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To Park Community Church,

Since February 1989, I have called Park Community Church my home and I can say unequivocally that God has blessed me during these past fifteen years. At this point in my life, however, I believe that God is calling me elsewhere and I hope to share with you in these next few pages a brief summary of my journey thus far.

When God brought me to my knees after the collapse of my marriage, I chose to seriously examine those areas of my life in need of healing, and one aspect that clearly required examination was my sexuality.

For as long as I can remember, I have struggled with same-sex attractions and for equally as long, I have wondered what was wrong with me. Like most raised in the Christian church, I was raised with the understanding that homosexuality was immoral, and an abomination. As a small child, this shame was further compounded as I witnessed members of Christian churches laughing at debasing jokes about homosexuals and condoning, whether directly or through their silence, violence against homosexuals. Confused and terrified, I remembered crying out to God asking what was so wrong with me that even the body of Christ, his church, would condone or even commit violence against me.

So I kept silent. I kept silent to protect myself. I kept silent to protect my family. I kept silent because as a struggling young child, I had no idea what to do. Out of legitimate fear, I didn't dare tell anyone about my struggle, so I did what I was taught to do in Sunday school. I prayed.

And I prayed; for over thirty years I prayed that God would free me from these same-sex attractions and somehow or another awaken in me a "normal" attraction to women. For over thirty years, I was disappointed and bewildered as to why God was not willing to change me. I struggled with feelings of inadequacy that somehow or another God didn't think I was worth the effort. I could not understand why I could not be granted this simple victory despite my faithful efforts to seek Him. Seeing that this was not going to change through prayer alone, I bought into the argument that my sexuality was somehow a choice and jumped head first into heterosexual relationships. This I prayed would provide me the liberation that I so desperately sought.

So I married. I married in the hopes that if perhaps I just tried it, God would then provide me the freedom from my struggle. Well, the marriage failed and while there were many reasons for the failure, it is undeniable that my struggle with my sexuality was one of the key factors. In our marriage bed, I struggled desperately. What should have been a

beautiful expression of our love left me feeling hollow and depressed, falling far short of the physical intimacy, the “one-flesh” experience that God intended for his children.

As the marriage continued to unfold, I sat in a weekend retreat four years ago being guided in prayer. During that session, we were asked to listen to our hearts because God had a message for us. As I quieted myself before God that morning I heard with alarming clarity, “Todd, you are a gay man.” I was startled and shaken. The message was so clear and delivered with such authority that on a visceral level I knew it had to be God. However, I was so scared that I convinced myself that this message was not from above, but from Satan in attempt to deceive me.

Next I bought into the argument that my struggle with same-sex attractions was somehow the result of “bad parenting” or unresolved conflicts from my childhood. Building upon years of counseling, I turned to therapy under the guidance of a trusted Christian therapist and for the next few years, I made the courageous decision to face the pain, fear and anger resulting from growing up in an imperfect world. Through this process, I tapped into the river of sadness within me, faced the dragons of my fears and cleansed myself of years of unresolved anger. I sought help and counsel through different therapeutic milieus and for a three-year period, I dedicated three nights each week in an attempt to heal and overcome these desires.

God is indeed faithful, because I did heal and I did find new clarity in my life. I felt safer in the world. I found deeper connection in relationship with others. More importantly, I found myself closer to God as I was able to free myself of old stories and lies about who I thought God was. Through it all though, my struggle remained the same. Despite years of prayer, despite years of therapy and healing, despite an attempt at marriage, my struggle with same-sex attractions continued.

Things changed for me this spring after I joined a men’s care group at Park Church where we studied the book, Wild At Heart. In one of the chapters, we were challenged to examine our wounds in the light of Christ’s healing, and in this section, I was particularly drawn to one of the prayers:

*Father, who am I to you? You are my true Father—my Creator, my Redeemer, and my Sustainer. You know the man you had in mind when you made me. You know my true name. O Father, I ask you to speak to me, to reveal to me my true strength and my real name. Open my eyes that I might see, give me ears to hear your voice. Father, I ask that you speak it not once, but again and again so that I might really receive it. And grant me the courage to receive what you say and the faith to believe it.
In Jesus Name.*

For the weeks and months that followed, I lived and breathed this prayer, seeking clarity from God about whom he had intended me to be. As the fog lifted, I came to understand clearly that the message I had heard four years earlier on that retreat, those simple words whispered with such authority and clarity, was truly the voice of God. So as I completed the last line of the prayer, “And grant me the courage to receive what you say and the faith to believe it,” I came to fully understand that yes, I am a gay man.

I felt a wave of peace flow through my entire being. I felt like Harry Ashfield, the small boy in one of my favorite short stories, *The River* by Flannery O'Connor. In this allegory, Harry is a boy searching and struggling for meaning and purpose when his sitter takes him to the river for a baptismal service. The preacher baptizes Harry and then tells him, "You count now." Afterwards, the sitter takes him back to his loveless home where everything is a joke, and upon awakening the next morning, Harry dreams of the river. So he returns and finds the riverside healing place now deserted. He bounds into the water, takes a gulp and stands there trying to decide what to do next. One thing for sure he isn't going to fool with preachers this time. He'll baptize himself and find this Kingdom of Christ where he thinks life will be so much better than it is back home. He ducks under the water and tries to stay there but the river pushes him back. He tries again,

"...and the same thing happened. The river wouldn't have him."

He decides it's just another joke. He gets angry, kicks out at the river and the next thing loses his footing,

*"...and the waiting current caught him like a long gentle hand and pulled him swiftly forward and down. For an instant he was overcome with surprise; then since he was moving quickly and knew that he was getting somewhere, **all his fury and his fear left him.**"*

In my life, I tried desperately to be heterosexual only to be "pushed back" like Harry in the water. As I continued my struggling against what God had intended for me, God, in the midst of my brokenness, pulled me with his gentle hand into the life that Christ had intended for me. Like Harry who stopped struggling once the hand of God gently pulled him under, so too my struggle ended and my fury and fear left me.

Tears streamed down my face.

With my newly gained acceptance of whom God had intended for me to be, my struggle was now intellectual as I sought to reconcile my sexuality with my understanding of the Scriptures. So I prayerfully studied the Scripture in the hopes of gaining clarity on this complex and emotionally charged issue.

I studied and read arguments from both sides of the debate. On both sides of the debate, I saw truths outlined and I saw God's words manipulated in order to fit a preexisting bias. I sifted through the arguments and let the Scriptures be the guide, willing to accept a life of celibacy if that is what God had intended. As I studied, I was most disheartened by the nearly universal theme on the traditional Christian argument that equated homosexuality with recreational sex and fetishism, an argument that was clearly meant to instill fear and disgust amongst the readers. Like these authors, I agree that this is not the way that God has called us to express our sexuality, whether in a heterosexual or homosexual context. What I did find lacking from the traditional arguments was a biblically based rationale for prohibiting loving, monogamous, same sex relationships. What I came across were distortions of the original Greek texts that were reminiscent of how the Church at one

time used the Scriptures to condone racism and slavery, condemn inter-racial marriages and turn its back on issues like domestic violence.

In the midst of my reading, I came across one influential work entitled, The New Testament and Homosexuality by Robin Scroggs. The author, a heterosexual New Testament scholar with no apparent hidden motivation, set out to study the classic Scriptural references to homosexuality in light of the cultural context in which they were written. The conclusion? There is no biblical mandate against consensual, monogamous, loving, same sex relationships. For me, this conclusion was even more justifiable in light of the fact that Christ himself never mentioned or condemned homosexuality.

So I don't know why I'm gay. What I do know is that my sexuality is an integral part of my being, and it is not a choice, conscious or otherwise. What I have learned though is that as a gay man, I am pleasing to God. Several weeks ago, I heard a sermon on the following passage from Jeremiah, Chapter 18.

The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord saying, "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I shall announce my words to you." Then I went down the potter's house, and there he was, making something on the wheel. But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter, so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make.

Through this sermon, I learned that there is not one design for God's children and that God created other vessels that are equally as pleasing to him. As a result, my relationship with God is now stronger than ever. Stronger because I now see myself as God has truly intended me to be and for the first time in my life, I see and feel that I am pleasing to God.

I am deeply saddened however, to see how countless Christian churches continue to reject many of God's children. It is not surprising that rates of depression and substance abuse are higher among homosexual, which I believe to be in part attributable to the fact that homosexuals are frequently marginalized by society, and told by many Christian churches that they are evil, and thus not worthy to enter the fold of Christ. During my reading, I was particularly offended to see many of the traditional arguments use the high rate of depression and substance abuse as an argument for why homosexuality is evil, failing to see this as a call to compassion, to bring those hurting and marginalized by society to find peace and comfort in the love of Christ.

My intention in writing this letter is that it will help you to understand one person's prayerful journey to accepting his sexuality and the man God intended him to be. I realize too that many readers will consider me a sinner and will react to my story with the "Love the sinner, hate the sin" response. With that in mind, the most loving response I can imagine would be for those taking this stance to consider the following: "Perhaps, God has called some of his children to be gay. Perhaps the traditional teachings of the Church are based on years of prejudice and misinterpretation of God's word." Then within that framework of openness, prayerfully study the Scripture in light of the cultural

context in which it was written and study the meaning of these often-cryptic words in the original Greek.

In my years at Park Community Church I have established many friendships that God has truly used to help me grow and be transformed into His image. However, I feel deeply convicted that God is leading me elsewhere now. I have found a new church home where all of God's children are welcome; a church where my two beautiful children can grow and thrive in the love of Christ and witness me flourish in my faith. Now every Sunday morning I stand shoulder to shoulder with my fellow Christians and cite the Apostle's Creed in a loving, accepting community:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty
Maker of Heaven and Earth,
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost
Born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell;
The third day he rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven,
And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead;
I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church;
The communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body; and life everlasting.
Amen*

I realize that there are many out there who believe that the Kingdom of Christ does not include God's homosexual children, and these judgments have resulted in many homosexuals leaving the Church and rejecting the claims of Christ. I, however, boldly stand firm in the face of these judgments and projections, standing firm in God's promise outlined by the Apostle Paul in *Romans 8:37-39*:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

My hope one day is that Park Church will be a place where all of God's children will be welcomed, and challenged to live Godly lives regardless of their sexuality. Until that time, however, it is with great sadness that I respectfully withdraw my name from membership at Park Community Church.

In God's Love,

Todd Zimmerman