

Thank you. Well, good morning St. James. How are you doing today? It is such pleasure to be here with you in a church as someone who was raised quite literally in a church. My father was a pastor and I'm told that my first act of ministry actually happened in a church. That was while sitting in the back like a good Christian, *[waving to the back rows]* hey good Christians, at age three I got a hold of a marker and when my father was preaching the sermon proceeded to color on the carpet underneath all the pews all the way up to him at the pulpit preaching. I can see you've prepared for my visit today and just gone ahead and removed all the carpet in the church so you don't have to worry about anything.

My dad is a lot of the reason why I'm here with you today. He spent the bulk of his career at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as the Lutheran Campus Minister during which time he built the ministry not only into America's largest Lutheran campus ministry but he also received the award for being the top Lutheran Campus Pastor in the country. Now, to get this award you have to be really good with 18 to 25-year olds. If anyone doubts that he had that ability, then you'd only ask my three older sisters because they will all tell you their favorite times with dad were when he would drive them to and from college from Nebraska to Missouri, Nebraska to Minnesota, Nebraska to Delaware and back. Because it was during these times that they say they really got to know him as an adult and got to talk about things that mattered. They were in that 18 to 25-year-old range that he specialized in.

Now, I wish I could say the same is the case for me but I can't. That's because when I was 19 years old my father passed away from esophageal cancer. Now, for a good Midwestern Protestant who had already started saving for my retirement in high school, my dad's passing changed everything. I was always told that we're born, we go to school, we go to college where we'll meet our spouse, we get a job and then when we turn 65 we get to do those things we've been dreaming about our whole life that take more than two weeks' vacation. Yet when I saw my dad pass away at age 58 missing out on that American dream, I realized that was not going to be the case for him.

*[looking at Mo. Rebecca]* Now, you'll have to tell me if this is a common back up career they push in seminary or not, but my dad often said if he hadn't been a pastor he'd probably would have been a trucker. No, I'm getting a head shake. I don't know what it was but my

dad loved to drive. So much so that when we would take our annual family vacations from Nebraska to Florida, a 28 hour drive, he would do the entire thing straight through all by himself with a giant grin on his face.

A few days after his funeral, this being the first encounter I'd had with the death of someone close to me and quite honestly having no idea how to grieve, I do the only thing that made any sense. I climbed into his hail battered Hyundai Elantra and took my first ever independent road trip to the glamorous locations of Sioux Falls, South Dakota and Rochester, Minnesota. While those locations might not have been glamorous by typical standards, they taught me a very important lesson during that road trip. That was that life is short, tomorrow's not guaranteed, and we don't always get the time we think we'll have to pursue our dreams or to spend with those we care about.

Since age 19 I've done one road trip every year to honor this experience and along the way realized that all my peers seemed to think they were guaranteed to live to 80. I wanted to do something crazy at age 30 with my road trips that would get all of their attentions and shake them into learning this lesson in a way that was less hard than I had to learn it. At age 30 I moved my entire life into a white windowless cargo van and I committed to living in that van for the next three years as I would drive around America and attempt to set a world record as the only person to visit all 418 of our National Park Service sites.

I'm happy to share that I'm here with you today in San Diego having been on the road for two years and ten months and having visited 390 of those 418 Park Service sites with two months to go before finishing. I'm also happy to share this journey has been a success in the sense that I've done over 1500 pieces of earned media coverage, everything from the San Diego Times Union *[sic]* to the Today Show, to share this *carpe diem* message that I was hoping to get out.

What's funny though is when God put me on this track toward this journey what I did not realize is that He had a second journey in mind for me this entire time. Like that first journey, the second journey also began when I was 19. Not only was that the year that I lost my father but 19 was the first time in my life that I ever met an openly gay adult. Growing up in Nebraska, the son of a well-known minister, my exposure to the LGBT community came from what I read in the newspaper

and saw on TV which taught me three very important lessons. Number one, all gay men grow up and become drag queens. Number two, the LGBT community spends the entire year plotting how to wear as little clothes as possible on a float downtown. And the third lesson I got, perhaps the one I got loudest and clearest of all, is that anyone who is LGBT is going to hell and there was nothing they could do to stop that.

Now imagine my surprise when I show up to first day of college at the University of Memphis, I walk into my first class, I meet my male professor and his male partner who had joined him for the first day of school. It was about 105 degrees that fall in Memphis, it was a cool, cool fall day. And I kind of walked, I walked into class and wiped the back sweat off of me and I looked at them standing there, long pants and sport coats and thought, "Gosh, it's so hot outside, this is really perfect Speedo weather. I don't understand why you're so dressed up." As I watched them interact with my classmates they were so traditionally masculine I thought, "Man, I feel bad for these guys. These are the two worst drag queens I have ever seen in my life." After class, they climbed into a Lexus convertible and drove off and I thought, "What? I've never met a deviant that can afford a Lexus convertible."

From that moment my stereotypes began to change such that I started asking tough questions, and looking at what I'd been told about LGBT people, and looking deeper and deeper into until one day I had a revelation. I'd come from a city that was 4% African-Americans to a city that was 68% African-American. Yet as I heard the struggles of my black friends that I had never imagined as a white pastor's kid in Nebraska, what struck me was that none of them had been told that they were going to hell because they were black. Around the same time I had a relative who was diagnosed as bipolar. What we would say during biblical times likely meant she had a demon in her or demons in her. Yet no one in my family was saying she was going to hell for being bipolar. Then there was my youngest sister who as much as we like to make fun of her for being the only left-handed one in the family I can't remember a time that anyone ever said she was going to hell for being left-handed. What I realized in that moment was that those three things shared in common was that they were all characteristics you did not choose for yourself. If that was case, after I had spent 20 something years praying to God to keep me from being anything but this, how could He send me to hell for being gay?

Now, as my 20s and coming out moved on, I ended going to work in LGBTQ advocacy and became what I like to call "gay on Google". That means if you met me at a party, if you were considering me for a job and you typed in "Mikah Meyer" into Google you would read some of my writings, some of my advocacy work, and you would know without a shadow of a doubt that Mikah Meyer was gay. Which became a really huge problem when I started this national parks road trip, because I began without the money to finish this project and knew I would have to fundraise along the way to keep it alive so I could share this carpe diem message.

But I also looked around at the American culture around me and realized that a gay man was not what Americans would support, that for the majority of America it was too offensive, so I decided to go back in the closet for this parks journey and hide that part of myself. Except nine months into my journey right as 2016 struck 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, much like Martin Luther and his lightning bolt that called him to ministry, I got my own lightning bolt. It came in the form of a message from a 15-year-old who said, "I go to a private Baptist school in Texas, I'm not out of the closet to anyone but I came across your journey and I started Googling you and I just need to thank you because now seeing that you're a gay Christian, now I know when I grow up I can grow up to be ordinary." He says, "Then I see you're setting world records and now I know when I grow up I can also be extraordinary."

I sort of wiped the tears off my smart phone and in that moment I heard God saying to me, "Mikah, I am giving you thousands of pieces of earned media coverage to share your parks journey. Do you think you could use it to be for that kid, for the hundreds and thousands around the world that are just like him, and 10-year-old you that really needed an example of who you could be in your life?" And I said, "Yeah." From that moment on every interview I did, every chance I had, I shared that I was not just a pastor's son but also a practicing Christian who just happened to be gay so that people around the world who came in contact with this story could know that they could be both ordinary and extraordinary.

Now, along the way churches started asking me to preach the sermon as I would come and share this message through song and a brief speech. As I got asked to preach this sermon I thought, "What can I offer? I

haven't been to seminary, I'm not ordained. I'm some dude living in a van driving around America." But I remembered along my journey seeing all these news stories next to mine and they were stories about how as of 2016 we were now a divided nation in America. We were red states and we were blue states, we were rich and we were poor, we were rural and we were urban, we were black and we were white. You name it and they were dividing us. Which was really odd for me to hear that we're all so different because as I drove to these red states and blue states, and met these rich and poor people from rural and urban backgrounds and all these differences I'm told made us so different, I found we were all the same.

In fact, above all things there was one trait, one goal we all had for our lives no matter what differences we shared. That goal was that above every desire we wanted more than anything to be loved by others and to be able to give them our love in return. Now, the pastor's kid in me would say that this is mankind reaching out for God's love and hoping to receive God's love in return.

If I can leave you with something today, if I can transform you in the way that John, and James, and Peter were, I hope that just as they looked to Jesus for an example of how to live their lives, that we can look to Jesus for an example on how to feed a world that is starving for love. My favorite example of this comes from the book of John 9:1-41, the story of the blind man where Jesus and His followers come upon a man who had been blind since birth and they say, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Because of the time, we didn't have scientific knowledge like we do today and it was thought that people were blind because their parents had sinned or they had sinned and God was punishing them for their sin with this physical ailment. And, if we touch that blind man, if we interact with him, we might catch his sin and catch that blindness ourselves. Yet Jesus goes against every cultural norm of the day to treat that blind man with the love that no one else of his time would.

My challenge for you and myself, all of us, is that as we leave God's house, a house of love, and go out into the world today that we take that example with us. And when we meet people who are outside the cultural norm, outside what is perfect today, that we take that example with us. Whether they're a different political party than us, a different race, a different religion, a

different gender, a different sexual orientation, differently physically abled, differently mentally abled, whatever difference we come upon in our popular culture, we remember that every person is not their labels of the day, but every person is a child of God deserving to be treated with that same love that Jesus showed that blind man.

Now, if you're hearing this story today and you say, "But Mikah, I am that other person, I'm differently physically abled, differently mentally abled. I'm not as smart as my coworkers or as talented as my siblings." Or whatever part of you the world has told you makes you not good enough, makes you not worthy of being treated with that love that we all desire, take heart in the gospel. Because when the people say, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?" Jesus goes, "Hold up, hold up, hold up." That's the Greek translation. Jesus says, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. This man, this man was made blind so that God's works might be revealed through him."

Maybe you're the closeted son of an award-winning minister and thinking, "God, haven't I done everything right? Haven't I been the perfect pastor's son? Haven't I been the living embodiment of every earthly example of what it means to be a Christian? Why do you have to make me gay?" And then realizing one day that in a world that says being gay was the result of a lack of church time, or no faith examples, or having a horrible father, would have to see an award-minister who had grown the largest flock of its kind in the country have a gay son and maybe have their stereotypes changed.

Never forget that each and every one of you through living your story, through living your life openly, and authentically, and honestly, has the power to change, for someone else who might have felt unwanted and unloved by God, their ability to feel God's love that we all desire so much. And above all things, above knowing that you can both be ordinary and extraordinary, remember that we have been shown by God through His son Jesus Christ in the Bible that not only are those things that you might feel make you less than, make you unworthy, make you unequal, not only are those differences holy, but those differences, perhaps the things that you felt make you most unworthy in this world, are actually what is allowing God to be seen in this world.

Amen.