutal, and includes mass murder by beating, sword, and in the case of one Catholic conquistador named Vasco Nunez, forty transgender persons were fed to his dogs alive. In European history, the best-known transgender person is Joan of Arc in the fifteenth century. At the age of seventeen, she dressed in men's clothing and led the French people in a number of decisive victories over their British captors. Her masterful leadership and genius as a military strategist has become the basis of many books, plays and films.

Two years later she was burned alive at the stake while still refusing to dress in women's clothing. Article III of her Accusation by the Catholic Church said, "many in her presence adore her as a saint... even more they declared her the greatest of all saints after the Virgin Mary..."

In her book, Feinberg tells the stories of many other incredible transgender persons throughout history. It turns out that despite the church's public stance against cross-dressers and other transgender people, there are actually twenty-five saints who are said to be transgender. Most of them were women who dressed like men and who wore beards. The book also documents the roles of transgender persons in cultures around the world from every country in Asia through Africa. In many places transgender people have sacred and honored roles in society.

But here in our country, transgender people continually face physical violence, verbal abuse and harassment, often rejection by their families and by their faith communities. They even have to endure misunderstanding and refusal of care by health care workers. Feinberg writes: "I remember late one night in December my lover and I arrived at a hospital emergency room during a snowstorm. My fever was 104 degrees and rising. My blood pressure was pounding dangerously high. ...The doctor in charge began physically examining me. When he determined that my anatomy was female, he flashed me a mean-spirited smirk. ...He told me to get dressed and then he stormed out of the room. ...The doctor returned after I was dressed. He ordered me to leave the hospital and never return."

So, why am I telling you all this? Because I know who you are. You are doctors, lawyers, judges, politicians, heads of universities, and hospitals. You are on the boards of universities and hospitals, you are mothers and fathers, and grandparents, Sunday School teachers, school counselors, police officers, therapists, nurses, social workers, business owners, voters, church members. I can't guarantee that you can save anybody's soul (except your own), but I know that you have the power to save some people's lives.

The suicide rate among transgender people is between forty and seventy percent. I visited a website last night that lists the names and stories of hundreds of transgender people who have been murdered or left to die by health care workers in the past few years.

Some of you may remember Stevie. She was a youth who grew up in this church. On Youth Sunday a few years ago, she shared with us her journey as a teenager who was lesbian and transgender. It says a great deal about this congregation that she felt safe enough to stand up before four-hundred-plus members and tell her story. And this congregation erupted in rousing applause and there wasn't a dry eye in the house. I think I can say with confidence that All Souls is the only church in Tulsa that is talking about this subject openly and honestly this morning.

You may not be very comfortable with the topic. That's okay, one of our transgender panelists said that it took her forty years to become comfortable with her identity and she doesn't expect people to just change overnight. It is a confusing, sometimes uncomfortable topic. It is certainly controversial. I commend this congregation for making room for the conference this weekend. I appreciate your willingness to listen openly to what I have to say on the subject.

I believe we have a responsibility to serve all of God's children. I think most of us like to think that we would have been among the saints of the world who, during slavery, would have harbored runaway slaves in the Underground Railroad. I think most of us like to think we would have been among the righteous Gentiles, the saints who hid Jews like Anne Frank and so many others in their houses during WWII. I even think that most of us would like to think that we would have been among the saints in Tulsa who harbored blacks in their homes during the terrible race riot of 1921.

If I showed up at your home or church, at six years old in a Tinker Bell costume or a pink tutu, how would you treat me? If I showed up in women's clothes at your home tonight, would you harbor me? If you were being berated and abused, would I harbor you? What does your conscience say? What would God ask of you? When we sing our final hymn "For All the Saints" let us sing it for ALL the saints, the Catholic Saints who were women with beards, the saints who harbored and still harbor those who are persecuted, the saints in our midst.

I honor transgender people, the ones who are visible and the ones who are invisible in our lives. For they have the courage to be who they are despite the consequences. If they can truly be themselves without shame or fear, then there is hope that the rest of us can too. If they can live their dream in the face of so much resistance and hardship, maybe some of the rest of us can find the courage to live our dreams too. If I was Tinker Bell, I could wave my wand and it would be so, but I'm not, so it's up to you!

Amen