

Happy Anniversary

Today we celebrate Dignity Boston's 46th anniversary. We are also celebrating the First Sunday of Advent. I love the fact that our Chapter's anniversary falls during the season of Advent. Advent is a season of preparation, of reflection and of celebration. Anniversaries are also a time of preparation, of reflection and of celebration.

The first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of a period of preparation for the celebration of the birth of Christ, our Savior, at Christmas. All of tonight's readings advise us urgently to make ourselves ready, to be on the alert, to turn our focus to God, and bring more attention to God in our lives. "Come, let us walk in the light of God," Isaiah says in the first reading. Living a life without God is living a life in darkness.

In the second reading St. Paul tells us to be open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit instructing us to "increase and abound in love for one another and for all."

"Be vigilant, stay awake," Luke's gospel tells us, at any moment Christ will return and we must be prepared. For me, Luke is saying that we should live our best lives according to Christ's teachings. We should live our lives with love for each other; love our neighbor as ourselves.

When I think about it, the season of Advent is a journey. It's a journey from darkness to light. A journey from penitence to rejoicing. A journey from despair to hope.

The life of this spiritual community is also a journey. Looking back, I'm amazed at what Dignity Boston has accomplished in our 46 years. A lot has changed in those years, in our world, in our community and in our own lives.

Dignity Boston's journey began when a small group of people met at a local gay bar, the Randolph Country Club on December 3, 1972.

In 1972 the LGBTQI community was on a journey of its own. The American Psychiatric Association still listed homosexuality as a mental disorder. But things were starting to change. In 1972 Colorado was the 6th state to repeal its sodomy laws. (It took Massachusetts another 2 years to do the same). Ann Arbor and Lansing Michigan as well as San Francisco were the first US cities to pass "homosexual" rights ordinances. This wasn't that long ago but it sounds like another era compared to where we are now.

Dignity Boston's journey continued in 1973 when we moved to St. Clements Catholic Church on Boylston Street in the Back Bay. It was very common for Dignity chapters to meet in Catholic spaces in the 1970's and 80's.

We remained at St. Clements for 4 years until 1977 when our journey continued to the Arlington Street Church. First we met in the Chapel and when we outgrew that space we moved to the basement.

Our time at the Arlington Street Church had many high and low points. A major high point was in 1984 when Dignity Boston, along with the Arlington Street Church, co-founded the Friday Night Supper Program which continues to feed the hungry and homeless 52 Fridays a year and is still going strong 34 years later.

A low point of our journey was in January 1983 when a bomb threat interrupted our Dignity liturgy and two years later a fire of suspicious origins burned Dignity Boston's offices on Boylston Street. These acts of violence didn't deter us from our mission. Our community came together and stood up to against this hate. We grew stronger by our challenges and our journey continued.

My journey with Dignity Boston began while we were worshipping at St. John the Evangelist Church on Beacon Hill. We journeyed from the Arlington Street Church to St. John's in 1988. Many of us have wonderful memories of St. John's. Personally that's where I met many of you and I established many deep and lifelong friendships and relationships. It was while we were at St. John's that my commitment to Dignity was born and continued to grow. That Church will always have a special place in my heart.

When I first joined Dignity in 1992, we were planning our 20th anniversary.

In 1992 the LGBTQI community also had reasons to celebrate. Our journey for equal rights and full acceptance was moving in the right direction. Anti-discrimination laws were being passed around the world. A ban on gay people serving in the military ended in Australia and Canada. (It would be another 19 years before Don't Ask, Don't Tell was lifted and LGBTQI people could serve openly in the US military).

In 1992 the first official gay and lesbian hall of fame in the United States opened in Chicago and the Red Ribbon was first used as a symbol in the campaign against HIV/AIDS.

After 26 years at St. John the Evangelist, the Church closed. But the Holy Spirit guided us here, to our newest home, St. Stephen's Church. And we were very fortunate to find such a welcoming and supportive community like St. Stephen's. Our journey continues.

Where we worship each Sunday is only part of the journey of Dignity Boston. The life of our Community, our liturgies, our causes, the new people who come each week, the people who have left us, are all part of our journey.

Since Dignity Boston was founded, we have always had a contingent participate every year in the Boston Pride Parade. In the early years our Chapter banner read “Be Not Afraid”. In the 1970’s and 80’s we could lose our jobs or our housing simply for being LGBTQI. We didn’t have the right to marry who we loved. In the early 70’s gay bars were still being raided by the police.

In the 1980’s and 90’s HIV and AIDS decimated our community. We lost many Dignity Boston and Dignity USA members to this awful disease. There was a lot to be afraid of. However, our Dignity Banner “Be Not Afraid” reflected the power of faith over fear. It represented a community that would face fear and discrimination from the Church and society and work to wipe out the injustices.

Our banner evolved over time. Now our banner says, “Praise God with Pride”. This aligns with our mission. We can be LGBTQI and Catholic and live the Gospel without fear, without shame and with pride. Our journey continues.

The Dignity community has also changed, not just where we worship but how we worship. We use inclusive language in all our services. Lay women and men frequently preside and preach at our liturgies. We have incorporated liturgical dance as part of our worship. Our liturgies adapt and grow with our journey and are infused with the theology of our lived experiences as LGBTQI persons.

Progress continues in the LGBTQI community as well. We now have the right to marry whom we love. In the United States there are openly LGBTQI Mayors, Congress persons, Governors and US Senators. These are things we could have only dreamed of in 1972.

While we have achieved a lot, there is still more work to be done. There may still be bakers out there who will refuse to bake us a wedding cake or a town clerk who will try to deny us a marriage license.

But now, more than ever, we can feel empowered to do something about it. Any time we see discrimination happening we can call it out and we can stand up for justice. Any time someone's rights are being denied all our rights are being denied. We are still waiting for full acceptance and full equal rights for our Transgender sisters and brothers. This is why we phone banked, wrote letters and canvased the state to make sure that Ballot Question 3 was passed in last month's election. To defend the dignity and respect for Transgender people in Massachusetts.

There are over 1.1million people living with HIV in our country today and over 38 thousand newly infected each year. This is why our chapter is so committed to participate in the AIDS Walk Boston and the Harbor to the Bay ride each year. Yesterday was World AIDS Day. In fact, it's the 30th anniversary of the first World AIDS Day. The AIDS crisis is not over, we need to continue to remind the world of that.

1 in 6 people in America face hunger. Food insecurity is a major problem, not just in Boston but in the world. This is why we support the Friday Night Supper Program and many of us volunteer there each week. Part of Dignity Boston's journey is to speak out where there is injustice; to help those in need; to support each other through worship and ministry and community.

Journeys are not always easy. In December of 1972, when Dignity Boston first met, the number 1 song in the country was "I am Women" by Helen Reddy. This beautiful, powerful anthem to the women's liberation movement gave me, as a 12-year-old queer kid from Brooklyn New York inspiration and hope. I probably didn't fully realize it at the time, but Helen's struggle was my struggle too.

There is one particularly poignant line in that song. It goes "Yes, I'm wise but it's wisdom born of pain. Yes, I've paid the price, but look how much I've gained.

I'm sure every one of us can relate to that line. The struggle is part of the journey. As an individual, or as a faith community we are all on a journey. We've experienced hardship, laughter, tears, joy and pain. But as Helen Reddy would tell us, we are wiser for that pain, And look how much we've gained.

Dignity Boston has been on a journey for 46 years. We have accomplished so much and have impacted our city and community in so many ways, we can't even fathom.

I was thinking back to the group of people who met at the Randolph Country Club on December 3, 1972. The journey they began on that day has led us all to where we are tonight. Their journey is part of my journey and part of all of our journeys. It's the journey of Dignity Boston.