

Good morning Buena Vista! Welcome all to this Palm Sunday service! For those of you who know me little or not at all, my name is Michael Steiger. My wife, Ellie Kim, and I have 4 children: Sora, our oldest is 9, our twins Somi and Elias are 7, and the baby, Soelle, is almost 2. We live in San Mateo and have been part of the Buena Vista community for over 10 years. We love the Buena Vista community, its diversity across ethnicity, age, backgrounds, and sexuality. We couldn't think of a better place to help raise our children.

Before I go into the Palm Sunday message, I would like to say a few words about the reconciling committee and the work that we do. About 1 year ago, I joined the reconciling committee without any expectations other than to follow where God was leading me. I think this calling stemmed from years past, with an earlier generation of reconciling champions that Ellie and I were close with, people such as Daniel Park, Sally & David McIntyre, Mary Abusaba and many others. These early champions at our church understood the opportunity they had to not only do great work, but also I think to be build relationships and to be a small part of the amazing LGBTQIA community. Just to clarify, as I will use this term a lot today — LGBTQIA means Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual. I also like to think of the A as Ally, which is a very important part.

The reconciling committee meets once a month here at Buena Vista, usually on a Monday or Tuesday evening. I can't express to you how much I have enjoyed being part of the reconciling committee, or what it means to me to be around such wonderful, caring, thoughtful, people like Nikki, Lois, Coke & Karleen. I am honored each month to be able to participate with this group to uplift, educate, and bring understanding around LGBTQIA issues and the intersection with religion, but maybe even more importantly to have and to deepen real meaningful relationships with such amazing people!

I think we assumed that Nikki, our committee chair, would give the Palm Sunday message today on behalf of the reconciling committee. I know she would have been amazing and would have given you a rich and thoughtful message. But instead she urged me to give the message and I think I understand why. To be true to the meaning of a reconciling church, it is imperative that non-LGBTQIA people participate and lead, as the early champions of our reconciling committee did. I only hope I can deliver a message that is half of what Nikki would have given! And now, for the Palm Sunday Message!

I ask you to imagine Palm Sunday over 2000 years ago when Jesus entered Jerusalem. When you imagine this scene, what do you see? What sounds do you hear? how do you feel? Put yourself there and ask why are you here? On this day of Passover, on the opposite side of town, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, is entering the City at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers, with all the power and glory. On the other side of town there will be bands, glorious soldiers, and beautiful majestic horses. but yet you stay here, to see Jesus, on a donkey, with a small, unassuming peasant procession. Why have you made this choice?

You look around and see the crowd of people, the streets filled with the “outcasts” of society, the old & sick, the blind, the lepers, the foreigners and the homeless. You hear the excitement and anticipation in the voices mixed with hushed whispers of perhaps confusion or uncertainty. You feel a sense of anticipation, but also fear because you see some nearby soldiers watching. But you’ve also seen how Pilate and the ruling class have mistreated, denigrated, imprisoned, and killed. You are here and you stay, because you know it’s right and you must be yourself. How could you go to Pilate’s parade and cheer? You are not brave, you are not strong, but you cannot pretend and you cannot ignore. You look around and begin to notice more closely the people around you. You see your neighbor, a

women of little means, she is talking to the tax collector. And the tax collector is sharing some bread with a child. The child is holding hands with a blind woman so she does not trip. The blind woman is introducing the foreigner to a friend. You see the encouragement, you see the bravery, you see the relationships, you see the peace, and you see God's kingdom. You begin to understand the true meaning of Jesus, and you feel the call to choose, to be on the side of God, to be on the side of good, and to uplift the voices of the oppressed and the marginalized.

Like in the times of Jesus on that Palm Sunday thousands of years ago, oppression is all around us and right outside our doors here in Alameda. Immigrants, people of color, People with Disabilities, LGBTQIA people, and those struggling to afford housing, among many others. We are being called to choose. Will you be on the side of God, to uplift these voices? There are so many opportunities here at Buena Vista for you to seek out relationship building, to offer a helping hand, and to fight oppression & injustice. Most recently, I think all of our Buena Vista ministries are hearing a call to intersectional justice work and are seeking ways to support each other.

For example, I recently learned more about an organization called RMN, or the Reconciling Ministries Network. RMN is a Christian and United Methodist organization. The network includes over 700 reconciling communities and over 34,000 individuals. They have a great website — check it out at rmnetwork.org. It is a sophisticated, successful, and important organization, with a powerful board of directors, numerous committees, and a relatively large staff. According to its mission statement, “RMN mobilizes United Methodists of all sexual orientations and gender identities to transform our church and world into the full expression of Christ's inclusive love.” Their core principles are: spiritually grounded, reconciliation, naming privilege and ending oppression, integrating sexuality with spirituality, relationships, systems change, stewardship,

organizational authenticity, and last but not least, commitment to intersectional justice. Well, this sounds great, right? But is RMN truly living up to this vision? Is RMN faithfully choosing the side of the oppressed as Jesus did as he entered the City of Jerusalem?

There has been a call for racial justice within RMN and a questioning of the direction of RMN's leadership. While it seems RMN is claiming an intersectional approach to LGBTQIA justice (it's one of their core principles), RMN's leadership has been resistant to the inclusion of LGBTQIA peoples of color, trans and gender nonconforming people, and poor LGBTQIA people in leadership positions. Did you know that there is history of this type of exclusion in the LGBTQIA movement? Maybe to some of you, this may not be a surprise as you have life experiences that I have not, but to me it was tremendously surprising as it comes from such an unexpected place. Quoting from an open letter to the board of directors of RMN:

“The LGBTQIA movement (inside and outside of the church) has a history of excluding queer, trans, and queer and trans people of color. Once the movement gained the freedom to marry in the United States, there was an exodus of white, economically privileged, cis-gender people and dollars from the movement. This has left those most vulnerable in our movement at risk and with reduced and limited resources”

The letter goes on to ask the RMN board to take certain concrete actions, such as work to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the board directors, invest money, and create a strategic plan to ensure that RMN's goals are rooted in anti-racism and anti-oppression. The story is yet to fully unfold and we do not yet know how the RMN board will react or what actions may or may not be taken, but I will continue to follow with great interest, pray for a just outcome, and do whatever small part I can to fight this injustice.

Racism, exclusion & oppression is alive and well, even within the seemingly safe walls of the United Methodist LGBTQIA community, and within the leadership of RMN. I must ask myself, how does a group so rooted and committed to justice, steeped in knowledge and compassion for those facing racism of one sort, not recognize the racism and oppression of a different sort. How and why does this happen? I don't have the answers, but perhaps upon deeper reflection, it should not be so surprising. How has the institution of Christianity, with its humble beginnings and founding principles of compassion and giving voices to the voiceless, treated the marginalized? How have European Jews, persecuted, marginalized, and oppressed in unimaginable ways treated their Palestinian brothers and sisters? There are many examples. Where is the compassion, the understanding, the helping hand, the standing side by side with the oppressed? It seems that no nation, no religion, no group has been immune to this failing. On this Palm Sunday, Jesus is calling us to reflect on his ministry. Jesus is calling us to intersectional justice. Jesus is calling us to be in relationship with one another, to support one another, and be stronger together.

The opportunities to heed this call are all around us! The ministries of Buena Vista provide each of us an amazing framework for using our talents and our energy, to seek out the relationships, to encourage, and to embolden our oppressed and marginalized brothers & sisters. Our reconciling committee is lifting up and supporting LGBTQIA persons through education and participation in the communities around us. We work together, in fellowship and understanding, learning about each others lives and backgrounds. As a group, we are compelled to seek justice and to support marginalized LGBTQIA people. I naively expected that the work of the reconciling committee would involve facing oppression from outside the LGBTQIA community, but as I learn and grow and participate, I learn new and surprising things everyday. Going back to RMN and the issues of

diversity, I am awed by the initial writers of the letter to the RMN board, as well as all those who have gone on to sign the letter. To me, this letter and group of people so closely embody the type of strength, bravery & commitment to intersectional justice that is the heart of Jesus's ministry. When I think of that day that Jesus humbly entered the City of Jerusalem, and compare it to the power and might of Pontius Pilate and his procession, the call to intersectional justice is unmistakable.

I would like to conclude with the last paragraph from MLK's "Beyond Vietnam" speech and ask you to reflect on what it means to you to make the right choices:

"And, if we will only make the right choice, we will be able to transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of peace. If we will make the right choice, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our world into a beautiful symphony of humanity. If we will but make the right choice, we will be able to speed up the day, all over America and all over the world, when "justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Do you hear the call, will you heed that call, will you make the right choice? I pray that in reflecting on the meaning of Palm Sunday, the words of MLK, and the work of the reconciling committee and all of our justice committees, that you will hear your calling, and do whatever it is that you can do to lend support to lifting up, emboldening, and supporting the marginalized communities all around us. In Jesus names we pray! Amen.

I now invite you, as you are able, to stand up, walk around and greet your neighbors and offer the peace of God.